



Lower Merion Conservancy

2022 Annual Report

Message from the Chairman and Executive Director

Cover Photo: Mike Mchale, from Duranti's Landscaping, poses with a shipment of native trees and shrubs ready to be planted for the Cynwyd Heritage Trail Habitat Expansion Project.

Dear Friends,

As the end of 2022 quickly approaches you, like us, are probably asking yourself, "Where did all the time go?" Maybe you'll feel better when you hear the familiar saying, "The days are long, but the years are short," and remind yourself of everything that you have accomplished. This has surely been the case for the Conservancy.

Our days were full. 2022 marked our busiest year for on-the-ground environmental projects, as we expanded our Green Streets program to add more green stormwater infrastructure and wildlife habitat to the streets of Narberth and Ardmore. We thank the PA Department of Environmental Protection for making this program possible.

Our largest project took shape on the Cynwyd Heritage Trail, as we worked to restore thousands of square feet of wildlife habitat through the restoration of meadows, woodlands, and riparian buffers. The multi-use recreational trail that connects Lower Merion to Philadelphia was planted with thousands of native plants, trees and shrubs.

In one of the most thrilling victories of the Conservancy's history, we helped save a 1.8-acre parcel of land from development, a move that preserved 3 Elmwood Avenue in Narberth, a vulnerable streamside and woodland property, as public parkland.

In the area of historic preservation, we continued to advocate for the retention of a historically and architecturally significant greenhouse complex in Villanova proposed for demolition by the Lower Merion school district. We know that a more preservation friendly and sustainable athletic field plan is both feasible and practical at this site.

We found ways to bring our stormwater, historic preservation, and environmental programming to thousands in our community, including our young environmental stewards at Lower Merion and Narberth elementary and preschools. And in June, we welcomed over 200 guests to our first Gala since 2019.

We are deeply grateful to our members and board for helping us achieve remarkable goals this year.

With gratitude,

Maurine McGeehan
Executive Director

Mark E. Taylor
Board Chair

Snapshots of FY2022



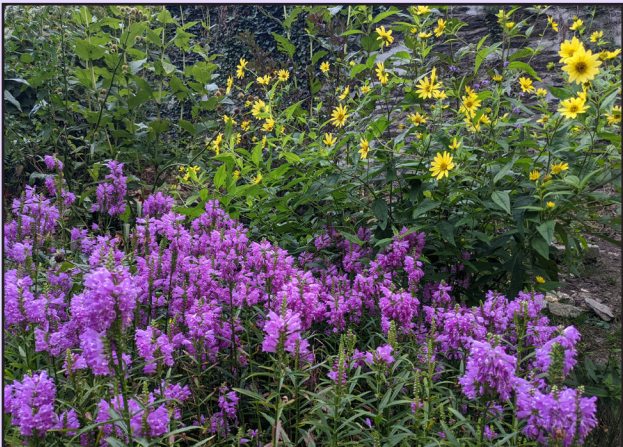
Bob Thomas leads a bike tour of the Main Line of Public Works.



Volunteers at Bethel AME help clear lawn grass to make space for wild petunia and mountain mint.



Schwa Rox leads a Shitake Mushroom Log workshop at the Conservancy cottage.



Native plants along the Cynwyd Heritage Trail provide late fall blooms.



Students are encouraged to have fun while observing the natural world around them.



Kathleen Abplanalp, board member Diana Post, and Ross Mitchell enjoy the return to the Annual Gala.



Board member Tony Vale with Executive Director Maurine McGeehan at the Olmsted Brothers lecture.



Overbrook Preschool celebrates the end of the school year with a bonfire at Rolling Hill Park.



Jim Garrison and Jeff Groff at our Olmsted Brothers lecture.

