

Fairmount Park

A Philadelphia Freedom

Gavin Hecker

Philadelphia's Fairmount Park is actually more than just one park. It is a system of 62, neighborhood and regional parks, which are maintained by the Fairmount Park Commission. The Commission was first formed in 1867 to oversee the creation of a public park along the Schuylkill River and to "maintain the Park forever, as an open public place and park, for the health and enjoyment of the citizens of Philadelphia, and the preservation of the purity of the water supply to the City of Philadelphia."¹ The key factors leading to the city's initial acquisition of land later to become the bulk of Fairmount Park, were to purchase land which drained into the Schuylkill River, protect Philadelphia's drinking water supply, and to build the Fairmount Water Works. Philadelphia was the first large American city to regard the delivery of safe water as a municipal responsibility and the city's water department was the first in America to supply an entire city with drinking water. The old Fairmount Water Works building originally pumped water into a reservoir, which was set on top of *Faire-Mount*, the current site of the Philadelphia Museum of Art.² In 1951, the Fairmount Park Commission became part of the Philadelphia City government and was designated a departmental commission of the Department of Recreation. Today Fairmount Park encompasses 10% of the land in Philadelphia totaling 9,200 acres, 5,600 acres of natural areas, over 215 miles of recreational trails, 22 playgrounds, 127 tennis courts, 35 basketball courts, and 160 baseball, football, soccer and softball fields, and includes the largest collection of historic properties in Pennsylvania.³ It's currently believed by many sources, to be the largest urban park in the United States and possibly even the entire world.



Fairmount Water Works, Late 1800's

¹ Fairmount, Philadelphia's Park, White

² www.fairmountwaterworks.com

³ www.fairmountpark.org



Photo by Tony Webb / City of Philadelphia

THE 62 PARKS OF FAIRMOUNT PARK Philadelphia's Park System

- | | |
|--------------------------------------|----------------------------|
| 1 Allen Lane | 30 Karskung Golf Course |
| 2 Ambury Park | 31 Key Park |
| 3 Barron's Garden | 32 Kerble Park |
| 4 Benjamin Franklin Parkway | 33 La Hara Park |
| 5 Bradford Park | 34 Logan Square |
| 6 Barksdale Park | 35 Locust Park |
| 7 Carpenter's Woods | 36 Manotown Farm |
| 8 Carroll Park | 37 Manayunk Canal |
| 9 Christ Church Park | 38 Market Place |
| 10 Clifford Park | 39 McMichael Park |
| 11 Cloverly Park | 40 Morris Park |
| 12 Cobbs Creek Golf Course | 41 Palmer Park |
| 13 Cobbs Creek Park | 42 Postlar Park |
| 14 East Fairmount Park | 43 Penn Treaty Park |
| 15 Franklin Park | 44 Pennypack Park |
| 16 Fisher Park | 45 Proquesting Creek Park |
| 17 Fisher Park | 46 Rittenhouse Square |
| 18 Fox Chase Farm | 47 Roosevelt Boulevard |
| 19 Franklin D. Roosevelt Golf Course | 48 Schuykill River Park |
| 20 Franklin D. Roosevelt Park | 49 Seaman Woods |
| 21 Franklin Square | 50 Southern Boulevard |
| 22 Franklinton Park | 51 Stephen Grand Park |
| 23 Germansy Hill | 52 Tacony Creek Park |
| 24 Green Ford | 53 Wakefield Park |
| 25 Harper's Hollow Park | 54 Walnut Lane Golf Course |
| 26 Helme Gracie Park | 55 Washington Square |
| 27 Hunting Park | 56 West Fairmount Park |
| 28 I-95 Park | 57 Wissahickon Valley Park |
| 29 John Byrne Golf Course | 58 White's Woods Park |
| 30 John F. Kennedy Plaza | 59 Wooden Bridge Run |
| 31 Junata Golf Course | 60 Woodward Pines |



Map of Fairmount Park System, www.phila.gov

The above map depicts an extensive Fairmount Park system within the Philadelphia landscape. Before the early 20th century, Fairmount Park was mostly comprised of just East Fairmount Park, West Fairmount Park, and Wissahickon Valley Park. Large tracts of land including Cobbs Creek Park, Franklin D Roosevelt Park, Tacony Park, and Pennypack Park, were later added. Currently, one out of every ten acres in Philadelphia is part of the Fairmount Park Commission.

