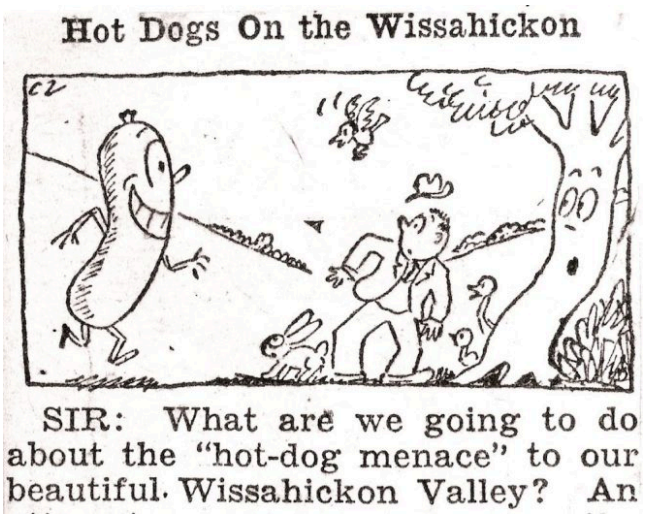
HISTORY

When Hot Dogs Threatened the Wissahickon Valley

JUNE 25, 2024 | by Kyle Bagenstose

The Wissahickon Valley has just about everything one could want in a park. There's the beautiful sight of light filtering through the leaves of a towering oak, then reflecting off of the gently flowing creek below. In summer comes the sweet songs of the wood thrush and scarlet tanager. Year round, dozens of miles of rugged trails, coated with the sparkling dust of Wissahickon schist crushed underfoot, invite visitors to take it all in. But where, they may ask, are all of the hot dogs?

If you've ever found yourself pining for a pig in a blanket during a visit to this natural gem of Northwest Philadelphia, know that you almost had it your way. As recently retold by Philadelphia-based architectural conservator Kate Cowing during a talk at the park's Valley Green Inn in mid-May, the humble frankfurter was once at the center of a controversy that echoed through the Wissahickon Valley in Depression-era Philadelphia.



A political cartoon published in the Philadelphia Bulletin satirizing the "Hot Dog Crisis" of 1937. | Image courtesy of Chestnut Hill Conservancy

On one side was a movement to modernize the city's park system by adding robust, active recreation. In the Wissahickon this took the form of a plan championed by the Fairmount Park Commission and federal Works Progress Administration (WPA) to vastly transform the park with playing fields, picnic areas, and, yes, numerous confectioners selling sweets, meats, and other assorted treats from stands along the trails.

Opposing this vision was, who else, but the Chestnut Hill crowd. In today's times, it's the racket of pickleballs going "pop-pop-pop" that stirs the ire of the inhabitants of this well-to-do neighborhood. Yet, in November 1937, as Cowing retold, it was an article in *The Philadelphia Inquirer* entitled, "Hot Dog Stand Menace Looms in Wissahickon," that publicly laid bare the transformational plans. The locals in opposition had a powerful ally in Francis Reeves Strawbridge, director of Strawbridge and Clothier department store, who at the time was president of the Friends of the Wissahickon (FOW), which came out against the plans. Pennsylvania State Senator George Woodward was also a member of the FOW. Woodward was a resident of Chestnut Hill who took no effort to hide his disdain for the proposal. "I think the plans are rotten," Woodward said, according to Cowing's research.

The Fairmount Park Guard station at Forbidden Drive and Allen Lane was built in 1938 by President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Works Progress Administration. The wood and stone structure was restored to its original condition in 2005 after years of neglect. | Photos: Michael Bixler

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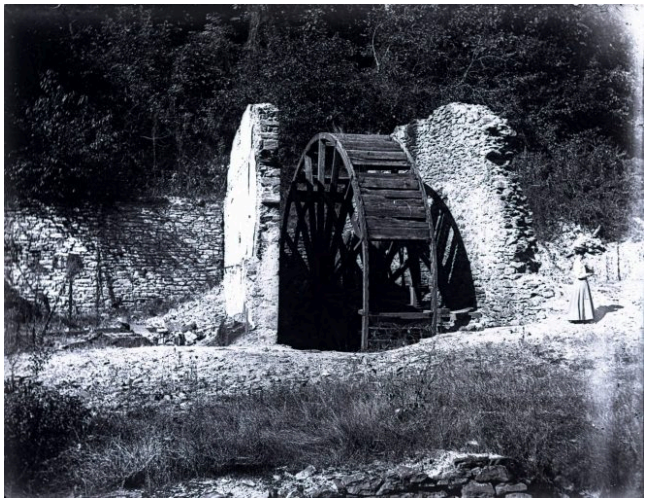
If you've walked the Wissahickon, you obviously know who won. Ultimately, the plans were scaled back to a much more modest WPA effort to build more utilitarian, rustic, low-slung buildings that still dot the park's trails today. Cowing detailed the history of both these structures and their ties to the 1937 controversy decades ago in her master's thesis for the University of Pennsylvania. The document, and Cowing's expertise, remain essential to understanding and preserving the buildings' legacies.