Watershed Conservation

Wildlife Habitat Restoration and Stormwater Improvements Along the Cynwyd Heritage Trail

This year, the Conservancy planted over 9,000 perennial plants and 500 trees and shrubs along a 425-meter stretch of the Cynwyd Heritage Trail, just downhill from Barmouth Station in Bala Cynwyd. All of the plantings used in the project are native species, selected for their resiliency and ecological value. The project was made possible by a National Fish and Wildlife grant that the Conservancy was awarded in 2021. The objectives of the grant are to increase wildlife habitat, slow soil erosion, and reduce the amount of water that reaches Vine Creek during storms.

The overall effort was a collaborative process among Conservancy staff, landscape designer and Conservancy supporter Bob Gray, the Friends of the Cynwyd Heritage Trail, and Lower Merion Township. Bob Gray of Gray Landscaping, LLC created the landscape design plan for the project and maximized our grant dollars to increase the restoration areas beyond the scope of the grant. The scale of the project is significant, and once the plants in the woodland, meadow, rain garden and riparian areas begin to mature, the environmental improvements along the trail will be dramatic and long-lasting. Dr. Karen Snetselaar, a member of the Conservancy board, the Friends of the Cynwyd Heritage Trail board, and a leader of the Friends of the Cynwyd Heritage Trail Stewardship Committee, was a significant partner in the project. Her help in selecting native plant species, mitigating soil disturbance throughout the project implementation, and identifying long-term maintenance strategies for the project was invaluable.

Back in 2008, when the Cynwyd Heritage Trail was first created by the Township, many trees and other vegetation were cut down and stripped clear to make space for the multi-use pedestrian trail. Much of the vegetation was replaced with lawn grass, a planting that provides almost no value for wildlife and contributes to water runoff issues on the trail and in Vine Creek. Along some areas of the trail, invasive plants like Japanese knotweed (*Fallopia japonica*), mugwort (*Artemisia vulgaris*) and bamboo were able to thrive and take over, further limiting biodiversity. By increasing the number of native plants in the space, we have created better conditions for birds, butterflies and other beneficial wildlife.



Bob Gray, the landscape architect for the Cynwyd Heritage Trail Wildlife Habitat Expansion Project, stands next to the first delivery of trees that are ready to be placed on site.



Dr. Karen Snetselaar - one of our main partners for all of our work on the Cynwyd Heritage Trail - poses inside the newly re-planted basin area.



A large shipment of native plants, delivered by Duranti's Landscaping, will be sent to various locations along the trail, as specified by Bob Gray's landscape plans (seen in truck window).



Staghorn sumacs, already showing off their vibrant fall color, were delivered to the trail and will contribute to the woodland restoration process of the Wildlife Habitat Expansion Project.

A few experimental tactics were employed during the project to minimize the negative impacts on Vine Creek and existing native plants. Oftentimes, restoration projects that include establishing meadows, woodlands, and improved riparian corridors use herbicides for removing invasive plants and clearing space prior to installing new plants. The Conservancy elected to forgo the use of chemicals and turf removal. By using this approach, we were able to minimize soil disturbance as well as the negative impact of herbicides on the environment. This unconventional strategy will likely result in more maintenance in the early years of the project. However, as the restoration areas became established, the burden of maintenance will become lighter and we will have achieved a healthier ecosystem.

Wildlife restoration and stormwater improvement progress will continue throughout 2023 when the grant award expires.



Each species of plant is first laid out next to corresponding flags that were carefully mapped according to the landscape plans.

Watershed Conservation

Green Streets Project: Protecting Water Quality One Property at a Time

The age and density of inner-ring Philadelphia suburbs make mitigating stormwater issues a difficult proposition. Virtually every street in the area drains to a storm sewer that is piped to a stream, thereby delivering lawn chemicals, loose debris, road and roof sediment, de-icing salt, and other pollutants to our waterways. This problem is exacerbated by the fact that many older properties are designed to channel water from their roofs, sidewalks, driveways, lawns, and sump pumps onto nearby streets. Pipes from some of these properties even connect directly to the storm sewer itself, skipping the street entirely.

Collectively, this poor arrangement leads to flooded streets and polluted streams. As an organization dedicated to protecting local waterways, the Conservancy invests a lot of time exploring effective and practical ways to capture and filter stormwater before it enters the sewer system. Through our ongoing "Green Streets" project work, we have enjoyed particular success (and pleasure!) working with area residents to reduce the amount of water running off their individual properties.

