

A Trolley Embark Ends at Torresdale Park



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Anyone who enjoys perusing the Facebook pages featuring pictures from Northeast Philadelphia has seen the above photo many times. I don't know the photo's origin. If you do know it, please contact us. Everyone who contributes should be credited.

The photo shows the entrance to an entertainment venue called "Torresdale Park." Accompanying the photo in some of the Facebook posts have been stories about the park's history. Unfortunately, the information in some of these posts includes inaccuracies; in some cases, the stories are more fiction than fact.

Despite reports to the contrary, Torresdale Park did not open in 1880, "long before Willow Grove Park." Actually, the two parks opened on the same day, Decoration Day (or Memorial Day as it is now called), May 30, 1896. This was a soft opening for Torresdale Park with the official opening on July 3, 1896.

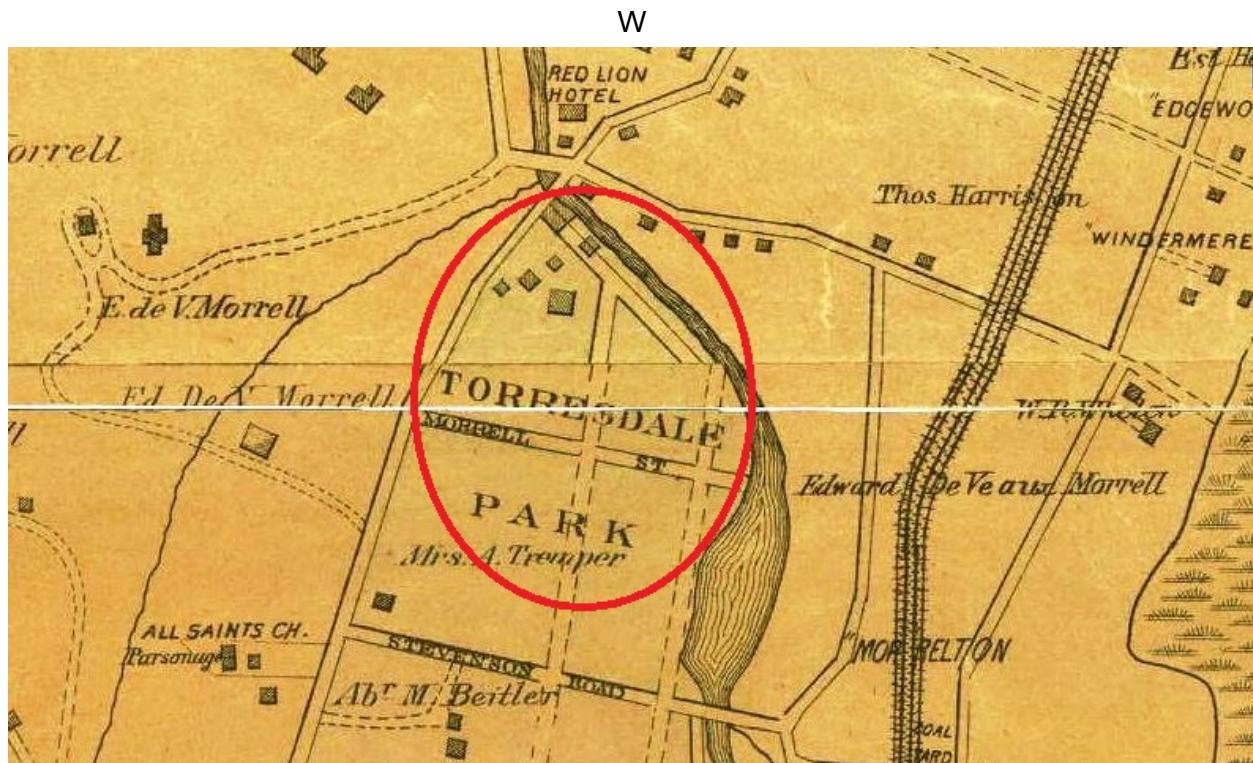
Both parks were “trolley parks,” designed to enhance ridership of trolley lines beyond commuter use. Torresdale Park’s trolley line was the Holmesburg, Tacony, and Frankford Electric Railway Company, fondly called the Hop, Toad, Frog. The terminus of the trolley line was the City Line Loop, just inside the Philadelphia city limits near the Poquessing Creek, the same location where the 66 trackless trolley turns around to head back to Frankford today. There was also space for safely parking bicycles at this spot for those that traveled to the park by bike.

