

Highlights From a Storied Career

Liz Jarvis's career in history, and in museum and archival work is a testament to her dedication and passion for history, community, and the natural world. As she retired on May 3 after 30 years of service with the Chestnut Hill Conservancy, her impact on preserving local history is profound and far-reaching.

A Lifelong Passion for Green Spaces

Nurtured by her father's beautiful garden, Liz's love for plants and green spaces has stayed with her throughout her life. "I grew up with a great garden, and everywhere I've lived, I've always cared about the green world," she reflects. This passion influenced her decision to leave New York and seek a place with more green space, ultimately leading her to Chestnut Hill.

Influences and Early Career

Crediting her parents as her biggest influence, she describes them as supportive and encouraging of her interests. "They never tried to direct or micromanage me. They were very laid back and waited for me to mention my interests," she recalls. Their encouragement helped her pursue higher education and a career in museum and archival work.

After earning art history and studio art degrees, Liz's early career included positions at institutions such as the Smithsonian, Guggenheim, and the Museum of Modern Art. Liz's career is full of remarkable stories; while at the Guggenheim as a registrar, she once couriered a Matisse painting in a cab! She was responsible for safely transporting the valuable artwork to its destination in Greenwich Village. "It was a big responsibility in my early 20s, and I had the confidence of youth," she recalls with a smile. These experiences gave her a solid foundation in curatorial work, which she later brought to her role at the Chestnut Hill Conservancy.

Early Years at Chestnut Hill Historical Society

Beginning her journey with the Chestnut Hill Historical Society (now the Chestnut Hill Conservancy) on February 1, 1994, Liz initially accepted a six-month freelance position. She recalls, "A friend told me not to take the job because it was 'archives,' and I was a curator. But no one told me to leave, so I stayed."

In her first year, Liz introduced public open hours, a conventional collection numbering system the conservancy still uses today, and detailed donor records, emphasizing the community's contributions. "We stand on the shoulders of the wonderful people before me," she notes. In the mid-1990s, Liz established comprehensive documentation and preservation procedures, ensuring the collection's integrity and accessibility. She also initiated a volunteer and intern program, guiding over 120 students and community members.

Accomplishments and Community Engagement

Her most visible accomplishments are her three photographic history books: *Images of America: Chestnut Hill* (with co-author Thomas Keels), *Images of America: Chestnut Hill Revisited*, and *Images of America: Mount Airy*. Liz visited repositories all over Philadelphia to gather material for these books and placed newspaper ads soliciting photographs and stories from area residents. This effort uncovered previously undocumented information, broadening the understanding of the community's social history and extending the Conservancy's reach. "Writing *Chestnut Hill* with Thomas Keels allowed us to learn

more about families who opened up scrapbooks and collections," she says. These books have preserved valuable historical narratives that might otherwise have been lost.

One of the standout moments in Liz's career was when she became aware of the Yeakel Cemetery while planning a public program about Chestnut Hill in the 18th century. "I discovered the Yeakel Cemetery and, by coincidence, met Jack Yeakel there," she recalls. This discovery led to preserving cemetery records and their inclusion in the Conservancy's collection.

Liz's dedication is also evident in her efforts to digitize the collection, making it accessible for in-person and online research. The current Curator and Archivist, Alex Bartlett, highlights her push for technological advancements: "Migrating our data into Past Perfect [software] around 20 years ago was critical. It allowed us to create a searchable database and helped establish a permanent exhibit, *Discovering Chestnut Hill: Rural Village to Philadelphia Neighborhood*, located at the Conservancy's headquarters.

In 1997, Liz wrote a successful grant application to the William Penn Foundation for the Assistant Archivist position. This allowed for open hours on Saturdays. Around the same time, she worked to improve relations and cooperation between the Chestnut Hill Historical Society and the Germantown Historical Society, serving on the latter's board for about a decade.

She and her husband, Andrew, also made personal contributions to preservation. They restored the 1854 Italianate house they bought in 1993 and placed a façade easement and an open space easement on the property in 2000 with the Chestnut Hill Historical Society, now the Chestnut Hill Conservancy, to protect this Chestnut Hill landmark, for the future.

Mentorship and Legacy

Over the years, more than 80 volunteers and student interns have worked under Liz, processing an ever-expanding collection of photographs, maps, drawings, letters, records, and other community documents while being mentored by her in the intricacies of archival work. Liz emphasizes the importance of relationships and responsiveness in her work. "You have to get back to donors and researchers—it's customer service," she advises.

Alex Bartlett first met Liz in 2009 when he responded to an article she wrote for the Chestnut Hill Local asking for volunteers. "Liz has many attributes that contributed to her success here at the Conservancy and the success of our Archives. These include her passion for history, her focus on accuracy and attention to detail, her appreciation of objects, and her love of the history of our area," Alex says. "She totally 'gets' Chestnut Hill!"

Looking Ahead

In retirement, Liz is excited to spend more time gardening, painting, and creating ceramics. She also expresses confidence in the future of the Chestnut Hill Conservancy under Alex's leadership. "I laid a foundation, and I'm lucky to have Alex, who has been here for 15 years," she says. "My hope is that the Conservancy grows and gets bigger and better." Liz plans to stay connected through volunteering and continuing to work on preservation projects for other organizations.

Final Reflections

Her career at the Chestnut Hill Conservancy is marked by her dedication to preserving history and her commitment to the community. Her advice to those in the field is simple yet profound: "Support your local historic preservation. Without people like us, many historical items would be lost."

Her legacy is not just in the archives she helped to build and preserve but also in the people she has mentored and inspired along the way. Liz's legacy reminds us of the importance of preserving our past to inform and inspire future generations. Her work ensures that the history of Chestnut Hill will continue to be a vibrant and accessible resource for generations to come.