Our Green Streets work, which is funded by a generous grant from the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection (PADEP), embraces multiple strategies for reducing the volume of stormwater that reaches streams during storms. These strategies include planting trees, installing rain gardens, re-directing gutter downspouts to discharge onto planted areas, and removing lawn and asphalt to create new garden beds. The Conservancy uses native plants – plants indigenous to southeastern Pennsylvania – for all projects because they have good survival rates and because they are far more beneficial to wildlife than are the landscaping plants typically available at area hardware stores.



A flooded Mill Creek empties into the Schuylkill River.



Frances Condon and Sulaiman Mathew-Wilson holding up potatoes from the Bethel AME Victory Gardens. Frances and Sulaiman helped us plant dozens of native plants around the Bethel AME church yard.

Under the grant guidelines for Green Streets, the Conservancy works with groups of residents who live in close proximity to one another, thus heightening the cumulative impact of each planting project. Green Streets are selected based on resident interest and geographical location within local watersheds. In 2022, we focused much of our work in Ardmore around Holland Avenue and on Inwood Road. We also continued several projects in Narberth. In the near future, our Green Streets program will expand to additional Ardmore neighborhoods and potentially to other areas of Lower Merion and Narberth. Small-scale planting projects aimed at capturing stormwater have a meaningful impact – especially when spread across neighboring properties!

In late winter 2022, we joined with our three Delaware River Watershed Initiative partners – Pennsylvania Resources Council (PRC), Eastern Delaware County Stormwater Collaborative (EDCSC), and Darby Creek Valley Association (DCVA) – to apply for a National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF) grant to fund the Green Streets program through 2024. We were delighted to learn that the NFWF grant was awarded in August, and that we will now be able to continue our Green Streets project beyond the window of our current PA DEP grant. We are also happy to report that our partners, with whom we have been working for 10 years to conserve Cobbs Creek and its tributaries, will also be expanding their Green Streets projects to neighborhoods in Upper Darby, Haverford, Darby, Yeadon, and other nearby municipalities. Collectively, our efforts will create healthier waterways for many in the region.



Zach Nestler plants a rain garden on his property.



Cara Cipriano plants a Virginia sweetspire, a native shrub that will provide vibrant fall color.



*Emily Scott and Conservancy Conservation Director Tom Clark plant a blackjack oak (*Quercus marilandica*) on Emily's property.*

Lower Merion Sustainability Plan

Back in August of 2021, Lower Merion Township began the process of creating a sustainability plan. As an unwavering advocate for greater environmental and historical sustainability, the Conservancy immediately joined in this effort and has since been working closely with the Township throughout every step of the plan's development. Larger goals of this plan include educating and empowering stakeholders, implementing standards for sustainable planning and design, enhancing resource management, minimizing waste, and reaching net zero greenhouse gas emissions in the township by 2050.

The sustainability planning process has led to the formation of multiple working groups, each designed to address one of ten topics derived from the plan's overarching principles. The Conservancy lent professional expertise to the groups tasked with handling stormwater management, waste minimization, and sustainable development. Our experience in these fields allowed us to draft recommendations that will directly contribute to the township's overall sustainability plan. Within the stormwater-management group, we worked to identify ways to reduce flooding, increase water infiltration, and improve the quality of our waterways by utilizing and promoting nature-based stormwater strategies. We worked with the waste minimization group to reduce solid waste by maximizing the reuse and recycling of materials and implementing an organic waste disposal program. We also contributed to the work of the sustainability group by recommending policies and enforcing land use and zoning regulations that align with the community's sustainability goals.

