

**HOUSES OF PHILADELPHIA:
CHESTNUT HILL AND THE WISSAHICKON VALLEY,
1880 – 1930**

James B. Garrison
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Forward by
John Andrew Gallery

Although I had lived in Philadelphia for many years, I was not familiar with the Chestnut Hill neighborhood until I returned to Philadelphia after four years in Texas. My previous apartments had been in Center City, but with a growing family I needed a real house, and real estate brokers suggested that I could find more for my money in Chestnut Hill.

I knew that Chestnut Hill was a community of large houses on large pieces of land. The first house I saw lived up to my expectations. I remember it vividly. It was a long, narrow brick house in a Jacobean style with terra-cotta details and handsome terraced grounds. Although I loved it as an architect, I knew its upkeep was beyond my ability. The second house I saw was much more to my liking. It was a modest house built for a newly married couple in 1923, designed in the English Cotswold style. Built of local stone, it was beautifully sited halfway down a sloping hill with French doors opening on to terraces overlooking the landscape. At closing the previous owner gave me the original linen architect's drawings and this was how I first learned of the architectural firm Willings, Sims and Talbutt.

In moving to Chestnut Hill I not only discovered a new section of the city, but also discovered a totally new chapter in the history of architecture of which I was unaware. My education in architectural history had moved quickly from the Victorian era to the modern movement, with a brief nod to the Art Deco. In Philadelphia I perceived architectural history as leaping from Frank Furness straight to Lou Kahn and Robert Venturi, with only a passing glance at the George Howe of the Philadelphia Savings Fund Society fame. I soon discovered that there was much more. The Hewitt Brothers, Mellor Meigs and Howe, Robert McGoodwin, Edward Gilchrist— I discovered them all as I wandered around my new neighborhood admiring one architectural marvel after another.

Although the northwest section of Philadelphia had been a place of retreat from the city since Colonial times, Chestnut Hill and the Wissahickon Valley were not well developed until the advent of the railroad and the vision of Henry Houston. In the

late 19th century, Houston acquired over 3,000 acres of land, facilitated the creation of a rail line, and built several hundred houses, thereby encouraging other wealthy individuals to do the same. His son-in-law, George Woodward, added 200 more in the early 20th century. Houston and Woodward's legacy defines the character of the area to this day.

Jim Garrison has selected an outstanding group of houses to illustrate the scope of development in the Wissahickon Valley and the talented architects who worked here. They range from Houston's much altered home, Druim Moir, to Edward Stotesbury's extraordinary Whitemarsh Hall, now the site of suburban tract houses. The list of architects whose work is represented is impressive: Willis Hale, Wilson Eyre, Horace Trumbauer, Peabody & Sterns—and more.

Included in Jim's selection are many of my favorite houses in Chestnut Hill. The Louis Saveur House by the Hewitt Brothers is an exceptional example of the Queen Anne residences that Houston built to attract residents. Binderton by Cope and Stewardson, the house my realtor showed me first, remains as exceptional today as in my memory. Also included are three houses by my friends Willings, Sims and Talbutt, each showing the firm's exceptional skill at integrating architecture and landscape. Indeed, this a theme that Garrison stresses over and over in his descriptions of these properties—the relationship between land and historical style that gives each of these houses its enduring quality.

The country houses of Chestnut Hill and the Wissahickon Valley are under-appreciated in architectural histories of Philadelphia. Jim Garrison has rectified this situation by documenting these exceptional houses with outstanding photographs and perceptive descriptions of their character and history. In doing so he has reminded us of an important period in the development of Philadelphia and of an architectural heritage of lasting significance.