"That graduate thesis is a foundational document that's used by the Friends, by the Parks department, and by many others as we circle back to these buildings," said Ruffian Tittmann, current executive director of the FOW. "Both for a great deal of interest in the built history of the Wissahickon and a great deal of need in stewarding those buildings."

Efforts to Save a Landscape



A woman stands in front of the ruins of an old water wheel and the crumbling stone walls of an old mill on the banks of the Wissahickon Creek in 1906. | Photo courtesy of The Library Company of Philadelphia

Visiting the Wissahickon today, it is easy to imagine the park as some virgin woodland, untouched for centuries as development grew around it, hot dog proposals be damned, but Cowing noted it is anything but. Well before the Depression-era controversy, the Wissahickon was indeed a site of both industry and recreation and of the seediest kind. Before the 1,800-acre valley was acquired by Fairmount Park in 1868, more than 60 mills lined the course of the creek, with a turnpike (now Forbidden Drive) used to transport goods into the city. During the same era when Edgar Allen Poe and other famous writers hailed the natural beauty of the Wissahickon, its banks were also rife with the busyness of industry. "Over the years there have been log mills, dye mills, nail-cutting mills, oil mills, and textile mills," Cowing explained.

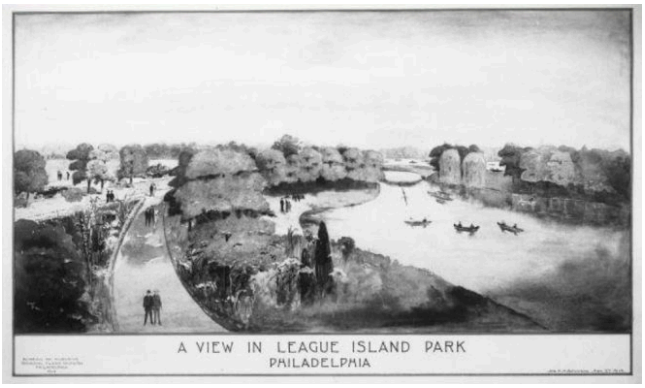
Also present were seven inns catering to tourists. Some were nice places to visit, and others were infamous for different reasons. "Valley Green always had a great reputation," Cowing said. "But some of them were real dives. At the Old Log Cabin Inn there were gangs that came and fought each other. It actually kept wild animals in the inn, including two bears that were tied to chains and apparently knew how to unpick locks."

The Old Log Cabin Inn. Date unknown. | Photo courtesy of Chestnut Hill Conservancy

Then, things changed. Liquor laws killed most of the inns, Cowing said. Fairmount Park took over, and a 19th-century, nationwide Park Movement to beautify landscapes in their natural splendor took root. "[The movement advocated] picturesque parks and that they would be an antidote to urban life and add to the quality of family and community," Cowing explained.

After the Fairmount Park Commission took over, many of the park's buildings were rapidly removed in line with the Park Movement ethos. Then, in the early 20th century, an effort to close the Wissahickon's turnpike to vehicular traffic was made. Local groups formed to support the cause, including the FOW, which celebrates its centennial this year. They were ultimately successful in leading to the naming of Forbidden Drive. That set the table for the largely natural and motor-free landscape Philadelphians still see today.

Parks and Pork



This watercolor from 1914 shows League Island Park, later renamed Franklin Delano Roosevelt Park, before the Park Reform Movement of the 1930s. | Image courtesy of PhillyHistory.org

The Wissahickon's freshly-minted sylvan character would be tested before long. Twin events conspired against it. First, the onset of the Great Depression and its waves of unemployment hit the area, including Chestnut Hill, where many Italian immigrants had moved to mine and mason stone to build nearby homes, giving the neighborhood much of its character today. Local make-work projects funded by prosperous citizens aimed to ease the pain of newly unemployed men, but such efforts would soon be subsumed by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's WPA.