The Conservancy believes there is great potential for the Lower Merion Township Sustainability Plan and remains dedicated to seeing through its successful development and implementation. Along with this, we continue to push for more immediate action from the Township on the proposed plastic bag ordinance. Following many years of research and community outreach, the Lower Merion Conservancy drafted an ordinance that would ban single-use plastic bags in Lower Merion. In 2021, the Conservancy presented the ordinance and its supporting rationale to the Township. The ordinance, which is yet to be implemented, would create an immediate and positive impact on the environment by reducing the amount of plastic waste that ends up in our waterways and landfills. The Conservancy continues to encourage the Township to pass this ordinance.



Jake Walton, a senior environmental science major in the Department of Geography and the Environment at Villanova University, collects plastic waste in the Wynnewood Valley Park stream to analyze for his senior project.

Open Space

3 Elmwood Avenue Update



A stone wall channelizes the East Branch of Indian Creek as it flows along the edge of the 1.8 acre lot.

Although Narberth was willing to buy 3 Elmwood at its fair market value, the borough did not have the funds to cover the entire cost of the transaction. To increase Narberth's chances of securing the property, the Conservancy applied for a highly competitive PA Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR) land acquisition grant (with the Borough as the applicant and the proposed grant recipient). In the summer of 2022, we were thrilled to learn that DCNR awarded the grant to the Borough. When the sale is complete, this environmentally sensitive 1.8-acre property will become Borough-owned public open space.

The Conservancy will work with the Borough to explore possibilities for future restoration projects on the property. Because most of the existing plants on the site are invasive shrubs, invasive vines, or lawn grass, much can be done to increase the ecological value of the space. A simple and effective potential approach would be to re-forest the property by planting trees in a grid pattern to fill in the entire space. The trees would improve water absorption and serve as habitat for birds, butterflies, and other beneficial wildlife. The grid pattern would simplify labor for Borough staff by limiting maintenance to periodic mowing around the trees in the early years (to help control invasive plants).

In addition to serving as a land trust, the Conservancy weighs in on development plans that have the potential to pose significant harm to our local environment. One particular development application caught the Conservancy's attention because of its likelihood to negatively impact the management of stormwater on the property and surrounding areas. This application, submitted in late 2020 and known as "3 Elmwood Avenue," proposed a townhouse complex on a 1.8 -site straddling the Narberth Borough and Lower Merion Township, between the East Branch of the Indian Creek and Wynnewood Road.

Most of 3 Elmwood exists in a floodplain. Since the ground on the site is frequently saturated, little stormwater can seep through the soil. Engineering studies conducted at the site have confirmed that water on this property cannot drain naturally. If this property were developed as proposed, soil on the site would be further compressed, resulting in few opportunities for water to seep into the ground. As a result, more water would be sent downstream during storms, worsening flooding and water quality.

Among Lower Merion planning commission members and elected officials, there was almost no support for developing. Yet, despite opposition to the project, opportunities for stopping it were unclear. This is because zoning codes for Narberth and Lower Merion permitted construction at the scale proposed. Understanding this, the Conservancy stepped in to offer assistance. Together with the Narberth Borough Council and Borough staff, we reviewed options for protecting the property and facilitated discussions with the property owner, the developer, and its legal team. Through these discussions, we learned that the only practicable means of protecting 3 Elmwood was to purchase it.

Larger restoration efforts would focus directly on the stream. The portion of the East Branch of Indian Creek that passes through the property is currently straightened and channelized by a stone wall. The wall forces water to flow at a faster speed during storms, increasing downstream erosion and contributing to nearby flooding. If the wall were removed, water would naturally spill onto the stream banks during storms, slowing the water velocity and allowing some of the polluted sediment from upstream roads to settle out. Amphibians and other aquatic life would then have better access to the stream and would be more likely to occupy the space.

Regardless of the direction the restoration efforts take, the purchase of the property will allow 1.8-acre space to serve as an ecological asset that benefits downstream communities. We appreciate the Borough's willingness to partner with us on the PA DCNR grant and to move forward with the acquisition of the property.



The land offers plenty of opportunities for restoration projects.

