

Glen Fern being restored by Park's preservation trust

BY MATT SCRENCI

Fairmount Park's historic Glen Fern is getting a long overdue restoration and facelift. Glen Fern, which was built in 1746 and is located along the Wissahickon Creek below Valley Green in West Mount Airy, is the last surviving building from the largest mill complex in the American colonies. Thanks to three significant grants, this project is finally able to take off.

Upon its construction, the house was the residence of the Livezey family, who owned the house until Fairmount Park purchased it in 1873. The house began small, but gradually expanded as the family grew, eventually consisting of three floors and a large number of rooms. Thomas Livezey, the patriarch, not only grew grapes, allowing him to produce wine, but had livestock and a fully operational farm. After the family left, the industrial buildings slowly but surely came down, with the mill finally coming down in the 1920s.

From the early twentieth century until about two years ago, this building was the home of the Valley Green Canoe Club. It became apparent that work would need to be done several years ago, but that concern was elevated in the past two years. The Fairmount Park Historic Preservation Trust has now gotten the ball rolling on the restoration project.

"This project is critical to the successful restoration and preservation of this great treasure," said Todd Bernstein, president of the

Fairmount Park Historic Preservation Trust. "Thanks to the generous support of community partners like the Philadelphia Intervention Fund and private contributors, new life will be given to an important part of our city's history: a building that was in jeopardy of eventual collapse."

The first phase of the restoration project, budgeted at approximately \$232,000, has been largely funded by a grant from the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, whose monies were matched by the City of Philadelphia. Most of the current renovations being made are exterior, including drainage improvements, structural repairs, restoration of all exterior windows and doors, as well as serious upgrades to the septic system.

The springhouse, which stood on the Livezey property, is currently in a ruined state. After visiting the site from California, 11th-generation descendants of Thomas Livezey, Holbrook Mitchell and Gladys Mitchell, made a generous donation to help restore the decrepit building.

This past December, the heating system at Glen Fern failed, threatening the progress of ongoing restoration. Enter the Philadelphia Intervention Fund, who awarded the Fairmount Park Historic Preservation Trust a \$7,000 grant to repair the heating system. "An extraordinary commitment from public and private sources, like the Philadelphia Intervention Fund, has enabled us to make great strides in improving historic

preservation in Fairmount Park," said John Carr, executive director of the Fairmount Park Historic Preservation Trust. "Without this support, Fairmount Park's treasures would be critically endangered."

Repairs and restoration are to be completed by this summer,

explained Carr. Discussions are now underway for the reuse of the house. The new tenants will have to be able to make the house accessible for the public. They will be issued a long-term lease of 30 years in exchange for an investment for further restoration. In addition, they will be responsible

for all utilities, upkeep and repairs. "And, of course, all parts of the building must remain as they were originally built," says Carr. The type of occupant will be limited, Carr points out, as accessibility to the site can be difficult.

The Fairmount Park Historic

Preservation Trust will continue to strive to keep Glen Fern in excellent condition, as well as conduct ongoing fundraising for its cleanup. The ultimate goal, according to Carr, is "for Glen Fern to have a positive impact on the Wissahickon, on the community, and on the city itself."



Ongoing restoration at Glen Fern.



Glen Fern as depicted in an early 1900s postcard.