



A History of the Founding of PCGCA The Philadelphia Committee of the Garden Club of America

Compiled by Susan Ayres, Chairman of PCGCA
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I got interested in PCGCA's beginnings and their first neighborhood parks project after a conversation with Gene Dilks (Mrs. Charles D.) of The Garden Club of Philadelphia, following a presentation made by PHS at PCGCA's June 2021 meeting. Gene wondered why PHS had not mentioned the role PCGCA played in getting their "Philadelphia Green" (city parks) project going

*She gave me a few documents from her files which helped me to prepare this history. Because PCGCA files prior to 2008 had been archived at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, I contacted them for information and because of COVID restrictions, they obliged me with sending a few of the relevant documents.
Our file is # 3468*

I have scanned all the materials mentioned and they are in a digital folder.

According to some handwritten notes, it appears that as early as 1932 The Weeders and The Garden Club of Philadelphia (GCP) considered "banding" together for some urban beautification projects. Connecting the two clubs were sisters, Dorothy 'Doc' Falcon Platt (Mrs. Charles - The Garden Club of Philadelphia) and Emeline 'Toby' Marian Sims Rosengarten (Mrs. Frederic - The Weeders). *(They would later collaborate on the Independence Hall National Historical Park's Magnolia Tribute Garden).*

Fast forward to the 1960's when the concept of a Philadelphia committee was discussed by three Philadelphia GCA club presidents while on the train to the 1964 GCA Annual Meeting in Portland, OR. They were Peg Dilks (Mrs. John Hyland - GC of Philadelphia), Lalite Pepper Lewis (Mrs. Francis Lewis - The Weeders) and Ann Dechert (Mrs. Philip - The Planters).

In a lengthy but undated memo (though infer sometime around 1967-69) from Peg Dilks, entitled, "*The Philadelphia Clubs Go to Town*", she notes that concern was shared by many garden club members about the future of American cities and the "dreadful conditions that prevailed in disadvantaged neighborhoods". She notes that there might be some way that garden clubs could help, albeit on a small scale, as the clubs were small, as were their budgets. They were at a loss as to how to go about making a difference, but as a start it seemed logical for the area GCA clubs to join forces. They would then actively look for a worthwhile project or projects which would be manageable by the group.

The intention of this collaboration was for clubs to retain their own identity and “special flavor”, with the organization offering “wider, more diversified opportunities”, as well as having more credibility, fundraising capabilities and civic influence.

As an IRS tax-exempt organization, both club and individual donations could be funneled to qualified projects while receiving a favorable tax consideration.

One thought had been to call this joint organization The Garden Club Council of Philadelphia but this was rejected as The Garden Club of America (GCA) would not get any credit and they wanted also to enhance the overall accomplishments of The GCA.

They settled on **The Philadelphia Committee of The Garden Club of America.**

Articles of Organization were drawn up (copies we have are undated but assumed to be 1965-66) and the Bylaws of the Organization were adopted in January of 1966 (copy in our Official Documents notebook and at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania). This was an unincorporated, not-for-profit association/organization and recognized as such by the IRS and the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. *These Bylaws were amended in 1970 and several times since then.*

From the memo it seems that the mayor had established a “Philadelphia Beautiful Committee” and that the City (1961) had set up a land bank with the goal of acquiring through sheriff sales tax-delinquent properties in underprivileged areas, for the use of various public agencies. There was staffing, as well as a budget for equipment to demolish derelict buildings and for clearing lots. Funding would come from the Federal Government and private foundations.

Thus, the birth of the **Neighborhood Park Program** (aka Vest-Pocket Parks). It was extremely popular, with the result that there were not enough funds or personnel to keep up with the demand.

What a perfect project for this new Philadelphia Committee. As a trial, they would finance the landscaping of two (2) parks. Multiple committees were set up to cover all phases of the work – Design, Research, Nursery, Planting, Horticulture and Community Relations and, of course, Fundraising. The memo describes at length the responsibilities of each committee.

It appears that members of PCGCA became or had been involved with pocket/vest parks as early as 1962 (based on a much later list of parks), but since PCGCA was not formed officially until 1966 those parks must have been the project of individual clubs or perhaps just individuals who happened to be members of a GCA club. Information available leaves this as a question.