**Wondering how to help
conservation efforts in a
big way?**

**Consider protecting your
land in perpetuity with a
conservation easement.**

**To learn more about putting your property under
easement, scan the QR code below or contact
Maurine@lmconservancy.org**



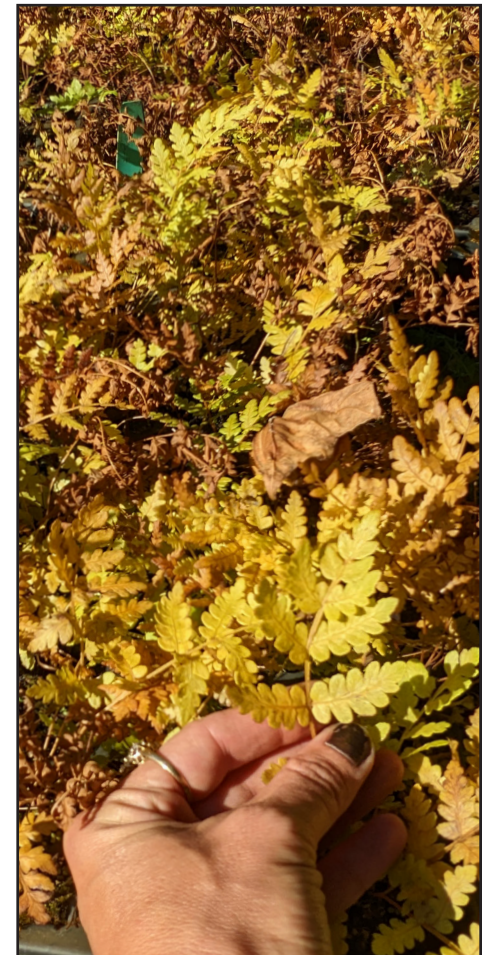
Mission Driven



40,000
Sq.ft. of new
meadow
established



183
Acres under
conservation
easement



12,000
Native perennial
plants put in the
ground last year

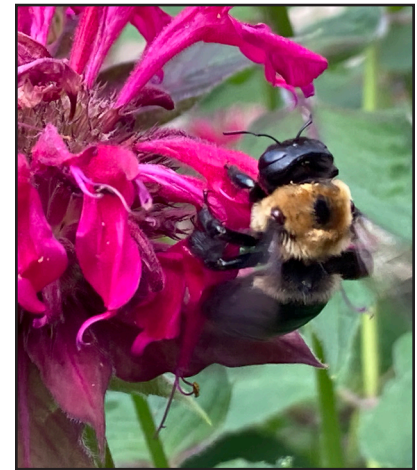
183
Properties
"Greened"



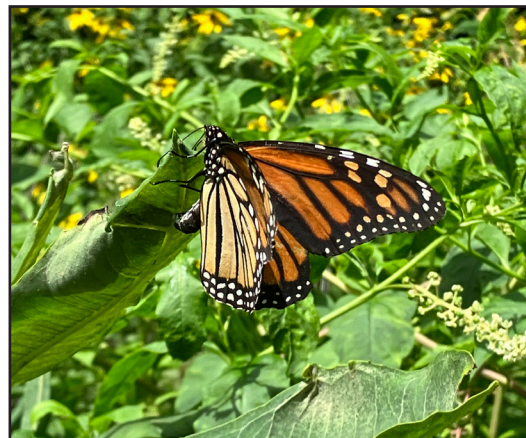
700
Native trees and
shrubs planted



890
Students
engaged in
2021/22
school year



330,000
Sq.ft. of habitat
restored



Education



A young visitor to the Fairy Forest in Rolling Hill Park is just as excited to learn about nature as we are to teach about it!



