

## Concourse Lake History

Compiled by Susan Ayres, Chairman of PCGCA  
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from documents given to me by Gene Dilks

Gene Dilks, Chairman of The Philadelphia Committee of The Garden Club of America (PCGCA) from 2008-2010 framed the beginning of the Concourse Lake Coalition as follows. PCGCA had begun to consider embarking on a large civic project, similar to their very first and historic "76 parks for 1976", irrespective of any connection to Zone V.

In the spring of 2008 PCGCA leadership met with the City of Philadelphia, The Pennsylvania Environmental Council and the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society to learn about projects which might be of benefit to the City.

There emerged three possibilities.

One, suggested by Mark Focht and Joan Blaustein (both from Philadelphia Department of Parks and Recreation), was for restoration of Concourse Lake in the historic Centennial District of West Fairmount Park.

Two others were: one proposed by PHS (Grey's Ferry/Lindbergh Blvd. area) and the other by the Delaware River City Corporation and PA Environmental Council (Lardner Point Park).

The leadership of the PCGCA clubs voted unanimously on Concourse Lake as the others were not as appealing or practical.

Meanwhile, that summer of 2008, GCA sent a letter to club presidents asking them to engage in a substantial tree project to honor GCA's Centennial in 2013. GCA had been founded in Philadelphia in 2013 so the 2013 Annual Meeting was to be held in Philadelphia, with all the clubs in Zone V as hosts.

It was suggested by those planning the meeting that having all clubs in the zone collaborate on one tree project might be a better use of limited resources and energies.

The goal was to make this a public/private partnership, on behalf of GCA clubs to improve and beautify a portion of the city which needed help and to gift it to the City upon completion. As late as June 2009 GCA's national leaders and Zone V leadership were pressuring PCGCA to select another tree project since this one was not far enough along. (They had in mind a tree project at the Morris Arboretum).

Great potential was seen for this 7.5 acre property, bordered by Belmont Avenue and South Concourse Drive, between the Mann Music Center and the Please Touch Museum, and the site of our nation's 1876 Centennial Exposition.

- Increase public access to the historic, neglected and underused part of West Fairmount Park
- Lake could be a destination for neighbors and visitors to the Mann Music Center & Please Touch Museum
- Create educational opportunities for the study of and appreciation of native plants with respect to biodiversity and healthy ecosystems
- Potential to improve water quality and stormwater management in the Schuylkill River watershed

- Good match for skills available within the membership
- Make design an example of the newly established LEED standards for landscape design

Gene's correspondence outlines the many questions, numerous steps required, voluminous amounts of paperwork necessary, endless phone calls and meetings, and the array of community partners that were included in creating the design, fundraising efforts, creation of educational plans and the many and endless challenges of working with city agencies to get permits, design approvals, liability issues. As Gene reflects now on the project, she is in awe that it was accomplished as it was so not an easy project.

The scope of the project involved environmental restoration and beautification:

- Dredging the lake to clear silt, trash and debris
- Removal of an old and deteriorated paths
- Installation of a new paths with 6 pedestrian entrances
- Repair of cracked drainage piping
- Grading and new soil
- Creating an outdoor classroom/amphitheatre and programming
- Planting of native trees, shrubs and perennials
- Removal of Canadian Geese
- Educational signage, labeling of plant material which was graffiti-proof
- Fundraising !

Partners included:

- Philadelphia Department of Parks and Recreation
- Fairmount Park System (now the Fairmount Park Conservancy)
- Philadelphia Water Department
- Franklin Institute & Academy of Natural Sciences at Drexel University – for educational programming
- Urban Tree Connection - education, planting, maintenance

To meet the GCA request for a tree project, clubs were encouraged to do tree propagation. A list of desirable trees was distributed, and each club selected one or two specific trees to propagate. Seedlings were to be nurtured in the greenhouse at Horticultural Hall until it was time to do the plantings in the park. This never really went anywhere as the trees were not large enough to plant when needed.

Reports to PCGCA provide some of the details on financing, design and construction, education plans and maintenance and of course a To Do list.

Fairmount Park Conservancy now has all the official records documenting the project - the construction documentation, plans for hardscaping and plantings and the list of partners and donors.

Alice Doering (of The Weeders and the landscape designer who did the actual plant plans) will make a drawing of the plants which were actually planted and what currently exists in 2021.

Contributors included:

- GCA garden clubs in Zone V
- PCGCA Fertilizer Fund grants – \$24,000 between 2010 & 2013

Individual donors  
Community partners

Two regrets are:

- Concourse Lake was not included on the city bus tour which was part of the 2013 Annual Meeting
- Historical signage about Machinery Hall was never made

Gene Dilks received the **GCA Zone V Civic Improvement Award** in 2013 for her leadership and stewardship of the project. She then gave credits to a long list of those who helped her – *see her letter of June 24, 2013.*