According to some handwritten notes (January 1966) of Peg Dilks, they experienced great frustration working with the City. Money was not the problem, but rather the City would not commit itself to supplying labor and other tangible things which had been requested.

A note from April 1968 mentions vest-pocket parks, with the ambitious goal of creating 76 for the US Bicentennial in 1976, so this appeared to be the focus of PCGCA work for the next decade.

For more on these parks see a separate document: PCGCA History Neighborhood Parks

Around 1980, at the behest of Ernesta Drinker Ballard [Pres. of The Pennsylvania Horticultural Society (PHS) since 1961], the 80 parks which had been completed were gifted to PHS to start or as a boost to their “Philadelphia Green” program.

A history of PCGCA written in May 1993, indicates that, "All Garden Club Members are welcome to attend meetings and participate in projects. The Committee is composed of the President and two Delegates from each of the ten club, Officers, Members-at-large, Members Emeritus and Committee Chairmen interested in civic affairs related to horticulture and conservation. Garden Club of America officers in Zone V, Committee Chairmen and Representatives were also invited." Funds for the projects come from money raised through the annual "Fertilizer Fund" appeal, club dues and other misc. sources.

The history reported that projects during the 1970's concentrated on:

- Fairmount Park: The traffic Triangle gardens east and west of Logan Circle which were gifted to the City 1981 & 1984. The Swan Fountain was the central feature of Logan Circle and restored with PCGCA funds
- The Azalea Garden revitalization – a garden sponsored by the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society's Center City Green Program
- The Rodin Museum – replant, build a walkway around the pool and help to install an irrigation system
- Bartram's Garden - then owned by Fairmount Park and administered by the John Bartram Association – meadow garden & educational materials
- Kennedy Boulevard – landscaping of approach to 30th Street Station

New Projects of the 1990's included:

- Children's Crisis Treatment Center
- Schuylkill Center for Environmental Education
- Philadelphia Senior Center
- Squirrel Hill Falls Theatre Park
- Physic Garden at the Pennsylvania Hospital
- Magnolia Tribute Garden at Independence National Historical Park

Past & Completed Projects:

- Carousel House in Fairmount Park
- Neighborhood Pocket Parks – "76 parks for 76"- more than 80 were completed and gifted to PHS for their "Philadelphia Green" program
- Teaching response to Environmental Demand
- Fairmount Park Mansions, garden maintenance program
- Stenton mansion
- Terry Thurmond Center – horticultural therapy at the West Philadelphia Consortium for Mental Health
- John R. Heinz National Wildlife Refuge at Tinicum
- Twelve historic churches in Society Hill received horticultural refurbishing for the Bicentennial
- Collaboration with the Tercentenary Gardens Collaborative to finance The Guidebook: Gardens and Arboreta of Philadelphia and the Delaware Valley

Fast forward now to 2008.

In anticipation of The Garden Club of America's Centennial Celebration, GCA requested that each club come up with a significant tree project. PCGCA opted to collaborate on one project, rather than each member club having to come up with their own separate project.

After much research and under the very professional leadership of the PCGCA Chairman, Gene Dilks (Mrs. Charles D. – Garden Club of Philadelphia), the restoration of Concourse Lake, in the 1876 Centennial District of West Fairmount Park, was decided on. This was a massive project requiring careful planning, fundraising and most notably vast amounts of Gene’s time navigating the complexities of city departments to get permits, approvals and assistance.

(For more detail see Concourse Lake History).

To protect PCGCA, its member clubs and individual members from liability for misconduct, it was advised that PCGCA alter its existing status (an IRS 501 c 3 organization and certified by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania to solicit charitable donations) to a certified Commonwealth of Pennsylvania Nonprofit Corporation. This necessitated filing new Articles of Incorporation (a revision of the original 1966 articles of organization) and updating our Bylaws and governance procedures.

The Board voted in favor of incorporation at the September 23,2009 meeting.

The new ByLaws were approved by the Board at the November 18,2009 meeting.

PCGCA continues to provide grants to multiple non-profits in the City of Philadelphia - some small neighborhood efforts and other larger civic projects. All grants are exclusive to horticulture: supporting plants and planting material for food production, conservation, historic preservation, community enrichment as well as advancing the knowledge of horticulture to all, including school students and young children.

For a complete list of all projects funded, to date, see: *PCGCA History Grants 1968-2021*

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