Tookany/Tacony-Frankford Watershed Partnership (TTF) partnered with Olney Culture Lab of Culture Trust Greater Philadelphia and Manor College to record in person interviews with community members as part of a two-year Tacony Creek Park Stories project made possible with support from the Joseph Roberts Foundation. Manor College, which sits at TTF’s Jenkintown Creek headwaters, hosts the online Oral History repository.

Tacony Creek Park Stories is a two-part effort to collect and share park and neighborhood history and memories, and then work with local artists to bring these stories to life, making the collective story of Tacony Creek Park more accessible to surrounding communities.

All interviews were conducted by Ambrose Liu from July 2018 – June 2020 except the interview of Fred Maurer conducted by Matthew Smalarz.

Although these interviews were conducted and posted in English only, we will conduct interviews in additional languages going forward. Please contact us if you would like to participate.

Visit tcpkeepers.org/park-stories to learn more

A look back with Susan Stevenson
By Vary Soth

How did Tacony Creek Park look many years before we were born? Were there many differences? What has changed? TTF and partner Olney Culture Lab have been interviewing neighbors who have lived in this area to recount the changes from then to now. In this interview, a resident described what it was like in the Lawncrest/Crescentville area.

Susan Stevenson was born in 1951 at a house close to the Home Depot where Adams Avenue and the Roosevelt Boulevard meet. Friends Hospital was across the street and much of the area was still farmland and mills. The Naval Depot was close by and is still home to many World War II airplanes today.

Susan remembers much of the park from her childhood — she and her family would walk their dogs there and sled there when it snowed in the winter. There were not any swimming pools back then, so she and her sister and friends would go down to the creek to swim.

Now when she goes to the creek and see families jumping into the water, she laughs at the vague memory. She also says that there was more wildlife seen around the creek, such as deer and birds.

It seems like the creek in the 1950s was much “cleaner” than it is now, with its regular sewage overflows. Littering was a problem back then, as it is now; neighborhood children would use shopping carts to sled down park hills and leave the carts there. Susan feels that the environmental issues were not as alarming during the 1950s, and that today we are trying our best to upkeep, protect, care and clean for our parks.

This interview was very interesting and fun to listen to, as I was a resident of Lawncrest for 12 years. The streets she mentioned and the places that were being built are still here today. It’s cool that I can see what she saw during the 1950s. The landscapes may change a lot over the years, but the memories of growing up near the park remained fresh in her mind.

ABOUT SUSAN
Susan Stevenson is a Philadelphia resident with roots in Lawncrest.
John Hewitt remembers Frankford Creek
By Rita Yelda

When John Hewitt was growing up in the Frankford section of Tacony Creek in the 1970s, he and his friends used the creek as a playground. Young and rebellious, John and his pals would keep bottles of wine cold in the creek, or drift through the tunnels of Frankford Creek as close to the Delaware River as possible, being on high alert for rain. John could never lie to his parents about being in the water because of the distinct smell he would carry afterwards. While not advised, these memories bring John back to a simpler time when he lived in the area until his late teen years.

“Well, the creek’s right there, and at that park, we kind of hung at that park there,” says John of his childhood. “Sometimes we would drift all the way down, not as far as the Delaware River but near it. We used to try to see how far we could go; and going through the tunnels is one of my early experiences getting introduced to the Frankford Creek.”

The creek grew to hold a different significance for John as he got into professional photography, first working freelance for local newspapers and then beginning a career in wedding photography. John recognized the “crisp, clear blue” of the creek, which is why he took couples to the Tookany Creek Parkway for photographs. The blooming flowers, fall leaves, and wooden bridges all made appearances in John’s photos and continue to leave an impression on him when discussing the area today. John is not only a Frankford Historical Society volunteer, but he’s had a long history of his own with the creek.

Water quality within the creek has been a long-time concern, including during John’s time living in the area. He recalls both the waterfall at Adams Avenue and most of Frankford Creek looking dirty. “I’ve seen where [the creek] was a lot of different colors...” John recounts about the area near Adams Avenue. Near Kensington Avenue, kids would jump into the creek and one of those times John shockingly saw a girl’s hair start on fire.

