SUBURB

in the City

Chestnut Hill, Philadelphia, 1850–1990

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Columbus
For Mary and Mary
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Once again I want to thank my wife, Mary, for her loving companionship and support.
In 1854 the city and county of Philadelphia were merged by an act of the state legislature. With a stroke of the pen the old city of Philadelphia, which had occupied only two square miles of land between the Delaware and Schuykill rivers, became a giant of some 129 square miles. It was the largest annexation to date in the United States, and it ensured that Philadelphia would remain one of the most important cities in North America for years to come. In the process of this massive consolidation, dozens of villages and other small settlements were swept into the City of Brotherly Love.

On the edge of this newly consolidated city, some ten miles north-west of downtown, lay the village of Chestnut Hill. For a century or more it had served the needs of surrounding farms and mills, as well as of travelers and teamsters passing through on their way to the city below. Because Chestnut Hill lay at one of the highest points in Philadelphia County (and then in the consolidated city), it had also attracted summer people for several decades, prosperous men and women who wanted to escape the sultry heat of Philadelphia streets. This summer trade received a boost with the arrival of train service to Germantown, some five miles to the southeast, in 1832. The train also brought a few suburban commuters to Chestnut Hill, who took advantage of a stagecoach line and later of an omnibus service to the railroad depot in Germantown. Then in 1854, the same year as the city/county consolidation, Chestnut Hill received its own rail link to downtown Philadelphia.
With the railroad came a burst of suburban development in Chestnut Hill. Within twenty years Victorian villas had arisen on the slopes around the railroad station in an area now known as North Chestnut Hill. In 1884 an immensely wealthy entrepreneur named Henry Howard Houston brought a second commuter line into the west side of the Hill. This was a spur of the Pennsylvania Railroad, around which Houston created a planned suburb called Wissahickon Heights, in reference to the adjacent Wissahickon Creek. In the early twentieth century his son-in-law George Woodward extended this suburban development and changed its name to St. Martin's, after St. Martin-in-the-Fields Episcopal Church, which Houston had built in 1889.

The emergence of these commuter suburbs within Chestnut Hill did not obliterate the earlier village. Rather, the new suburbanites coexisted with local craftsmen and shopkeepers, whose numbers were actually augmented by new arrivals in their trades, who were intent on making a living by serving the Hill's prosperous suburban residents. The suburbanites also brought numerous domestic servants with them, contributing yet another element to the population. Chestnut Hill thus remained a heterogeneous community made up of distinct neighborhoods that overlapped or intersected at certain points.

However varied its population may have been, Chestnut Hill has been essentially suburban in nature for much of its existence. Even before the city/county consolidation in the middle of the nineteenth century, the community's well-being had depended upon its proximity to Philadelphia. Commuters in later generations were likewise attracted by the Hill's convenient access by rail to jobs downtown. In this respect, the question of whether Chestnut Hill was legally a part of the city was not of controlling importance, for the Hill was essentially suburban—both before and after the consolidation. As such, Chestnut Hill displayed the most salient characteristics of the American suburb: a low density of housing and population combined with an economic dependence upon the city.

Yet as a suburb within the city limits, Chestnut Hill and other communities like it, such as Germantown and West Philadelphia,
faced conditions that politically independent suburbs outside the city have escaped. Above all, Chestnut Hill has not been able to exercise official government at the local level to provide utilities, build and maintain public works (including schools), and control the development of real estate. Despite this impediment, Chestnut Hill has remained a successful suburb in the city for nearly a century and a half.

There are several factors, both natural and human, that account for Chestnut Hill's survival as a suburban community. One of these is its favored location. Poised on the edge of the city and located a full ten miles from downtown, the Hill was insulated from development on its borders for several generations. It was not until the early twentieth century that substantial building took place directly to the south, in the Mount Airy section of Philadelphia, and it was not until after World War II that land beyond the city limits in Montgomery County was transformed into automobile suburbs for the baby-boom generation.

Adding to Chestnut Hill's isolation is the deep Wissahickon gorge, which flows along its west side, providing a physical as well as visual boundary between the Hill and the Roxborough section of Philadelphia to the west. Over the years residents of Chestnut Hill have worked to preserve this natural divide through supporting its acquisition by Philadelphia's Fairmount Park system, donating parcels of land to the park, blocking automobile traffic in the valley, and opposing development projects along its edges.

Chestnut Hill's physical elevation has likewise reinforced a feeling of separation from the rest of the city. From their homes on the heights, residents could survey the city below or gaze out on the rolling hills to the north and west in Montgomery County.

A sense of the past has also helped to maintain a feeling of separation, as residents remember the old village in various ways. Several dozen eighteenth-century structures, constructed of stone in an unsophisticated vernacular style, survive as solid reminders of the Hill's village past. A campaign in the 1950s to restore the commercial district along colonial lines, however inaccurate and misconceived, only reinforced these memories. Associations with the American Rev-
olution, although much romanticized, heightened the sense of historical identity: both American and British forces had marched back and forth through Chestnut Hill just before and during the British occupation of Philadelphia. Since its founding in 1967, the Chestnut Hill Historical Society also has raised an awareness of local history through campaigns to save and restore older buildings and a variety of other projects.

Chestnut Hill's historical society is only one of many civic organizations that local residents have created to deal with being a suburb in the city. In addition to exerting pressure on city authorities to deliver more and better services, these organizations have raised their own funds and have launched their own programs to improve life in Chestnut Hill. Residents also have used these organizations to monitor land use, direct landscaping projects, and curb commercial development.

This active civic life originated during the preconsolidation period, i.e., before 1854, when local residents banded together to create churches, schools, cemeteries, and fire companies. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, two improvement associations provided direction for the Hill. After World War II, the Chestnut Hill Community Association emerged as the chief instrument of civic life. Out of this association has come a system of unofficial government that Chestnut Hill residents proudly refer to as their quasi government.