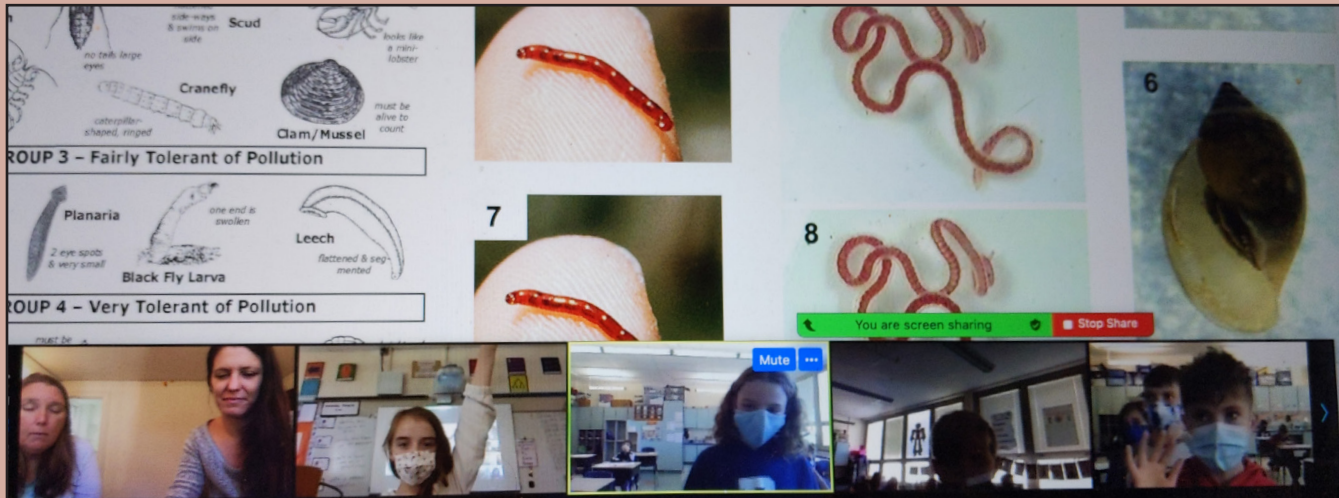
Overbrook Preschool students become citizen scientists at Mill Creek, identifying macroinvertebrates such as this crane fly larvae.

Shaping the Future

During the past year, the Conservancy continued to adjust its educational programming to honor the Covid-19 protocols of each school it serves. In some cases, we were able to resume creek-side lessons with students. In other cases, we visited students in the classroom via Zoom. No matter the manner of connection, we kept students engaged and excited to learn more about the natural world.

Our partnerships with the Lower Merion School District, Shipley Lower School, and The Haverford School focused on the health of local watersheds, water quality, and the impact humans have on our waterways. In both on-site and classroom lessons, we introduced students to the harm of “nonpoint source” water pollution – that is, water pollution that is generated from human-introduced contaminants such as road salt, fertilizers and oil). We also taught students how to determine stream health as well methods to mitigate harm to our waterways. In all of these lessons, we encouraged students to consider the ways that humans can positively impact the health of the environment!

The Conservancy was also grateful for the opportunity celebrate the natural environment with other area schools! This past year, we partnered with Waldron Mercy to teach students both about the importance of habitat and host plants for Monarch butterflies and the challenges these magnificent creatures face. The interactive game that we created for this lesson was a hit with this young audience! Our wonderful partnerships with Overbrook preschool and kindergarten, the Phoebe Anna Thorne, and Narberth Presbyterian Preschool continued to reward us with exciting opportunities to teach little learners about the natural environment.



Conservancy educators take questions from Lower Merion students over Zoom following an interactive macroinvertebrate matching activity.

For these lessons, we used outdoor classroom space and the Fairy Forest in Rolling Hill Park. For learning about invertebrate life, we returned, of course, to the Mill Creek in Rolling Hill Park! This year, our StoryWalk tradition endured with the introduction of "Am I Still the Ocean?," a book by the local author, Dr. Hank Finkel. Set up along a small loop train in Rolling Hill Park, this StoryWalk was a wonderful means of engaging both children and adults with nature.

Throughout the year, the Conservancy also worked on securing a number of grants to help us advance our educational programming. These included an environmental education grant supported through the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection (PA DEP) and a grant from PECO. These awards grants aid the purchase of needed supplies for field trips and in-class lessons. They also aid our staff in developing and implementing educational programs. Funds from the PA DEP grant, for example, will be used to support student-led greening projects on school campuses, including rain gardens, pollinator gardens, and tree plantings. These projects will not only be invaluable assets to school properties; they will also be examples of the many ways student can contribute to efforts that promote sustainability.

