



Chestnut Hill Local

Friday, June 21, 2024

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Northwest neighborhoods built on regional rails

Preserving Chestnut Hill's iconic stations



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Chestnut Hill West Station c. 1880-1900, showing parallel covered walkways leading to a covered train platform and the station house showing a spire.

PHOTO COURTESY OF CHESTNUT HILL CONSERVANCY ARCHIVES



Posted Friday, June 14, 2024 12:00 am

by **Carla Robinson**

For more than a century, the regional rail lines that serve our Northwest neighborhoods have been an integral part of the identity and character of Chestnut Hill. Originally envisioned by Pennsylvania Railroad executive Henry Howard Houston as the backbone of his proposed "Wissahickon Heights" community – a part of the neighborhood centered around the Wissahickon Inn, the Philadelphia Cricket Club and the Church of St. Martin-in-the-Fields -- the Chestnut Hill West line opened to passengers in May 1884.

With that line now under threat of potential closure due to declining ridership and chronic funding shortages, the Chestnut Hill Conservancy is stepping up to help raise awareness about its critical importance – and to help build the ridership needed to keep it running now and into the future.

While 54% of commuters drive to Center City, only 18% use public transit. Ridership has dropped from 6,000 daily passengers pre-COVID to 1,500-1,700 currently on the Chestnut Hill East and West lines combined. SEPTA has gone from transporting 29 million passengers monthly before the pandemic to just 13.2 million now, resulting in a \$240 million deficit.

"The future of SEPTA's Chestnut Hill West branch hinges on community engagement," said Bob Previdi, a neighborhood resident and active member of Save the Train, a grassroots group of civic organizations now working to build support for statewide transit lines. "Close attention is crucial as SEPTA's current budget challenges could impact the future of Northwest Philadelphia as a transit-oriented community."

"These stations provide connections to our neighborhood's heritage, added Alex Bartlett, archivist at the Chestnut Hill Conservancy. "They welcomed our founding residents starting over a century ago and shepherd today's commuters into a community steeped in history and tradition."

The Conservancy kicked off its series of train-related programs on March 12, with a virtual "Discovering Chestnut Hill lecture titled "Northwest Philadelphia: Connected by Railroads." The self-guided walking tour of three of the neighborhood's most iconic stations: Chestnut Hill West, Highland Avenue and St. Martins – all three of which were designed in the Spanish Mission style by architect Washington Bleddyn Powell – followed on April 20.

Chestnut Hill West

The terminus of the Chestnut Hill West line has experienced considerable transformations since its inception in 1884. The main station building, designed by Powell, featured a spire that was removed at an unspecified date. Initially, the station's platforms were track-level and constructed from wooden planks. Canopies once sheltered all platforms, including a large canopy over the tracks as depicted in a circa 1905 photo; these were dismantled during the station's electrification in 1918 and were not reinstated. A waiting room was also part of the original station structure. By the early 1980s, the station had deteriorated significantly, prompting renovations that transformed the first floor, including the waiting room, into a bank. The groundbreaking occurred in 1984.



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The station's signal tower, a short distance south of the main building, has a largely undocumented history. Constructed around 1915, its erection may have been associated with the line's electrification a few years later. The current parking lot of the station occupies what used to be the railroad yard and the site of the original turntable. This turntable was crucial for reorienting locomotives at the end of their journeys to Chestnut Hill, allowing them to face forward for their return trips to Center City. With the electrification of the line in 1918, both the steam engines and the turntable became obsolete.

Current stewardship

Over the years, numerous community groups and SEPTA have contributed to the upkeep of the Chestnut Hill West Station through restorative plantings.

In spring 2023, a group of volunteers dubbed the Chestnut Hill Train Stations Native Gardens Group expanded its "plant native" mission to the Chestnut Hill West Station. This effort took off, supported by special grants from the Chestnut Hill Community Association (CHCA) and Weavers Way Co-op, along with generous contributions from community members.

To date, the group has created and installed both a rain garden and a rock garden, planted six oak trees, three redbuds and a sweet bay magnolia, planted garden beds in and around the station and cleared decades worth of invasive species.

This season, the group plans to introduce nectar and pollen-rich perennials to the new beds and landscape the long hill along the lower parking lot platform with native grasses, shrubs and perennials. They're also planning native trees and shrubs along Evergreen Avenue. The plan is to eventually plant 19 trees, 72 shrubs, and more than 100 types of perennials.