“I think there was a company right there that was pumping something in the water, and out of nowhere, it just caught on fire. And we stopped swimming in that area right there,” says John.

Flooding and stormwater pollution remained a concern for the creek, and repairs had been made over the years to address the problem. During Hurricane Agnes in 1972, John recalls the tunnels of Frankford Creek flooding and gushing to the brim. Unexpected flooding and safety issues are one of the biggest reasons not to travel on the water through the tunnels, but that didn’t stop John from taking risks.

Growing up in the area, John observed fishermen on Frankford Creek near the Delaware River but never took part. Meanwhile, John’s father was an avid fisherman who found relaxation and sport in having the creek nearby. Now living in Bridgeburg, John continues to have access to local waterways, including the Allegheny River and the tributary Pine Creek. John’s son recently convinced him to follow in his father’s footsteps by taking a fishing outing on the river and they caught six fish, including eel and catfish.

“You know, my father died... when I was thirteen, so I kind of wanted to kind of go [out fishing] with him to see because he was always saying, ‘Oh it’s fishing, oh it’s fishing!’

ABOUT JOHN
John Hewitt is a Frankford Historical Society volunteer who has roots in Frankford.
Tacony Tookany Creek creates a lasting impression on Dan Donahue

By Rita Yelda

Our childhood experiences still inform who we are today as adults. Formative experiences such as playing on swings, falling in the creek, or spotting a new bird can become etched in our memory. This can certainly be said for Philadelphia resident Dan Donahue, who grew up in Olney and has lasting memories of Tacony/Tookany Creek and what it meant for him to be able to play outside.

With his mother and two grandmothers living in Olney and Feltonville beginning in the ‘40s and ‘50s, Dan’s family is no stranger to Northeast Philadelphia. His grandmothers, mother, and his seven siblings all grew up in the area during different decades, watching the neighborhood grow and change with them.

“My one grandmom lived at Fifth and Fisher, which is in Olney; my other grandmom lived on Second Street, Second and Wyoming, which I think technically is Feltonville. But they were connected by Incarnation Parish, which is at Fifth and Lindley, which is kind of in the middle,” Dan explains. “We lived on a little street around the corner from my grandmother in Feltonville/Olney kind of area, just under the Roosevelt Boulevard... it was actually a little street called Mentor Street.”

Growing up in a developed, urban environment, space for biking, walking, and relaxing in nature can seem few and far between. But like many children, growing up for Dan meant not staying inside the house during the summer. It was during this time that Dan began to realize the important role of green, open space for him and his siblings.

“We lived in a very little, kind of tight little street with no green around us whatsoever,” recalls Dan. Though Dan’s parents moved to New Jersey during the summer, Dan and his siblings would come back to visit their grandmothers regularly. The children would spend weeks at a time in Feltonville and Olney during the summer, leading to the discovery of Tacony/Tookany Creek. Almost fifty years later, Dan and his sisters remember the playground near the Tacony/Tookany Creek and the time they spent playing near its banks.

“Olney, but even more so Feltonville, there wasn’t green space, so going there was probably a really big deal for us and that’s why all my sisters remember it so well, and we talk about Tacony/Tookany Creek all the time,” he says.

This exposure to open, green space created an enthusiasm about urban environmentalism within Dan and contributed to his passion for preserving green space in Philadelphia. Now living in Center City, Dan admires projects like Schuylkill Banks and the conversion of old railroad tracks into parks and trails.

“I just love when they kind of take areas and not only take advantage of the green space, but make public access to it.”

Tacony/Tookany Creek has provided an opportunity for Dan, and likely many other children, to access the natural world when they might not have otherwise. “In the ‘70s, Tacony/Tookany Creek was probably our only access to green space, because we didn’t really leave the city much,” adds Dan. “I’m positive that Tacony/Tookany Creek had a major impact on all of us appreciating nature, because it was our only exposure to nature. Like, we didn’t go to the Poconos.”