Thomas W. South heavily promoted the establishment of the Hop, Toad, Frog line. South was a Tacony resident and relative of the Disston family. He was the manager and land agent for their family-owned properties. He was a five-term local magistrate, ward leader for the 41st Ward, and director of the Suburban Electric Company. In addition, he organized the Tacony Building and Loan, where he served as Treasurer for 42 years. His clout, money, and connections led him to create and serve as president of the the Torresdale Park Association. Other influential locals were board members and stockholders. According to a quote from *The Philadelphia Times*, July 3, 1896, edition, “Besides Magistrate South, some of the best-known men in Philadelphia share in the responsibilities of management, and it spoke well for the park that those officials are taking a lively personal interest in its welfare.”



Thomas Winfield South
1861-1919
(source: Findagrave.com)

The Torresdale Park Association leased two miles of land along Frankford Avenue from Andrew C. Barclay Stevenson. The lease was for a period of 10 years (1896-1906), and the property extended along The Bristol Pike and was bordered on the north and east by the Poquessing Creek, and on the south just above Stevenson Lane. It is usually reported that the Torresdale Park land was owned by Edward deVeaux Morrell. Although Mr. Morrell owned a great deal of land in Torresdale and the surrounding area, he never owned the property where the park was located. The owner, until her death in 1887, had been Aurelia Tremper Stevenson, Andrew C. Barclay Stevenson's wife. She left 115 acres of land (including the park land) to her husband to be used by him until his death, after which the land would go to their daughter, Alice. Her will stipulated that he could not sell any land without Alice's permission. The Stevenson story will be told on this site at a later date.



1900 Atlas of the 23rd, 35th, and 41st Wards of Philadelphia
Source: Historical Society of Frankford

The eight-cent trolley ride was said to be almost as enjoyable as the park itself. The excursion to the "country" was scenic and pleasant. Torresdale Park was a perfect venue for community picnics; company and church picnics were often held there. The spacious park could accommodate thousands of visitors, and admission was free. Ladies and children felt safe from obnoxious drunks since no alcohol was served in the park.

The park boasted an \$8,000 (or almost \$283,000 in 2025 dollars) carousel and a three-quarter-mile gravity roller coaster called the Scenic Railway, a ride that was very popular at the mid-winter fair in California. It featured caverns, ice grottoes, and other beautiful panoramic scenes. Other rides included the Ocean Wave and the Mysterious Gates. Visitors enjoyed a midway with exciting games to play and a first-class casino. No, this wasn't a gambling hall. At that time and in that area, a casino was a well-appointed dining hall, dance hall, and entertainment venue.

If one desired lighter fare, the old, refurbished Red Lion School sold cold milk, sandwiches, and pies. The school stood on the edge of the Poquessing Creek, presently the location of The Taggart House, 9961 Frankford Avenue. Women who had taught at the Red Lion School told of times when the rains made the waters of the Poquessing rise so high that they had to evacuate the students from the flooded school.



THE RED LION SCHOOL HOUSE, ON THE POQUESSING

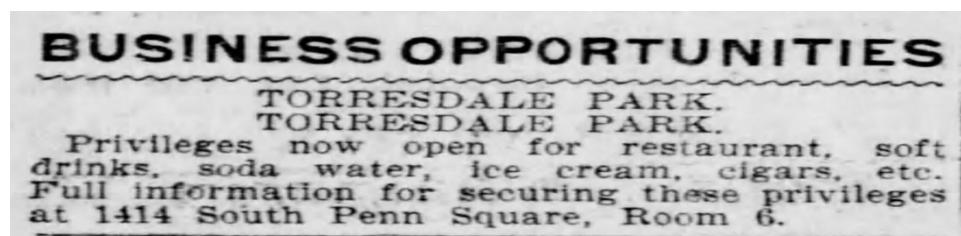
There was a well-appointed ladies' building in the park, where women could rest and freshen up with the aid of a maid. The men's building provided a place to take a break from the park's activities, and gentlemen could smoke a cigar.

In the early years, activities at the park also included a toboggan slide, a ball field, a half-mile bicycle track, shooting, and other games. There were also demonstrations of Thomas Edison novelties. On different occasions, there were displays such as hot air balloon ascensions, fireworks, and a circus. The Germania Band (not to be confused with the Germania Orchestra) performed twice daily. The band was composed of union musicians from Quakertown.