The Conservancy continues to identify youth education as a core component of its mission. By getting young children into nature for hands-on activities, we hope to facilitate connections between human actions and environmental impacts. We are grateful for the opportunity to do so, and look forward to inspiring many future stewards of the Earth!



A student uses binoculars to seek out and identify a bird in the distance at Rolling Hill Park.



Family comes to Rolling Hill Park for the "Am I Still The Ocean" StoryWalk meet and greet with the book's author, Dr. Hank Finkel (pictured right).



Narberth Presbetyrian students learn to find, collect and identify macroinvertebrates living in the creek.

Historic Preservation

Every spring and fall since 1995, the Lower Merion Conservancy has offered our membership programming that is relevant to one of our key missions: historic preservation. Traditionally, this programming has been aimed at familiarizing our audiences with the material culture and architecture of Lower Merion and Narberth. The township and borough are, after all, the communities the Conservancy serves! Lower Merion's and Narberth's astonishingly varied building stock (representing more than 325 years of development) does not disappoint. Indeed, it continually inspires further exploration and future lecture potential. (Look forward, for example, to our spring 2023 lectures about, among other topics, the history of post offices and public parks in the township and borough!)

During the past few years, we have also become increasingly attracted to subject matter that not only illuminates our local history, but that transcends the geographic borders of our community. This past spring, our historic preservation lecture series included a talk about the history of ice skating in the Delaware Valley, starting with the organization of the Philadelphia Skating Club and Humane Society in 1861. Fittingly, the venue for this lecture was the second-floor lounge of the club's historic and longtime home in Ardmore. Later in the year, we hosted a series of events that explored the strategic importance of Lower Merion and Narberth in the creation of the Main Line of Public Works, a nationally significant network of early-nineteenth-century canals, railroads, and roads. With Bob Thomas (a noted historian, architect, greenway designer, and enthusiastic cyclist) as our leader, we traced the path of the Philadelphia and Columbia Railroad (a segment of the Public Works) on our bikes from Villanova to Callowhill Street in Philadelphia. Local highlights of the ride included a look at stretches of the old railroad line (abandoned long ago) in Bryn Mawr, Ardmore, Narberth, and Bala Cynwyd. More recently, the Conservancy partnered with the Radnor Historical Society to survey local projects of Olmsted Brothers, the foremost American landscape design firm of the early twentieth century. Held at a 15-acre Olmsted-designed property in Bryn Mawr, the event introduced audience members to much of the firm's work in Lower Merion and Radnor.



Carrotte, one of the stars of the show at the Olmsted Brothers lecture.



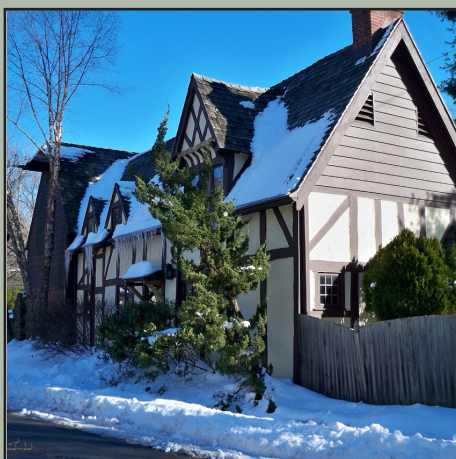
Jim Garrison, John Constable and Jeff Groff view Olmsted Brothers landscaping.



Lecture on the history of the Philadelphia Skating Club and Humane Society in the historic lounge of the club's building in Ardmore.



Brick greenhouse complex built by Frank Miles Day at the site of the proposed Lower Merion School District playing fields.



House plaques (R) will soon be available to property owners in the English Village Historic District.