The Fairmount Park Commission maintains prominent Philadelphia neighborhood parks such as Rittenhouse and Washington Squares and a great number of other city parks, which vary in size. The Benjamin Franklin Parkway is also part of the Commission and encompasses a large section of Philadelphia's downtown geography. I will briefly discuss the importance of these parks and then focus the large part of this writing around what most Philadelphia residents consider to be Fairmount Park as it is seen on maps, and as it was for the most part, originally created.

More than any of the other squares, Rittenhouse functions as a multipurpose neighborhood park. Its proximity to Philadelphia's center city along with its design and natural beauty have made the park a magnet for office workers on lunch break, art and performance exhibitions, and a place for parents to bring their children to play. The park's main walkways begin at the four corners and meet at a central plaza, which contains a reflecting pool. Numerous benches, large trees, grassy areas, and, sculptures, further add to the park's appeal. Historically, the Rittenhouse Square area has been a sought after neighborhood to live in and work close to. In the 1850's, great Victorian mansions were built facing the square, most of which were replaced by apartment buildings after 1913.⁴ The square is a prime example of how a park can be just as much a part of the city as well as being separate. It's small enough to walk through on your way to another destination, it serves as a known meeting place, there are almost always people around, and it is very much centrally located. At the same time, a person could spend all day there, reading, sleeping, engaging in sports and other activities, and in a sense, escape from the city that's clearly all around them.



Rittenhouse Square, © Franklin Images

⁴ www.fairmountpark.org/RittenhouseSquare

The Benjamin Franklin Parkway, in contrast to Rittenhouse Square is a mile-long boulevard, stretching from Philadelphia's center city to the Art Museum. It essentially connects the original Fairmount Park with the rest of the city. Both sides of the parkway are lined with wide sidewalks trees and grassy areas. Directly in front of the Art Museum is a large open square with a prominent sculpture facing downtown. From the steps of the Philadelphia Museum of Art is a wide-open view of the entire boulevard with City Hall as its central backdrop. The Parkway displays several styles of architecture along its boundaries including French at the Rodin Museum, Central Library and Municipal Court Building, Roman-Corinthian at the Cathedral of Saints Peter and Paul, and Greek at the Philadelphia Museum of Art and the Franklin Institute.⁵ While the parkway is a prominent link in Philadelphia's landscape, it is not a used in the every day lives of city workers.⁶ However, it is ideal for large events with the space to accommodate close to a million people. Free concerts, fireworks displays, and international celebrations are just some of the festivities that Philadelphia has hosted on the parkway. The ability to host such events in a downtown area is what places Philadelphia on par with other large cities like New York and Washington D.C. with their use of Central Park and the Capital Mall grounds. Events of such grand stature and significance are key in promoting business and other economic growth in a city. If done properly, the entire world will get an opportunity to view, read about, or hear what that given city has to offer. An example of this would be the recent Live 8 concert, which was staged at the foot of the Art Museum steps. Close to a million people were expected throughout the day, and there was consistent worldwide media coverage leading up to and during the event. Philadelphia was as big as London for a day, and everything went off just as planned without a flaw.



Live 8, Benjamin Franklin Parkway, 2005. Hecker

Shortly after the initial creation of the Fairmount Park Commission, one of the largest and most important sections of land in the system was added to the Commission's jurisdiction. This was the acquisition of the Wissahickon Valley in 1868, which is a major artery of the Schuylkill River watershed.⁷ Now known as Wissahickon Valley Park, it extends for seven miles along a steep river gorge and covers 1,800 acres. It has over 50 miles of trails and is heavily used by city and regional hikers, equestrians, anglers, and bikers.⁸ The Wissahickon gorge is said to be the first piece of publicly owned land in the

⁵ www.fairmountpark.org/BenFranklinParkway

⁶ *The American City, What Works What Doesn't*, Garvin pg. 58

⁷ *Fairmount, Philadelphia's Park*, White

⁸ www.fow.org/

United States to be preserved mainly because of its scenic attributes. The gorge is now designated as a National Natural Landmark.⁸ Though the Wissahickon Valley is not part of Philadelphia's downtown area, it is just minutes away from center city by public transportation or car and bike. The magic of this part of Fairmount is that if you did not know you were actually in Philadelphia, you would think you were in a beautiful gorge at a rural location, at least fifty miles away from any real city life. There are even some areas within the park that look and could possibly be primary growth forest. During the Depression, the Works Progress Administration (WPA) built many of the shelters, dams, trails and walls along the gorge, adding to the parks infrastructure and historic character. The WPA built thirteen stone and log trail shelters, guard boxes, and comfort stations throughout Wissahickon Park between 1938 and 1939.⁹ Fairmount Park's Wissahickon Valley is truly a place where Philadelphians can easily go to get away from the noise, masses of people, and stress of the city. Since the park is so close to the city, it is sad to say that it has not quite managed to completely escape city related problems. Garbage is one of the biggest problems the park faces today. There are a good number of visitors who leave their empty beverage containers, wrappers, and other waste products behind in the water, and on trails. There are many ways to go about trying to solve this problem, such as better enforcement of rules or proper sign placement in key areas, but current funding for such measures is minimal. There is one group of people who have been in place since 1924 to help maintain the beauty of the Wissahickon gorge for everybody. The Friends of the Wissahickon (FOW) is a 1,300 member, non-profit organization with a mission "to preserve the natural beauty and wildness of the Wissahickon Valley and stimulate public interest therein."¹⁰ Volunteers work year round to plant trees, remove vines; repair trails, clean up graffiti and trash, serve on committees, and assist with administrative tasks.



