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PHILADELPHIA'S FAIRMOUNT PARK TROLLEYS - GONE BUT NOT FORGOTTEN

A golden carpet of leaves unfurls over the slippery mud subfloor, leading the way into the forest. As the rush of traffic fades into the purl of a babbling stream and the crunch of branches underfoot, it's easy to imagine we're in some remote wilderness - an illusion crushed as that heavy-footed rustling in the woods reveals itself as not a graceful deer but some guy with a metal detector.

Then this nature hike begins showing its secrets: a patch of brick cobbles underfoot, a strip of wood that once held a catenary wire, a skew arch bridge whose stylish, asymmetrical supports track at a jaunty angle, all dressed up with no one to impress.

They are remnants of a passenger railway that, for the first half of the last century, wound through the western reaches of Fairmount Park, a wilderness on the edge of the city that had previously been inaccessible to working-class Philadelphians. The trolleys shuddered out of ornate, pagoda-like stations in Strawberry Mansion and Parkside and rambled along a lazy woodland loop, stopping to deposit visitors at Woodside Park, an amusement park complete with a carousel, a roller coaster, and a lake with swan boats and gondolas.

"The trolley was a way to open up the park to a vast sector of Philadelphia that would otherwise not have access," says Chris Dougherty, a former project manager for the Fairmount Park Conservancy who now runs walking tours along the path of the old track. "If you lived in Philadelphia before air-conditioning, to ride through Fairmount Park in an open car would have been a spectacular thing."



PHILADELPHIA EVENING BULLETIN COLLECTION/TEMPLE UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES
Fairmount Park Trolley photographed along the Dauphin Street Route in 1946.

A few generations removed, the railway is faded from memory and, to a great extent, from the landscape. After service stopped in 1946, its tracks, bridges, and cables were promptly sold at auction. Nature has done its best to reclaim the rest.

Now, though, the Fairmount Park Conservancy is working with Philadelphia Parks & Recreation to claw it back.

They're turning the remains of the trolley line - whose artifacts include elegant bridges of stone and brick, a 1940s car barn, and the platform where thousands once embarked to Woodside Park, now consumed by forest - into a 4.5-mile Trolley Trail, a nature walk with a side of forgotten history.

The conservancy needs to raise \$250,000 more to finish the bike, equestrian, and hiking trail. Work began in 2015 but has progressed in a halting, piecemeal fashion.

The project, born out of a 2014 master plan for the park, reflects a broader effort to transform West Fairmount Park from Philly's neglected backyard into a multiuse destination. Recent additions include Treetop Quest, an adventure course run by a private concessionaire, and the Centennial Commons, a \$5 million initiative to transform the landscape around the Please Touch Museum with a series of green "living rooms" and, in coming phases, a variety of play spaces.

There's no timeline for completion of the comparatively modest Trolley Trail.

"It's really dependent on funding," says Jamie Gauthier, executive director of the Fairmount Park Conservancy. There's still a mile left to build to connect existing pieces, plus other improvements like trail markers, new footbridges, historical signage, and infrastructure to support equestrian and cycling

uses.

For now, the adventurous can download a map from the conservancy's website and prepare to get lost in the woods - or look out for one of Dougherty's tours, which are part nature walk, party history lesson.

The story begins in 1867, with the establishment of the Fairmount Park Commission, created to oversee the purchase of land to protect Philadelphia's drinking-water intakes, turning green what had been an increasingly industrialized shoreline marked by breweries, oil works, and ice houses.

Elizabeth Milroy, a professor of art history at Drexel University and author of the 2016 *The Grid and the River: Philadelphia's Green Places, 1672-1876*, notes that the rhetoric around the park's founding was that it was meant for everyday Philadelphians.



Staff Graphic

"Parks advocates who oversaw the development of parks and green spaces did see the parks as a therapeutic aspect, as well as a kind of civilizing effect," she says.

But, for most of the 19th century, population was clustered in the eastern part of the city near the Delaware River - and most people didn't own a bicycle, let alone a horse and carriage. Given that, she says, "Fairmount Park's problem, from the 1860s onward, was it was too far away for a lot of people to

get to, and then when you got there, it was too big."

So began Fairmount's reputation as a driving park, popular for carriage and later auto races. The Trolley Trail intersects with an artifact of that era: a straightaway known as the Chamounix Speedway, popular with gentlemen of leisure who wished to exceed the 7-m.p.h. speed limit in place across the rest of the park.

"The use of the speedway is restricted to light vehicles seating not more than 2 persons: buggies, runabouts, surreys, drawn by one or two horses," read regulations that Dougherty found in his research.

The passenger railway was the Fairmount Park Commission's first attempt to democratize access to the park, and to reform its driving culture (an effort that continues to this day). Some members of City Council sued to block the railway, but lost. In 1897, it lurched into operation.

For a while, it was successful. "The trolley was a really important change and addition to the park, which made it easier for people to get to the park and get around the park," Milroy says. In its heyday, it delivered thousands to Woodside Park for picnics, fireworks shows, and concerts, and operated year-round to serve commuters.

But the Fairmount Transit Co. also struggled financially over the years, and upkeep to the trolleys was minimal. In September 1946, the trolleys stopped running for good.

Many people had cars by then and, as Dougherty puts it, "after World War II, when everyone came back, the last thing they wanted to do was ride around in these old trolley cars literally from the 1800s."

Now, a November walk on the trail takes visitors underneath a fiery fall canopy, under tunnels and over high iron bridges, behind fields now used by cricket and Frisbee players, and near little-known park amenities like the Greenland Nursery, where plants are propagated for park projects, and the park's organic recycling center, where Philadelphia residents can obtain mulch for free.

The trail also sidles up, briefly, to the roar of I-76, which Dougherty calls "the eight-lane elephant in the room."

To think about how quickly an entire transit system was consumed by nature does not give Dougherty pause as he advocates for the creation of this new trail.

"I think a lot of the transportation systems in America perhaps were overbuilt and faced a lot of competition," he says. "Building trails is probably one of the more sustainable things that you can do on the land."

(By Samantha Melamed - Philadelphia Inquirer - 11/26/18)

*Attention given to the old trolley route to become a new trail in one of the most beautiful parts of the City of Philadelphia will undoubtedly be something new that we will all appreciate. **Kudos** to those involved in this project.*

- Gary Brown



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