During the past year, the Conservancy also continued to advocate for the preservation of significant historic properties vulnerable to loss, including an enchanting brick greenhouse complex in Villanova. The Lower Merion School District has proposed demolishing and replacing the complex, which sits on a three-acre parcel, with middle school athletic fields. The complex, erected during the early 1900s, was designed by the noted Philadelphia architect, Frank Miles Day, to complement Stoneleigh, the 65-acre estate to which it originally belonged. A *House and Garden* article, published in 1903, perfectly captures the singularity of the complex:

Here is an ingenious grouping, not only of the greenhouses themselves, but of all their accompaniments, including the horses and teams engaged upon the garden work. All of this is enclosed within distinctly defined boundaries to which are added details of a charming architectural character.

The district proposes fields for this parcel - as well as for a neighboring 10-acre parcel originally associated with Stoneleigh. Both parcels retain remnants of a landscape design executed by Olmsted Brothers. The district's plan, which has been widely shared and discussed, includes rehabilitating and reusing an existing ca. 1920 Elizabethan manor house on the 10-acre parcel, but razing most of the site's trees, many of which are mature.

The Conservancy does not object to playing fields at this site, especially since the district has committed to building the fields around the mansion. Rather, we strongly believe that a field plan that retains the greenhouse complex, as well as certain valuable mature plantings, is achievable. Creating a plan that meets these objectives will be a challenge and will necessitate compromise from multiple entities. However, a design that integrates or retains existing assets, including stately trees and unique historic buildings, would be beneficial to the surrounding neighborhood, to the larger community, and arguably, to the district itself. This remains our aspiration for the site.

On a final note, we are delighted to report that our work to secure historic plaques for houses in the English Village Historic District has been successful. For the past few years, the Conservancy, township, and a group of English Village residents have been considering ways to honor and celebrate the architecture and history of this little slice of Wynnewood. This past fall, after lots of discussion and community input, we settled on a unique design for an English Village house plaque. By spring, we expect to see a dozen or so of these plaques mounted on houses in this unforgettable neighborhood.

Donors

Thank you!

The Conservancy would like to express our sincere gratitude to all of our donors. With the support of our annual donors and Board of Directors, we remain a financially healthy non-profit organization and we look forward to our next year of local conservation.

We are also grateful to have held our Gala after a two-year hiatus. Our largest fundraiser of the year, the 2022 Gala was not only a beautiful evening, but a financial success. Thank you to the Gala Committee, sponsors, attendees and supporters.

Donor List

The Conservancy appreciates its wide circle of generous members. Below is a list of those who gave gifts between July 1, 2021 and June 30, 2022.

\$10,000 and above

The Austelle Foundation
Deborah and Tim Callahan
David F. Hoffman
Lower Merion Township
Melissa Morris and Miguel Perez
The National Fish and Wildlife Foundation
PA Department of Environmental Protection
Shreiner Tree Care
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\$5,000 to \$9,999

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\$500 to \$999

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We greatly appreciate your support and have made every effort to ensure the accuracy of this listing. Please notify Kat Hassinger, Director of Development at Kat@lmconservancy.org, of any inaccuracies or omissions. Thank you.



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Summary of FY 2022 Operating Revenue and Expenses

REVENUE

Programming	14,214
Contributions and Grants	327,493
Ticketed events [including Gala]	91,448
Permanent Fund Drawdown *	45,763
Total Revenue	464,704

EXPENSES

Programming	436,440
Management and General	12,211
Fundraising	30,398
Total Expenses	479,049
Operating Surplus/(Deficit)	(14,345)

* Permanent fund balance 6/30/2022 equal to \$1,323,544.

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A close-up photograph of several purple aster flowers. The flowers have numerous thin, pointed petals radiating from a central yellow-orange disk. The petals are covered with small, clear water droplets, suggesting they have been recently watered or it has rained. The background is a soft-focus green, likely foliage. A semi-transparent purple box with white text is overlaid on the bottom portion of the image.

The Lower Merion Conservancy protects and enhances our community's character and quality of life, recognizing that the sustainable management of our environmental and historic resources is intertwined with both conservation and change.