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Tom and Savannah McHale

By Rita Yelda

Tom McHale’s family has lived near Tacony Creek Park since the 1960s, and in 1991 purchased an historic home once owned by the Whitaker family. The Whitakers had a family-owned wool mill on Tacony Creek in the early 1800s that operated until the 1970s. By 1813, a series of homes were completed adjacent to the mill to be utilized by the Whitaker workers, visitors, and family members. While many of these homes fell victim to arson in 1975 and thus were knocked down, the McHales were able to purchase an intact home, which had been a long-time dream for Tom’s mother.

Some of Tom’s favorite memories would come from living in the home and its proximity to Tacony Creek Park, such as taking his dog for walks and spending time with neighborhood friends. “We’d always be out there playing, and it always gave me an appreciation for the park and taking care of it,” says Tom. While Tom moved to Center City Philadelphia in his twenties, his love for the park and the community brought him back to the family home with his wife Savannah in Spring 2018.

The couple enjoy the history of the property so much, they held their marriage ceremony in the yard near the forest bordering Tacony Creek Park.

“The park, you know, the house - there’s so much character. It’s just such an amazing place to be,” says Savannah.

During Tom’s departure from the neighborhood, he followed TTF on social media to see progress and programming taking place in Tacony Creek Park. He also heard from his mother first-hand that the neighborhood was seeing improvements. Upon moving back to the area some ten years later, Tom says he sees more wildlife and plants than he ever remembers seeing as a child,
The past and future of Tacony Creek Park: an interview with Lisa Kuzma, Director of Olney Christian School

By Rita Yelda

Olney is a neighborhood in Philadelphia that Lisa Kuzma knows well. It’s where she works, exercises, explores, and has lived for about twenty years. Lisa is candid about the immense challenges that Tacony Creek Park faced when she first moved to the neighborhood. “My earliest memory was going for a walk with a friend… I was new to this neighborhood, I just moved in not that long ago,” she begins. “So, we started walking down the path together… and a guy was coming the other direction and he’s like ‘You two need to turn around and take yourselves out of the park. It’s not safe for you to be here.’”

In 1999, when Lisa worked for the after-school program at a New Life Church in Olney, options for students to enjoy the outdoors were limited. Still wanting the students to have fresh air and open space to enjoy, Lisa took the students out to Tacony Creek Park to give them “the pleasure of rolling down a hill, playing in the dirt… just all the things that I think kids should be able to do.” However, when they were at the park, extra adult supervision was necessary and tight reigns had to be kept on the students to avoid facing leash-less dogs or other trouble. Along with this lack of safety in Tacony Creek Park at the time, the cleanliness of the creek was questionable. The creek had a stench and was littered with toppled over grocery carts and trash.

Twenty years later, Lisa says she’s seen the park’s safety and the creek’s cleanliness improve, which she attributes largely to TTF’s commitment...
to rolling up their sleeves and doing the hard work.

“The stream is now perfectly clean,” Lisa says with a smile. “And the work that they’ve done on the trail – that makes the trail accessible.”

Lisa has no hesitation to use the park now, utilizing it herself for biking and running, and she feels better about the students going there as well. “We don’t have the same concerns that we did 10, 15 years ago,” she adds.

TTF’s work doesn’t stop in the park, as they’ve also engaged Lisa’s students at Olney Christian School in the classroom by conducting environmental education and adding to understanding of the natural world.

Students can now recognize bird calls and have planted a rain garden on the side of the school to control stormwater.

Students were also taught about the connection between stormwater pollution and drinking water, which the students then proceeded to educate their community about.

TTF’s dedication and sheer elbow grease over the years has acted as a wake-up call toward the stewardship of the park for Lisa. This understanding of personal responsibility and giving back is also mirrored in Lisa’s faith, “[God] doesn’t just hand out gifts and then let you trash them.”

After twenty years of growth at Tacony Creek Park, Lisa hopes to see continued improvement over the next ten years, as well.

“What I see the very beginnings of, that I would really love to see more, is families taking their own initiative to spend time in the park... I would love it to be a place that you could wander in and people are having picnics, people are sitting around reading a book; [a place] that the kids are up and down the trail.”