WPA Shelter, Hecker



Trash left behind, Hecker

⁹ www.fairmountpark.org

¹⁰ www.fow.org/about_us.htm



Bridge over Wissahickon Creek, Hecker



Wissahickon Creek, Hecker



Trail Users, Hecker

Fairmount Park is also home to America's first Zoo. Established in 1873, the Philadelphia Zoo presently covers 42 acres, with over 1,500 rare and exotic animals from around the world.¹¹ Zoos now exist in many American cities, and have evolved over time to play a significant role in youth and adult education. The Philadelphia Zoo is a place where people can go and experience a slice of the rest of the world, and learn why preservation of natural resources is important. City dwellers are often blind to the impact they may have on the rest of the world. The Zoo gives the people a chance to see first hand, the animals that may be losing essential habitat due to the consumption of natural resources, which have no direct effect upon city life.



The Philadelphia Zoo, www.philadelphiazoo.org/

The Centennial year of 1876 brought Philadelphia's West Fairmount Park to the forefront of America's attention. Commissioners of Fairmount Park made 450 acres of land available for an International Exhibition to celebrate the occasion. An act of Congress created a Board of Finance with the authority to issue capital stock to the limit of ten million dollars for the Centennial.¹² Numerous buildings were constructed for the celebration, but Memorial Hall is the only substantial structure that still stands today. It is situated on ground 112 feet above the Schuylkill River, and remains one of Philadelphia's most beautiful buildings'. It's also one of America's first examples of Beaux-Arts architecture. After the Centennial Exhibition ended, Memorial Hall became home of the Pennsylvania Museum of Art until 1928, and most recently housed some offices of the Fairmount Park Commission. Its next tenant is soon to be Philadelphia's Please Touch museum expected to open in 2007.¹³



Memorial Hall, Hecker

Opening Day of Centennial Exhibition, www.fairmountpark.org

West Fairmount Park is also home to The Horticulture Center. It contains an over 20-acre Arboretum dating back to 1876, including a wide variety of trees with Asian, European and North American origin. The area also contains a greenhouse along with several gardens and sculptures. Nature trails can take you deep into the grounds and past butterfly gardens. Picnic areas are available for the gathering of friends and family. Also located on the grounds are the Japanese House and Garden, which holds a replica of a 17th-century Japanese scholar's house and a reflecting pond with Koi fish.¹⁴



Japanese House and Garden. Hecker

¹² Fairmount, Philadelphia's Park, White

¹³ www.fairmountpark.org/MemorialHall.asp

¹⁴ www.fairmountpark.org/JapaneseGarden.asp

For the music lover, West Fairmount Park includes The Mann Center for the Performing Arts. A pavilion seat 4000 people under cover, and the lawn can accommodate an extra 10,000 general admission spaces.¹⁵ During the spring, summer and fall, the Mann Center hosts a wide variety of musical performances from The Philadelphia Orchestra to classic rock concerts.

East Fairmount Park is best known for The Philadelphia Museum of Art, Boat house Row, Smith Memorial Play ground with its giant slide, The Academy of Natural Sciences, and the several mansions that dot its landscape. But most importantly, historically, is the Fairmount Water Works Building Itself. Its existence is the reason why all this land was set-aside in the first place.

Along with all its cultural, and educational assets, Fairmount Park is a place primarily of recreation, with vast areas dedicated to open fields, athletic fields, trees and other vegetation, and even horse stables. This is a place where the people of Philadelphia come to learn, explore historic sites, exercise, participate in team sports, hold events such as weddings, and simply to relax. Its grounds are home to some of the best views of Philadelphia, and with a few exceptions, it's all free for everyone to enjoy making it Philadelphia's greatest Freedom of all.



West Fairmount Park, Hecker

¹⁵ www.manncenter.org/