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William Penn's 1688 plan for Philadelphia included an open square near each of the town's four corners and a plot for public buildings at the center.

# Introduction

## Philadelphia and Its Parks

From its genesis more than three hundred years ago, Philadelphia's park system has grown with the city to encompass ever-increasing recreational opportunities, as well as important art and architecture, America's first zoo, and musical performances of every variety. It also has spawned one of the greatest urban planning projects undertaken by any American city. The history of Philadelphia's parks is the story of a project that keeps expanding, as succeeding generations continue to mold and develop it. It is the story of the intimate, unfolding connection between the city's people and its environment.

When William Penn planned his city of Philadelphia in the 1680s, he included public green spaces within the grid of streets. For the first century, those squares were left largely to nature and for citizens to use as grazing and burial grounds. Then, in 1799, the plot at the center of Penn's grid became the site of the pumping station for the world's first public water system. A park with a fountain and sculpture was created on the grounds surrounding that elegant little pump house. Within just a few years, the water plant had to be expanded to larger quarters, and land was chosen beside the Schuylkill River, just beyond the city limits at the foot of Fairmount.

Today, more than two hundred years after that move and the beginnings of a new public park at Fairmount, Philadelphia is widely regarded as having one of the finest urban parks in the world.<sup>1</sup> From the few acres acquired in 1812 to construct a new waterworks on the riverbank, Philadelphia's park system has grown to include some 10,200 acres of parkland encompassing 120 neighborhood parks scattered far across the city. Approximately one acre in ten within Philadelphia's boundaries is now devoted to parks and playgrounds, with more continuing to be added almost annually.

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The city created out of the wilderness in the 1680s as a “greene countrie town” connects clearly to our own day, when Philadelphia’s mayor has proclaimed the goal of making this city the greenest in America. If that seems a merely rhetorical or sentimental connection, it goes much deeper than that. The ideal of green space for the city across more than three centuries addresses both very different and, at the same time, nearly identical realities. A salutary quality of life is the constant. In laying out his city, William Penn’s desire was for houses to rise surrounded by small garden plots and open spaces for the health of the inhabitants. He included five public squares in his plan for the same reason. Today, the vision of a green city is a response to the enormous increase in population—both regionally and across the globe—and that population’s consumption of resources on a scale that, thanks to the accompanying pollution, now threatens the very viability of the planet, including the health of *all* its inhabitants, human and nonhuman. The need is the same as in Penn’s day, but the issue is vastly larger and more critical.

Penn’s hoped-for private plots of green were quickly filled in by dense building in a rapidly burgeoning town. For most of its first two centuries, Philadelphia’s enormous growth overwhelmed its open spaces. But a little more than halfway through that period, moving the waterworks to Fairmount marked the start of a new and much greater effort to protect the city’s water supply. That required protection of open spaces on each side of the Schuylkill. A long struggle followed against the impact of industrialization on the city’s waterways. That effort eventually proved fruitless when the natural resource grew hopelessly polluted from industrial activity beyond the city’s boundaries. By late in the nineteenth century, it was clear that Philadelphia’s water had to be made safe through greater intervention in its treatment. But meanwhile, a remarkable public park had been born.

By the 1850s, when Fairmount Park was beginning to grow beyond its base at the waterworks, the park idea was spreading across America. The industrial age was making its belching presence felt around urban settlements, drawing unskilled laborers into its maw and spitting out its wastes into what had been pristine air and water. As an antidote, the romantic appeal of nature seemed to grow in proportion to its ever-greater distance from the lives of city dwellers. Alternatives were needed to this shutting out of the natural world. First came the rapid spread of rural garden cemeteries. One of the first was Laurel Hill, which was laid out in 1836, just to the north of what would be an expanding Fairmount Park. The romantic, contoured landscapes of these cemeteries became places both to honor the dead and elevate the thoughts of the

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living who strolled there. From these, it was a small step to the creation of city parks intended to bring similar uplift and spiritual restoration.

For the early proponents of parks in America like Andrew Jackson Downing, such public grounds also would be good for our democracy. “Much as they would create healthier cities,” he wrote, “so would parks bring together all classes of people in the common enjoyment of nature.”<sup>2</sup> Where European towns and cities had expansive parks, they typically had originated in the private pleasure grounds of the nobility. Many of these were only coming into the public domain early in the nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup> So, for park advocates in the new world, it seemed persuasive that the cities of republican America should create their own public gardens, libraries, and galleries, which would supplement the education of the masses. In Downing’s view, “by these means, you would soften and humanize the rude, educate and enlighten the ignorant, . . . give continued enjoyment to the educated . . . [and thereby] banish the plague-spots of democracy.”<sup>4</sup> A number of the early proponents of Fairmount Park took that idea very much to heart.