Also afoot was a new park philosophy, called the Park Reform Movement, in which active recreation was now being championed across the nation. Fairmount's system was deemed too old fashioned, Cowing said, helping lead, for example, to the development of playing fields and a golf course at Philadelphia's aptly-named FDR Park. "City parks were supposed to give city people places to go to expel their energy," Cowing noted. "Ball fields, golf courses, slides, picnic areas, tennis courts, et cetera, et cetera."

A national study by Lebert Weir, then-director of the National Recreation Association, called out Philadelphia's park system as one of the nation's worst laggards, but not for long. The desire to upgrade the city's parks dovetailed with WPA efforts and resulted in a city-wide, $16 million overhaul between 1935 and 1942.

NIMP: Not In My Park

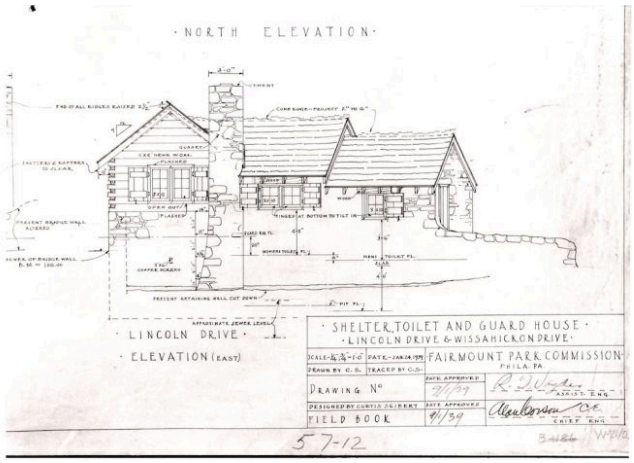
A *Philadelphia Inquirer* artist's conception circa 1930s of what Wissahickon Valley Park would look like with hot dog stands dotting the banks of the creek. | Image courtesy of Chestnut Hill Conservancy

Within this effort to overhaul, the Wissahickon Valley was a bit of an odd duck. The *Inquirer* expose of November 11, 1937 launched controversy over proposed changes to the park before they were even publicly announced, and the newspaper led, of course, with the hot dog.

"The 'hot dog menace,' repulsed at Valley Forge…" the story began, citing an earlier effort to offer concessions at that Montgomery County-based historical landmark. "… threatened yesterday to invade the winding valley of the Wissahickon."

A bit further down, the paper added some mustard. “Blueprints are ready; the money has been appropriated, workers are available,” the piece continued. “And ere next summer arrives the blossoming trees may vie for honors with Coney Island stands, and the scent of new-born violets and arbutus may be lost in the blanketing odor of fresh fried hot dogs.”

However, included within the article were early hints of weakness among the reformers pushing for a massive repurposing of the park. Quoted was Alan Corson, chief engineer for the Fairmount Park Commission, who told the newspaper that public blowback could halt the plans. “The whole scheme is subject to change,” Corson said. As Cowing’s research shows, it did indeed, and dramatically so.



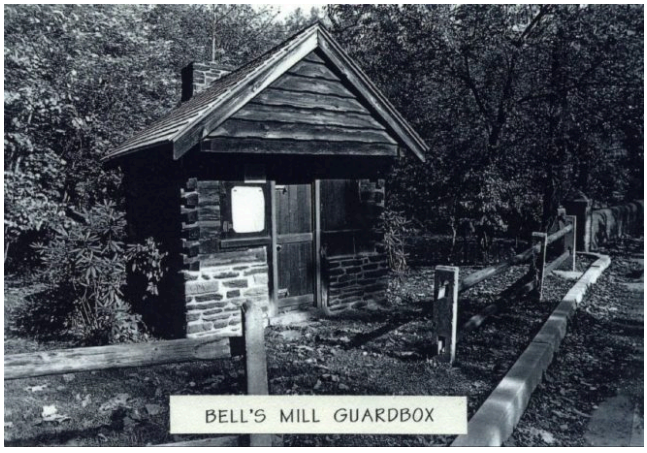
An architectural drawing of the north elevation of Lincoln Drive Guard House, 1939. | Image courtesy of Chestnut Hill Conservancy

Initial plans for the park were robust: 10 picnic areas with lawns, 12 toilets, 12 shelters, four larger shelters, 600 picnic benches, 16,000 feet of paths with 12 rustic bridges, six tennis course, three baseball fields, the planting of 1,168 trees and 10,000 plants, and the installation or repair of more than 20,000 feet of fencing. Plus quarrying, repairing dams, building stone retaining walls, and on. Enough work for 1,031 men for 10-months at a cost of $833,869.