Highland Avenue

Highland Station has undergone substantial changes since its original construction in 1884. Before the line's electrification in 1918, the station building was situated on the outbound side of the tracks along the north side of Highland Avenue, near 309 W. Highland Ave. Access to the station was available from Highland Avenue and via a small pathway from the corner of West Evergreen Avenue and Navajo Street. The station's electrification prompted significant alterations; the road was elevated, and the railway grade was lowered to eliminate the existing grade crossing. Identical to the station at St. Martins, the Highland Station was demolished and replaced with a small wooden waiting shelter on the inbound platform. This shelter burned down approximately 35 years ago and was replaced with a Plexiglas bus shelter.

Current stewardship

The Chestnut Hill Train Stations Native Gardens initiative began working on the Highland station in 2020. The project of planting a variety of trees, shrubs and perennial beds builds upon the prior efforts of local community members, notably John Black, who spent much of his free time in the 2000s enhancing the neighborhood's landscapes, and the "Hi-A's," a neighbor group from the 1980s and 1990s that maintained the yews at the station. The mission is to use local train stations as venues to plant native species that provide food and habitat for essential pollinators.

Their efforts have been supported by funds raised within the community, including grants from the CHCA, Weavers Way and the collaborative efforts of a robust group of neighborhood volunteers and partners, including SEPTA and the Philadelphia Parking Authority.

A special grant from the Free2Be Fund at the Philadelphia Foundation funded safety improvements and the installation of protective fencing around the Native Educational Garden, the heart of the station's ecological efforts. This garden showcases most of the native plantings and features plant identification signs and educational boards that explain various aspects of the garden, such as the bioswale.

St. Martins

Originally constructed as a one-story building in 1884, this station received an addition of a station master's apartment on the second floor in 1891. Initially named Wissahickon Heights, the station was renamed St. Martins in 1906. A spur line to link the station to Henry Howard Houston's Wissahickon Inn (now part of Springside Chestnut Hill Academy's upper school) was planned but never built. A small railroad yard once located on the outbound side of the tracks was replaced by a parking lot, likely around World War II.

By the late 1950s, many of these stations, including St. Martins, had fallen into severe neglect. In 1962, proactive neighbors formed the St. Martins Station Committee. Since then, the committee has raised money and collaborated with SEPTA to maintain both the station and its surrounding areas.

Current stewardship

The St. Martins Station Committee is a volunteer-driven organization focused on maintaining the station in a collaborative relationship with SEPTA under a long-term lease. This includes managing a tenant in the second-floor station agent's apartment and coordinating with local vendors, volunteers and community groups for ongoing landscape maintenance.

Led by community volunteers and supported by numerous local organizations, including the Chestnut Hill Conservancy, the committee has responded to recent ridership challenges, such as SEPTA's closure of ticket offices and potential rail line discontinuations.

OTHER ITEMS THAT MAY INTEREST YOU

Northwest neighborhoods built on regional rails (/stories/preserving-chestnut-hills-iconic-stations,32584)

Kimberly James bridal shop has new home on the Avenue (/stories/kimberly-james-bridal-shop-has-new-home-on-the-avenue,32576)

SCH gets "Bird Safe Schools" recognition (/stories/sch-gets-bird-safe-schools-recognition,32489)

Arson at Chestnut Hill East; Feasterville man charged (/stories/arson-at-chestnut-hill-east-feasterville-man-charged,32473)



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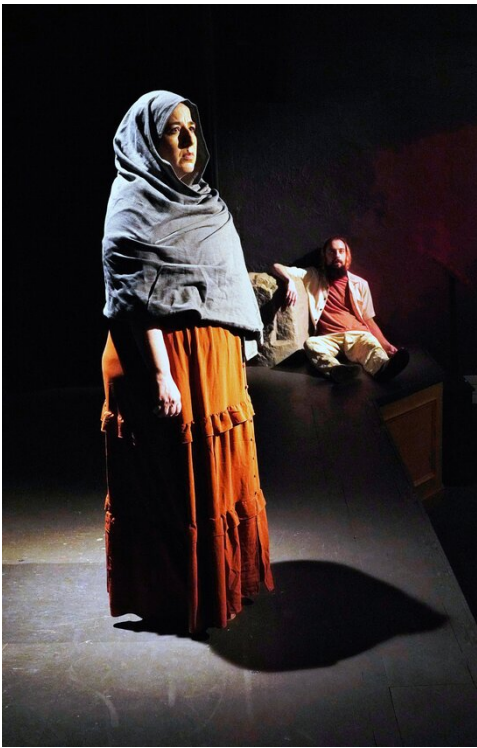
LOCAL CALENDAR