From the beginning, Philadelphia’s Fairmount Park has been inseparable from its place beside the Schuylkill. Soon after the park was created as such in 1855, a decade after Lemon Hill had been added to the Fairmount Water Works on the river’s east bank, it began its expansion to larger lands along the Schuylkill’s west bank. This Pennsylvania waterway begins more than 130 miles to the city’s northwest, flowing past Pottsville, Reading, and Norristown before entering the Philadelphia city limits for its final fourteen-mile course to the Delaware. By the 1870s, some five miles of that route passed through Fairmount Park. That stretch of the river quickly became one of the nation’s best courses for boating and rowing. Today, open space continues to be added along the riverbank south of the Philadelphia Museum of Art to extend parkland and hiking trails ever farther downriver. It is now possible to imagine a time when virtually all of the Schuylkill’s path through Philadelphia will be a green and public space.

The Schuylkill’s tributary, Wissahickon Creek, flows from its source in Montgomery County northeast of Norristown for more than twenty miles to its mouth at the Schuylkill in East Fairmount Park. By 1869, its seven-mile stretch within Philadelphia had been incorporated into the park. Because of its steep descent—it drops more than a hundred feet within the city limits—the creek had been an early site for water-powered industry in eastern Pennsylvania. Once the creek and gorge came under the jurisdiction of Fairmount Park, the park’s commissioners moved swiftly to demolish virtually all the

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mills along the way. That began a remarkable transformation. Within a few years, what had been a valley teeming with industry was returned largely to its wild and rugged state before Europeans settled in North America. In the 1920s, when motor vehicles were banned from the only motorway through the gorge, Wissahickon Drive, the sense of a return to primeval nature was complete. That ban gave the road its popular name since then—Forbidden Drive.

The Schuylkill River, rolling through a wooded landscape and its tributary plunging dramatically through the wilderness, defined Fairmount Park. By the same token, the creation of Fairmount Park defined the Herculean civic effort to provide a clean water supply to Philadelphia while offering public pleasure grounds. Over time, other creeks flowing through additional Philadelphia neighborhoods—most important, Cobbs, Pennypack, and Tacony—were brought into the city's park system to try to prevent their further pollution and provide more green retreats for Philadelphians. Meanwhile, however, the greatest waterway of them all, the Delaware, remained largely beyond the intended reach of the great new municipal park. There, where commercial activity could lead directly to the highway of the Atlantic, commerce and industry ruled.

In the 1920s, what would become perhaps the most iconic piece of outdoor art in Philadelphia was dedicated at Logan Square. Alexander Stirling Calder's *Fountain of the Three Rivers* depicted Philadelphia's three principal waterways as recumbent Native Americans: one male to represent the mighty Delaware, the others female for the gentler Schuylkill and the Wissahickon. While the three were equally beautiful in this allegorical depiction, it would be almost another century before Philadelphians could begin to imagine that this could become a reality. Yet by early in our century, green shoots were being established along the Delaware, that most rugged—and ragged—of the city's rivers. It began to seem possible that Philadelphia might one day claim public greenways linking all three of its principal rivers.

The park's beneficial impact on the city it serves has been profound and, in some respects, unique among urban parks in America. From its earliest days, the development of parkland has been accompanied by the installation of great public art, much of it within the parks themselves, but a good deal of it spilling out to enhance other public spaces throughout the city. For well over a century, Philadelphia has held the distinction of displaying more public art than any other city in America. That tradition began with the establishment of the Fairmount Park Art Association by private citizens only a few years after the park itself was named and began to grow.<sup>5</sup>



The Fountain of the Three Rivers (*Swann Fountain*) on Logan Square is dominated by three reclining figures of Native Americans that represent Philadelphia's three principal waterways: the Delaware, Schuylkill, and Wissahickon.

Early in the twentieth century, the most extensive urban plan in Philadelphia's history came about because of the existence of Fairmount Park. The Benjamin Franklin Parkway was designed to provide a direct and impressive entrance to the park while creating a handsome civic boulevard connecting that entrance to City Hall. It extended a green swath of the park down into the heart of the city at the same time it provided a thoroughfare lined with many of Philadelphia's principal cultural and educational institutions. In the process, it provided a superb avenue where additional works of art and architecture could be presented to the public.