Germania Band
Photo source: The Philadelphia Inquirer

The Torresdale Park Association placed an advertisement in the Philadelphia Inquirer just two weeks before the soft opening of the park, looking for someone to run the concession stands. The position entailed the sale of candy, ice cream, soft drinks, soda water, and cigars. They hired Robert A. Rockhill. The terms and length of his contract aren't known, but he held the position starting May 27, 1896. However, the Association decided to run the concessions itself in 1897 and moving forward.



In June 1898, Mr. Rockhill filed a suit against the Torresdale Park Association in the Court of Common Pleas in Philadelphia, claiming that the Association had broken their agreement. He sought \$3,390 with interest. The outcome of the suit isn't known. It has been reported

that this issue with Mr. Rockhill was the reason that the park closed. However, the park did not close until 1906, so it is doubtful that this problem caused the park's close.

In 1899, Jacob Moses Wiener was hired as the manager. He held this position until the park closed in 1906. He then moved to Chicago. Wiener brought with him the "Famous" White City Band, directed by F. Gatti, and introduced a greased pole contest, a bowling alley, shuffleboard, a shooting gallery, and many concession stands. This was a time before political correctness; some of the entertainment would not be tolerated today. There were minstrel acts and white couples and groups imitating the intricate steps of Black cake walkers. Cake walking originated before the Civil War when Black plantation slaves performed dances after working the fields, and the winner won a cake.



Example of Cake Walking (source: clip art)

There was a circus with animal acts, trapeze artists, and high-wire walkers. There were orchestras and soloists, and dancing every afternoon and evening. One man, William Kendal, the "Hindu Mystic" even buried a man alive for 24 hours. He promised to bury a woman alive for 48 hours the next night. The acts were touted as "Fantastic," "Amazing," "The Great," but you would be hard-pressed to find anything about their careers today.

The photo below has been listed on eBay and WorthPoint (www.worthpoint.com), a website that researches and values collectibles and antiques. It is captioned "Torresdale Park August 19, 1900". The photographer was Frank Weinig, born in Germany in 1871. WorthPoint describes the photo as "a group of people and even a dog." This photo is a "history mystery" that screams to be solved. This group of men, except for a young girl, a young boy, and what appears to be a teenage boy. Who are they? Do they work at the park or are they there for a company or church picnic? Why are there no women in the photo? What was the pavilion to the right used for? The sign to the left reads "6 Ring." Does this mean that the circus appearing at the park has six rings rather than the commonly used single-ring or three-ring circus or is it a sign for a ring toss game on the midway? Were dogs allowed in the park? Were dogs allowed in the park?

My first thought when looking at the photo was that the dog was not a dog, but a bear cub, and the cub was in a circus act where it balanced and/or walked on the ball. Or the ball could be a basketball and the men a team for the sport introduced less than 9 years

before? All interesting guesses, but I have no idea who the people are or why a group photo was taken of them, and unfortunately, we will probably never know.



In 1903, Mother Jones, a labor activist, organized and led a march from Philadelphia to New York to raise awareness of child labor in the mills in Kensington. The march was given the name "March of the Mill Children" and began on July 8, 1903. The first night of the march was spent camping out at Torresdale Park.



"Mother Jones"
Mary G. Harris Jones
Photo source: www.womenshistory.org



March of the Mill Children
Photo source: The Philadelphia Inquirer

On April 8, 1927, fire destroyed most of the old Torresdale Park. The fire started in the grass along Frankford Avenue. It burned the scenic railway, some of the old park buildings, and ten acres of trees. The railway and the other amusements were abandoned when the park closed. The amusements were never donated to Willow Grove Park, as is widely reported.

The Old York Road Historical Society has the provenance of every ride that was in Willow Grove Park, and none came from Torresdale Park.

On November 7, 1931, another fire put the final nail in the old Torresdale Park's coffin. The remnants of the carousel were burned to the ground, as was anything that was associated with the park's former life.

Today, the former Torresdale Park location includes part of a housing development that lies between Hegeman Street and Carteret Road to the north and south, and the Poquessing Creek and Frankford Avenue to the east and west. Also included is a small section of Poquessing Creek Park. This is where the entrance to the park stood. This area of the park has been reclaimed by nature following fires and abandonment.

Those who patronized Torresdale Park have all passed away. We only have newspaper articles, a couple of photographs, and articles like this to learn about this place where for an eight-cent trolley fare, families could enjoy a day of thrills and a respite from the city's grind and grime. While eight cents seems trivial, it was the equivalent of \$3.06 today -- more than a \$2.50 one-way SEPTA fare!

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