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SOME WINDOWS ONTO HISTORY IN FAIRMOUNT PARK

About Philadelphia's Historic Fairmount Park Houses

Within Philadelphia's extensive Fairmount Park is a gracious group of 18th- and early 19th-century historic houses, all of them established by wealthy landowners as country seats to provide refuge from the pressures of urban life. Located to the north and west of Philadelphia along the Schuylkill River, these houses were built within a leisurely horseback ride from the commercial center of what was once the most prosperous city in the American colonies. Some properties functioned as working farms, including productive dairies, orchards, and game lands. Others provided elegant, fashionable retreats.

Fiske Kimball (1888-1955), the distinguished architectural historian who became director of the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 1925, was the prime mover behind establishing these rare architectural treasures as house museums. In the 1920s, Kimball fostered relationships with many civic organizations, encouraging them to support and preserve the historic houses for posterity. Under his auspices, the Museum assumed administration of **Mount Pleasant** (built 1762-1765), which had been built for a Scottish sea captain and privateer and was briefly owned by Benedict Arnold, and **Cedar Grove** (built 1748), a simpler structure that is fascinating for its innovative interior features and its original furnishings that remain in pristine condition. Both houses offer rare and authentic contexts in which to present works from the Museum's American Art and Decorative Arts collections and extend into the park Kimball's vision of the Museum as a place to "walk through time."

Anne d'Harmoncourt, Director and Chief Executive Officer of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, said: "These houses provide visitors with a remarkable opportunity to go back in time and

to experience with astonishing immediacy a touch of Philadelphia's rich cultural history and its important role in the shaping of our nation.”

The Park House Guides of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, organized in 1960 and now numbering some sixty highly trained volunteers, offer detailed tours of seven Fairmount Park homes, all located within a 10-minute drive of each other. In these tours, Mount Pleasant and Cedar Grove are joined by five others:

- **Laurel Hill** (1764-1767), located on a rise high above the banks of the Schuylkill River at Edgeley Drive and Fairmount Avenue, is the most visible of the houses when driving through the park on West River Drive. The original central section of Laurel Hill reflects the Middle Georgian influence of nearby Mount Pleasant. Two additions enlarged the house in the 19th century: a simple one-story wing on the south side and an octagonal two-story wing on the north side. In addition to administering the house, Women for Greater Philadelphia annually hosts a summer concert series with candlelight receptions on the porch facing the river.
- **Lemon Hill** (1800), a grand Neoclassical villa, features oval-shaped rooms with curved doors and fireplaces on each of its of three levels. Situated at Kelly Drive and Sedgley Avenue, Lemon Hill was the first of the Park Houses to be purchased by the City of Philadelphia in 1844 and it is administered today by Colonial Dames of America, Chapter II.
- **Strawberry Mansion** (1788-1789), the largest of the Park houses, is Federal in style with a large Greek Revival wings on either side. Located at 33rd and Dauphin Streets, the site of what was once a steamboat landing, Strawberry Mansion served not only as a country home, but also as a popular restaurant. In the late 19th century, the Philadelphia artist Thomas Eakins was known to play “shinny,” a form of street hockey, on its grounds with his friends. Today, the mansion's attic houses a fine collection of 19th-century toys and dolls, which can be enjoyed on a tour. It is administered by The Committee of 1926.
- **Sweetbriar** (1797) was built in a Neoclassical style as a year-round residence for Samuel Breck, an acquaintance of the French General Marquis de Lafayette, who fought alongside George Washington in the Revolutionary War. Standing on what is today

Lansdowne Avenue, the house features a colonnade in the entry hallway and large Italianate windows. It is administered by The Modern Club.

- **Woodford's** (1772) original owner, the merchant William Coleman, was praised by his close confidant Benjamin Franklin for having the “coolest, clearest head, best heart, and the exactest morals of any man.” Not far from Strawberry Mansion on 33rd and Dauphin Streets, Woodford presents an excellent Philadelphia interpretation of Georgian architecture, and its parlor contains one of the most finely carved overmantles and chimneybreasts in the city. It is administered by the Naomi Wood Trust.

Annual Yuletide Tours of the Park Houses

In addition to general tours for individuals, groups, and school classes, the Museum's Park House Guides present annual Yuletide Tours of the houses. Garden clubs, florists, and school groups donate their talent and resources to decorate the houses with seasonal spirit and festive style for one week each December for the tours.

The changing themes of the Yuletide Tours open surprising and amusing perspectives on the history of these extraordinary homes. Visitors can see the historic houses by trolleys departing from Philadelphia's Horticulture Center, each year transformed into a “Winter Wonderland” of holiday greens and gift boutiques. Self-guided tours also enable visitors to enjoy the scenic drive through the Park at their own pace. Candlelight Evenings, beginning with food and wine at the Restaurant of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, feature three of the historic houses lighted much like they would have been in the 18th and 19th century.

The Philadelphia Museum of Art is among the largest art museums in the United States, showcasing more than 2,000 years of exceptional human creativity in masterpieces of painting, sculpture, works on paper, decorative arts and architectural settings from Europe, Asia and the Americas. The striking neoclassical building, housing more than 200 galleries and standing on a nine-acre site above the Benjamin Franklin Parkway, is an oasis of beauty and enriching activities-including programs for children and families, lectures, concerts and films.

For additional information, contact the Marketing and Public Relations Department of the Philadelphia Museum of Art at (215) 684-7860. The Philadelphia Museum of Art is located on the Benjamin Franklin Parkway at 26th Street. For general information, call (215) 763-8100, or visit the Museum's website at www.philamuseum.org. (7/26/02)