Although prosperous residents of the Hill have always been in the minority, comprising no more than 40 percent of the population at any time, they have dominated the community's civic life. These residents have used their managerial skills, as well as their social and political connections throughout the city, state, and nation, to obtain favors and appropriations from governmental authorities. They have employed these same connections and skills to found and lead Chestnut Hill's civic organizations. This abundance of talent also has enabled residents to persist in their civic efforts; despite flagging energies at various periods, Chestnut Hill's community organizations have lasted longer and accomplished far more than their counterparts in other sections of Philadelphia. Although these civic organizations
have sometimes worked for the good of the entire city, most of their
efforts have focused more narrowly on maintaining the quality of life
in Chestnut Hill, as defined by its most prosperous inhabitants.

Although they had their roots in the late nineteenth century, the
Hill's civic organizations have always reflected many characteristics
of the Progressive Era. Like the progressive reformers in the early
twentieth century, they have emphasized nonpartisanship, expert
leadership, and essentially private solutions to local problems. The
 persistence of these civic groups provides an intriguing glimpse into
the survival of progressive ideas well after the Progressive Era sup-
posedly ended with the American entrance into World War I. It also
lends strength to the argument that most progressive reformers were
members of the middle and upper classes who often were more in-
terested in promoting their own welfare than in launching sweeping
reforms throughout American society.

However narrow in focus their community organizations have
been, Chestnut Hill residents also have identified themselves with the
city at large. Only in the city could they earn incomes that allowed
commutation back and forth from spacious suburban homes in Chest-
ut Hill. Only in the city could they visit art galleries, attend the opera
and symphony orchestra, and sit on the boards of prestigious cultural
and philanthropic societies. Chestnut Hill residents wanted to enjoy
the best of both worlds: the riches of the city, and the peaceful, semi-
rural surroundings of the suburb. Thus, like most suburbanites until
recent decades, they maintained a dual identity—one urban and the
other suburban. It was a selective identity, however, which sought
the wealth and culture of the city but wanted to escape the worst of
its squalor and crime through the evening train ride back to Chestnut
Hill.

Complicating this dual identity have been internal divisions on
the Hill itself. In their drive for attractive homes, creature comforts,
and social ease, Chestnut Hill's more prosperous suburbanites have
created a world of their own. By living in North Chestnut Hill or the
West Side, and by establishing a series of exclusive associations, they
have had little or no social contact with the shopkeepers, craftsmen,
and other members of the local working class, who traditionally have
lived in the central and eastern sections of the community. At the same time, the local working class has been divided by religious and ethnic differences that persist even as the twentieth century comes to a close.

Until World War II these dualities and divisions created few difficulties for prosperous suburban residents of Chestnut Hill. So long as Philadelphia flourished economically, and so long as Chestnut Hill itself was surrounded by other attractive suburbs or undeveloped lands, the two worlds of city and suburb could coexist without undue effort or thought. But by the 1950s, the newer automobile suburbs to the north and east of Chestnut Hill, with their convenient shopping centers, began to challenge the Hill's commercial district. At the same time, the proliferation of automobiles had ended Hillers' dependence upon the commuter train, which had one main destination—the railroad station downtown. With automobiles, Chestnut Hill residents could work and shop just as easily outside city boundaries as within them.

Meanwhile, Mount Airy and Germantown to the south began to experience serious decline, with decaying properties, rising crime rates, and increasing racial tensions. Despairing over such conditions, some Chestnut Hillers proposed to secede from the city altogether. Although this movement failed, civic organizations in Chestnut Hill had to work harder than ever to fend off these threats, both real and imagined. Complicating this task were the social divisions within Chestnut Hill itself, which mitigated community consensus and made quasi government more difficult.

A study of how Chestnut Hill has evolved as a suburb in the city should help to illuminate the long and often troubled relationships between American cities and their suburbs. It is important to remember, however, that attitudes toward suburbs have changed over the decades. Commentators on the American family during the middle of the nineteenth century, for example, saw the suburb as an ideal site for a proper Christian home, removed from the ugliness and immorality of urban life. By the end of the century, some students of the city believed that trolleys and railroads would allow nearly all urban residents to live in suburban communities—however humble—and
thus alleviate the overcrowding and other dangers of large cities. In
the early twentieth century, some reformers refined this concept by
talking about an "organic city," where a variety of neighborhoods,
including suburbs, each played a distinct but healthy role in the city’s
life. Only in the post–World War II period, when older cities began
to lose population and to decay in various ways, did large numbers
of opinion makers begin to castigate suburbanites and blame a mul-
titude of urban ills on the suburbs. It is thus essential not to judge
the early suburbanization of Chestnut Hill entirely from the per-
spectives of later generations.

With such reservations in mind, much can be learned from study-
ing Chestnut Hill. Because it has existed as a suburban community
inside municipal limits, its relationship to the city has been even more
revealing than that of suburbs outside the city, which have had far
more freedom to ignore their urban neighbors. Yet like Chestnut Hill
in recent decades, these more independent suburbs are slowly learn-
ing that their welfare depends upon the health of the entire region,
including its urban core.

The author hopes that this study will appeal to enlightened gen-
eral readers in both cities and suburbs, who are struggling to under-
stand how their communities have evolved and where they might be
headed. At the same time, the author has tried to address the growing
number of urban and suburban historians who, like men and women
outside the profession, seek answers to one of the greatest problems
of American life—the problem of cities and suburbs. For as the twen-
tieth century comes to an end, approximately 80 percent of Americans
live in urban areas, and about half of these dwell in suburbs of one
kind or another. To understand the country’s cities and suburbs is to
understand the essence of American life.