Meet Elaine Johnson and Latinas In Motion

By Rita Yelda

With the 2012 founding of Latinas In Motion (LIM), Elaine Johnson aimed to encourage other women of color to stay active and create a sense of motivating team camaraderie. After all, running and walking is the most accessible type of physical fitness because it’s free, and therefore it doesn’t exclude anyone based on inability to pay an entrance fee. Elaine shares that growing up in inner city North Philadelphia, it wasn’t always safe to play outside, and health and wellness wasn’t typical conversation around the dinner table. In her research, she found that women of color have higher rates of obesity, heart disease, and diabetes, all of which physical fitness can help to address. Not only is staying active important for physical health, it’s also acted as a confidence boost for Elaine and has strengthened her personal relationships.

“Before, I think being outside made me super uncomfortable... I think I wasn’t comfortable enough with myself to be comfortable with silence,” says Elaine. “Now, it’s my peace.”

When Elaine first heard about TTF six or seven years ago, the organization had reached out to her about the first annual Healthy Trails 5K in Tacony Creek Park, for which she volunteered to help. Before TTF, Elaine didn’t know Tacony Creek Park existed, but now she visits often and raises awareness of the park amongst her fellow runners. Latinas In Motion has also held their annual 5K in Tacony Creek Park for the last five years, creating another opportunity to showcase what the park has to offer.

TTF staff gave Elaine her first tour of the park to familiarize her with the terrain. Elaine describes her tour of Tacony Creek Park as “...so magical, because if you don’t know about the park, you don’t know that it exists. And once you’re in the park, it doesn’t feel like Philly. It feels so peaceful and serene.”

Now a champion for the park, Elaine tells other runners and walkers about the park as a safe, accessible alternative to stop-and-go running and walking on city sidewalks. She also takes part in a clean-up of the park every year before Latinas In Motion’s 5K and has seen first-hand how these clean-ups give people a sense of investment in the park’s future. The partnership between Latinas In Motion and TTF is one that brings increased activity to Tacony Creek Park and elevates the park’s visibility. In 2016, TTF recognized LIM with the annual Friend of the Watershed Milestone Award!

Since Elaine began working with TTF, she’s been impressed with the organization’s ability to keep Tacony Creek Park safe and clean over the years and described the organization as “little angels” that care about the park. Elaine adds that TTF has a special ability to make environmental education accessible, even for those who don’t
Even as a young girl, Pamela was a self-proclaimed park and nature lover. Parks were abundant with wildlife as well. Pamela can recall several sightings of deer, geese, beavers, and possums. She can recall a time when she would come to a park in the early morning when it was quiet to pick berries from bushes, mulberries and raspberries specifically. “I used to get those, take them home, wash them, and eat them. Back then, there was no spraying or anything, so everything was safe”

She first got involved with Tacony Creek Park after seeing flyers for events such as cleanups. She wanted to take part because she has always wanted to help improve and clean parks. Pamela says that she likes being a part of a group during cleanups, enjoying the company of like-minded people from the community. Aside from clean-ups, she enjoys helping plant trees to better the park. She takes part in other events too, such as nature walks and bird walks, drawn to them for her love of birds, nature, and the nostalgic smell of summer flowers and grass. When asked about how the park has changed, she feels that it has improved for the better and is a much safer environment thanks to the Tacony Creek community. Pamela has even received two awards for her continued dedication to improving Tacony Creek Park.

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While not as abundant as during her childhood, there are still a wide variety of park animals to be spotted. Pamela recalls seeing four deer and having the chance to observe them quietly for an amazing moment in which there was no fear of one another. Another story features a family of possums that she found on her own property and relocated to the park where they could thrive in a safer environment.

Birds are also very special to her, especially in groups of three, which she sees as a sign that everything’s looking...
up and going to be okay.

In the future, she hopes that more people will participate in park activities. Her faith and her love of nature intersect and she wants to share that love with her grandchildren. When they lived with her, she would take them to the park with her so that they could enjoy nature together.

“God’s not separate from nature because he created it. So when I’m in the park, it’s like a creative spirit out there that I feel from God, so it’s all connected together with the animals, and the flowers, and the trees, and the smell of the trees. I love the smell of nature. So it’s all connected together. You know, I can’t enjoy that without God being a part of it.”

ABOUT PAMELA

Pamela Miller is an area resident who has lived near Tacony Creek Park for the better part of 23 years.

Visit tcpkeepers.org/park-stories to learn more