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With the creation of Fairmount Park, the city also acquired an unrivaled collection of houses, mostly along the Schuylkill, dating from the colonial period and the first decades of the young Republic. At first, officials tended to regard these buildings as practical assets, to be used to house park offices and personnel. But gradually their historic and architectural value came to be appreciated, and the finest of them were refurbished and opened to the public. While some of these houses have been lost to the ravages of time—fires and vandalism have taken a toll—others now are being maintained by private groups leasing them for their use. Today, the Fairmount Park villas make it unique among urban parks for the number and quality of its examples of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century domestic architecture in America.

Thanks to its parks, high (and not so high) musical culture lives outdoors throughout Philadelphia's summers. The Philadelphia Orchestra has long provided a summer concert season at its home in Fairmount Park. Ballet, jazz, and other popular fare, musical and otherwise, are presented in parks throughout the city in the warmer months.

More than a century after the Schuylkill stopped providing the city with its water supply because of its ever-greater pollution, the river is once more clean enough for shad to return there to spawn. This was only made possible due to the combined efforts of the Philadelphia Water Department, the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission, and the Army Corps of Engineers. A fish ladder at the waterworks dam was essential to the shad; with them have come striped bass, perch, and other game fish to attract anglers back to the riverbank. For Philadelphians, the restoration of the Schuylkill may be the most satisfying indicator that their beloved park still thrives.

This is also a prime example of how a society's commitment and hard work can overcome the injury human settlement often does to the natural landscape. Unfortunately, however, the sequence of cause and effect more often flows in the other direction. Too frequently the demands of urban life have impacted negatively on Philadelphia's parks. Roads in the age of the automobile are the most dramatic example. By the mid-twentieth century, the nation was consumed with enabling automotive traffic to speed across the country. For Philadelphia, that resulted in building the Schuylkill Expressway right through some of the most bucolic acreage of West Fairmount Park.

More insidious harm to the city's park system has come from the long, slow decline in maintaining it. In the second half of the twentieth century, too many parks and recreation facilities subsided into urban jungles. This was the result of a number of factors, primarily the city's loss of population, in which once-thriving neighborhoods were abandoned to the very poor.

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This resulted in a decline in Philadelphia's tax base whereby city services were increasingly starved for funds. Among those services, the parks were perhaps the easiest target since the benefits they provided were widely seen as nonessential. With severe cutbacks in the personnel required to maintain the parks and keep them secure, their decline was so great that some came to be seen as civic liabilities, not assets.

For decades following World War II, the decline in Philadelphia's parks bore the hallmarks of a self-fulfilling prophecy. Where increasingly derelict neighborhoods threatened the attractiveness and even the safety of neighboring parks, park advocates found it ever more difficult to persuade a declining population of taxpayers of the need to maintain them. The more parks declined, the greater the loss of support for them, and vice versa. During the second half of the twentieth century, Philadelphia lost 26.7 percent of its population, mostly in the form of white flight to the suburbs. As a result, while tax revenues shrank, city officials could not afford to make parks a priority for spending.

Happily, as reflected in the current drive for a greener city, Philadelphia may be starting to turn back from that nadir. This is suggested by two hopeful trends: first, the stabilization and slight growth in the city's population since 2006, which had not happened since 1950; second, and more significant, what may be durable, long-term changes in the kind of life and livelihood this postindustrial city is able to offer its citizens. In the early years of the twenty-first century, Philadelphia saw an increase in the number of young people living in the city. Among them were substantial numbers with specialized training and advanced degrees for whom attractive recreational and other green space was an inducement to stay in the city.<sup>6</sup>

As a result, even during the most serious economic downturn since the Great Depression, starting in 2008, Philadelphia's parks were showing new signs of life. Although they remain badly underfunded, almost miraculous signs of their restoration are visible today. Volunteer groups and nonprofit organizations are stepping up to restore and enliven park properties, bringing many back to life that had long been moribund. The Fairmount Water Works and South Garden now beckon as brightly as they have at any time in the past two centuries. Smaller parks throughout the city, such as Hunting Park, have undergone face-lifts and revitalization that make them neighborhood magnets once more. What would have seemed a foolish sentiment not so long ago may be a sane possibility today: The best years for Philadelphia's parks may still lie in the future.

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Latrobe's pumping station for the city's first waterworks provided the backdrop for this July 4th celebration in Centre Square, circa 1805.  
(Courtesy of Historical Society of Pennsylvania)