<p>Thu, Jul 11 @2:00pm Sponsored (</p> <p>BELMONT: 80s Escape Room</p> <p>Belmont Hills Library Fri, Jun 21</p> <p>Evil Twins of Comedy: Don Jamieson & Mark Riccadonna</p> <p>The Royal Fri, Jun 21</p> <p>Special Event: Josh Johnson</p> <p>Helium Comedy Club Philadelphia Fri, Jun 21</p> <p>Royal Comedy</p> <p>The Royal, Where Music Lives</p> <p>See All Events (https://chestnuthilllocal.com/events/)</p>	<p>Sat, Jun 22 @7:00pm Sponsored (</p> <p>Brian Quinn: Solo Acoustic</p> <p>Eagleville Taphouse</p> <p>Add Your Event (https://hub.cityspark.com/event/submission/ChestnutHill?utm_medium=internal&utm_source=widget&utm_campaign=add-ev)</p>	<p>Tue, Jun 25 @7:00pm Sponsored (</p> <p>Zoning Hearing Board</p> <p>Municipal Hall</p>
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THE LATEST

Judging Judas Iscariot at Stagecrafters Theater (/stories/judging-judas-iscariot-at-stagecrafters-theater,32653)

It is party time in purgatory as Stagecrafters winds up its 2023-24 season with "The Last Days of Judas Iscariot" by Stephen Adly Guirgis. This fantastical time/space-bender centers on a simple ...



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(/stories/take-pride-in-learning-childrens-book-recommendations-from-a-local-librarian,32652)

Take Pride in learning: Children’s book recommendations from a local librarian (/stories/take-pride-in-learning-childrens-book-recommendations-from-a-local-librarian,32652)

June is now well known as Pride Month, celebrating the LGBTQ+ community. Rainbow flags are plentiful around the neighborhood. Young children may see all the colorful excitement and wonder what ...



(/stories/st-martins-sings-pride-outdoor-music-serenades-in-germantown,32651)

St. Martin’s sings Pride, outdoor music serenades in Germantown (/stories/st-martins-sings-pride-outdoor-music-serenades-in-germantown,32651)

Plymouth Meeting’s Kris Rudzinski, director of the Germantown Branch of Settlement Music School, has announced a full schedule of concerts and instruction for its summer semester, running from ...

'Gold medal' ice cream shop gets right to the pint (/stories/gold-medal-ice-cream-shop-gets-right-to-the-pint,32646)

“I work from 5:30 a.m. to 10.30 p.m. If someone invented a 25th hour or an eighth day in the week, I’d be working it,” said Danielle Jowdy. Her shop, Zsa’s Ice Cream, at 6616 Germantown ...



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Jun 20, 2024 issue (/stories/jun-20-2024-issue,32588)

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Chill Local
Local folk group to sing at Pastorius concert
page 13

Community
Heat the heat at Mt. Airy's "Philly Favorite"
page 9

Conservancy Director to depart
By Dorothy Lopez
I n a surprise move, the director of the Chestnut Hill Conservancy has announced she will leave the organization in six months after a decade of leading the nonprofit in its expansion to a Greater Philadelphia area. The announcement was made by the conservancy's board of directors in a meeting held last week.

A tree branch sparks fire
A Philadelphia firefighter's team started when strong winds during Friday's storm caused a tree branch to fall across the railroad tracks in the area of the Mt. Airy Station along the Chestnut Hill Line. The fire was quickly extinguished by the fire department. The station's fire alarm system is being upgraded to be able to detect and alert the station staff if a fire is detected.

Restored Water Tower courts debut
By Melissa D'Agostino and Melissa Brown
A little over a month ago, the restored Water Tower Courts in the Chestnut Hill neighborhood opened its doors to the public. The courts, which were built in the 1920s, are now a vibrant community space. The courts are located in the historic Water Tower building, which was once a prominent landmark in the neighborhood. The courts are now a vibrant community space, and the building has been restored to its original glory.

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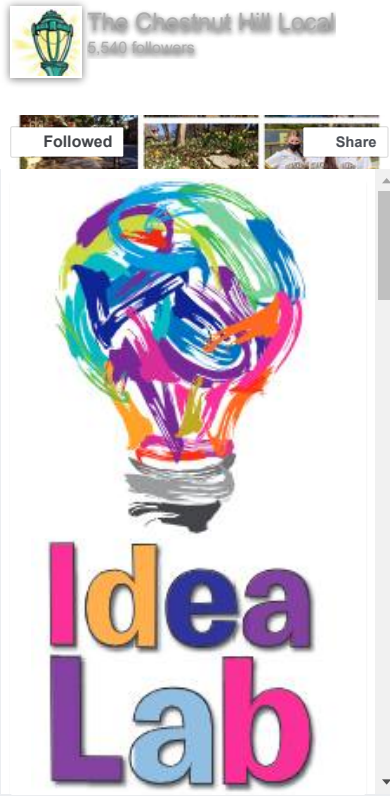
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