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HISTORY

Dive Into History at the Mermaid Inn

MAY 1, 2024 | [by Stacia Friedman](#)



The Mermaid Inn at 7673 Germantown Avenue. | Photo: Stacia Friedman

Today the [Mermaid Inn](#) in Chestnut Hill is a cherished community landmark, but it may have vanished if singer-songwriter Tom Gala hadn't stumbled upon it in the 1980s. "There was no one at the bar except a half dozen motorcycle gang members," said Gala. "But there was an adjacent room that was right for my purpose. I asked the owner, John Mekkis, who bought the place in 1959, if I could use the room one night a month for a gathering of folk musicians. John didn't say a word. He just nodded."

Before long, Gala's group, The Open Circle, had grown. "We were meeting at the Mermaid once a week and started performing in the bar on Friday nights," said Gala. "The bikers ignored us. They talked loudly over our music and made a racket playing pinball. By then, many of our

members had formed bands and WXPN radio host Gene Shay would drop by to catch a new act.” By that time, Gala, who performed with guitarist Richard Dreuding, was appearing in clubs up and down the coast from Maryland to Massachusetts.



A watercolor from 1907 showing the Mermaid Inn. | Image courtesy of the Chestnut Hill Conservancy

Participants in The Open Circle included singer-songwriter Susan Werner, whose songs were covered by Tom Jones and others. Eventually, the bikers found a hangout more suited to their needs and the Mermaid Inn, now owned by Mekkis' daughter Joanne, transitioned into a popular music venue offering food and drink five nights a week.

These days, the music has been cut back to three nights, Thursday through Saturday, with an eclectic mix of Bluegrass, Rock, Indie, Folk, Blues and Swing, plus open mic nights. Depending whose performing,

there is a cover charge or a hat is passed around. While the seats on folk music nights are filled mostly by the Woodstock set, younger singer-songwriters such as Emmet Dreuding (son of the late Richard Dreuding) and bassist John Anthony DeMaio attract millennials.



The original Mermaid Inn before it was demolished to make way for Winston Road. | Image courtesy of the Chestnut Hill Conservancy

“For many, the Mermaid is a second home,” said Dreuding. “It’s a place where artists have cultivated their craft over years of residencies, including my father, Richard Dreuding, Reverend Chris, The Sacred Cowboys, The Dukes of Destiny and too many to name. It’s a space where you can grow and experiment while being heard.”

“I performed many times at the Mermaid Inn over the years,” said vocalist Phyllis Chapell. “It was always a welcoming place for everyone.”

People just walked in from the street in their most casual attire and would just sit at the bar or at tables and listened to music. I loved the owners. They were so supportive of local musicians.”

Unlike other area bars, the Mermaid Inn isn't known for its fancy cocktails or food, and don't ask to see a wine list, but it rates highly with lovers of craft beer.



Patrons stand at the entryway of the Mermaid Inn in 1944. | Image courtesy of the Chestnut Hill

Conservancy

Meanwhile, historic preservationists may appreciate the Mermaid Inn for other reasons. It is the only former Chestnut Hill inn that was not demolished or converted. Germantown Avenue was originally a footpath of the Leni Lenape. During the 18th century it became the primary route for delivering products to and from Philadelphia and was dotted with lodging. The Mermaid Inn, established in 1734, was originally a stagecoach stop. Back then, it was a two-story German Traditional stone structure surrounded by farmland. According to local lore, George Washington once stopped there for a brew.

That building was demolished in 1913 for the construction of Winston Road. The current two and a half-story structure, designed by architects Koeller and Speth, was built in 1919 of Wissahickon schist with a white portico and dormer windows. It included a majestic cherry wood bar, ornate chandeliers, and leaded glass windows with colorful insets of mermaids. Around the same time, Winston Street was covered with cobblestones. All of these artifacts are still on view, creating the illusion of time travel as soon as you walk through the door.





An original leaded glass window and the cherry wood bar at the Mermaid Inn. |

Photos: Stacia Friedman

Described by some as funky, old timey, and a dive, the Mermaid Inn is a precious relic which has miraculously escaped the ravenous appetite for development currently gobbling up Germantown Avenue. How much longer will this neighborhood institution exist? Without being listed for legal protections on the local register its colorful history is potentially at risk. If you go, there is free street parking, and the 23 bus stops right in front. [Check out the online event calendar to see who is performing.](#) Bring cash, as they don't accept credit cards or Venmo, and be sure to tip the musicians generously.

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**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Stacia Friedman is a Philadelphia freelance writer and visual artist who tried New York and Los Angeles on for size and came home to roost. Her articles have appeared in WHYY's Newsworks, The Philadelphia Inquirer, The New York Times, Broad Street Review, and Chestnut Hill Local. She loves the city's architecture, history, and vibrant arts scene.

4 Comments:

1. *Jack Leaming* says:

[May 2, 2024 at 8:11 am](#)

Thank you Stacia for an informative article about my favorite bar. I sing with a band that plays there and know Tom Gala and Emmett well.

You described the place well too, which is not easy to do.

Walking in casually off the street is well said. So many people, including the band, take a quick glance at who is coming through the door to see if they are someone they know. Maybe I will see you there. I live 250 steps from the Maid.

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2. *John J Snyder* says:

[May 5, 2024 at 9:12 am](#)

Ahhhh. Never a disappointing visit back in the day. Of course you had to bang on the door to wake John up sometimes.

[Leave a Reply](#)

3. *Alan Markley* says:

[May 5, 2024 at 4:53 pm](#)

Thanks for the article. I often wondered about this place since I drive by it every day for work and have learned quite a bit of the history of Germantown, Mt Airy and Chestnut Hill but I knew nothing about the story behind this structure. Now I do! I hope they will continue to exist as a successful part of Chestnut Hill. Thanks again!

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4. *STEVEN G DEY* says:

[May 6, 2024 at 6:26 pm](#)

In the 70's and 80s it was a heaven for Spring Garden College Students. Joe and her father were the heart of the place for many years. Bumper pool in the back room was a go to spot.

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