However, following public blowback, the initial work was reduced to three guard shelters, three toilet buildings, three picnic shelters, two trailhead structures, and the adaptive reuse of two remaining mill buildings. By the end of the WPA’s work in the valley in 1943, its output had grown modestly to the construction of a total of 13 new buildings and the renovation of three existing buildings, but nothing nearly approaching the original proposal.

“There were so many letters to the editor that it really took the city by surprise,” Cowing said of the public outcry that led to the vast reduction in plans. “The idea that the WPA would actually ruin this natural wonderland that the park only created 60 years before just was horrific.”

Preservation, Not Preservatives



Bell’s Mill Guardbox circa 1930s. | Photo courtesy of Chestnut Hill Conservancy

When Cowing began the work for her 1997 thesis on the WPA-era buildings of the Wissahickon, she said she found several in serious disrepair, some even beyond saving. “Nobody had looked at these buildings in a comprehensive manner before. The collective memory of their construction had disappeared,” Cowing explained during her presentation at Valley Green Inn. “They were just sort of missing in action.”

Her work also came at a pivotal moment. There was a debate within local Wissahickon Valley supporters whether or not to try and save the aging buildings or let them disappear fully into the past. Yet, members of the FOW saw fit to fund Cowing's thesis, and after it was published the organization, along with the City's Department of Parks & Recreation, endeavored to repair and preserve the buildings into the future using historically-appropriate materials. Tittmann specifically recalled the repair of a WPA-era building near Mt. Airy Avenue after a damaging fire in 2006. "They used the thesis as a document that guided that restoration effort," he explained.

Cowing said that of the 16 WPA-era buildings, 12 remain. Most of them, she added, are textbook examples of the National Park Service guidelines of the time, which called for buildings to blend into their surroundings. In the Wissahickon, that meant they were largely constructed of Wissahickon schist stone from a local quarry and topped with log roofs and wooden shingles made from felled trees in the valley. The buildings are also low-slung and one-story, with "super low" pitch. "They emphasized horizontality and essentially had an obtrusive nature," Cowing said.

Thomas Mill Comfort Station circa 1930s. | Photo courtesy of Chestnut Hill Conservancy

The bathrooms were especially concealed, tucked away amongst shrubbery and utilizing honeycomb-like terracotta pipes to allow for light and ventilation while concealing their function.

Of the remaining structures, perhaps the most recognizable is Ten Box, a curiously-shaped structure at the intersection of Forbidden and Lincoln Drives, which is bisected by a large covered passageway that allows for recreationalists to follow the Wissahickon Bike Trail along the Monoshone Creek. According to the FOW's website, the structure originally served as a guardhouse, replete with a wood stove and working telephone. It's the latter device from which the building gets its name: numerous call boxes along the Wissahickon were identified by their number, and this one was the 10th along the trail and the only that remains. However, the phone line no longer functions today, and another past use for a bicycle vending operation has also come and gone.

The bicycle concessions at the Ten Box in 1940. | Photo courtesy of Print and Picture Collection, Free Library of Philadelphia

Moving up the creek, additional WPA-era buildings include several guard boxes and picnic and comfort shelters, capped at the other end by an entry building at Bells Mills.

Today, the structures primarily serve the public as places to simply get out of the elements. Tittmann said some WPA-era bathrooms were considered as a part of an ongoing effort by FOW to explore the addition of more restrooms within the park, but she adds that several are located in flood prone areas unfit to house an active vault toilet.

Still, many admire their historic value. Bruce Bohri, a spokesman for the Department of Planning and Development said that the buildings are not listed on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places, but are owned by the City and "maintained to historic preservation standards."

When asked for his views on the WPA structures, Paul Steinke, executive director of the Preservation Alliance for Greater Philadelphia, said he thinks they could potentially "merit designation as a thematic historic district, much like the historic subway entrances, Carnegie libraries, and historic street paving, which are all designated as thematic historic districts," Steinke noted. "It wouldn't be a simple undertaking, but it would be great if someone would do it."

TAGS: FAIRMOUNT PARK | WISSAHICKON VALLEY PARK | WPA

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kyle Bagenstose is an independent journalist based in East Mt. Airy. Previously with USA Today, he writes primarily about environmental and urban topics.

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