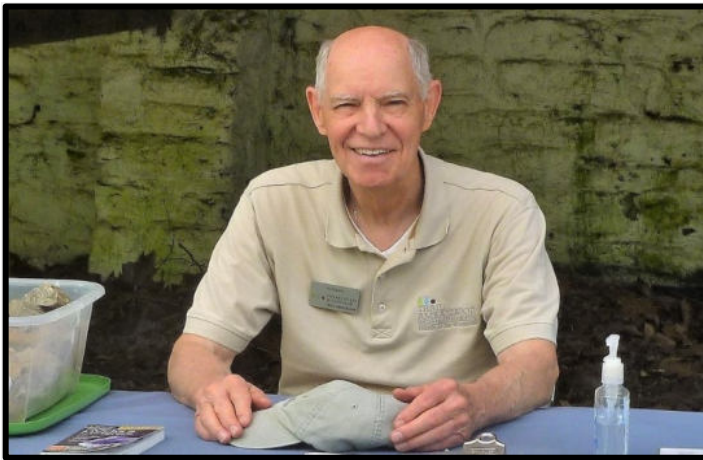




Chestnut Hill Local

Trail Ambassador,
81, Obsessed with
Wissahickon Park

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Friends of the Wissahickon “Trail Ambassador,” James Charnock, 81, works the Outreach Table at Valley Green Inn, recruiting new members.

James Charnock has written all of the songs in his new CD, “Songs of the Wissahickon,” which pays tribute to the park that weaves its way through big chunks of Mt. Airy and Chestnut Hill in the city of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

by Len Lear

Len Lear can be reached at lenlear@chestnuthilllocal.com



Lots of people enjoy the Wissahickon Park and visit it often, but James Charnock is probably more enthusiastic than any other user of the park that traverses parts of Chestnut Hill and Mt. Airy. Charnock is obsessed with it.

In fact, the Friends of the Wissahickon (FOW) trail ambassador has written poems and articles about the park and a CD full of songs about it. He is preparing to start a website called Wissahickon Memories, as well as a clothing line emblazoned with the declaration, “I’m a Wissahickonite! I love Wissahickon Valley Park.” How did Charnock, who is 81, begin his love affair with the park?

“In 2012, a lady I was dating enthusiastically said, 'Jim, let’s go to Forbidden Drive,’” Charnock explained last week. “Well, I didn’t know what she meant by *that*, but it was my introduction to the Wissahickon. I soon did some research and was hooked on this city’s rural paradise and joined the FOW in 2013.”

Charnock, who earned a master's degree in elementary education from Temple University, was a middle junior high school teacher for more than 30 years in the Philly public schools. He also currently volunteers with the West Philadelphia Alliance for Children (WePAC) and leads a library crew at Add B. Anderson School in West Philadelphia.

He is the author of a book for teachers, “The Creative Teacher: Activities for Language Arts, Grades 4 to 8 and Up,” and a book about the history of a one-room schoolhouse he attended in Harford County, Maryland, “Mt. Horeb; the Little White Schoolhouse on Little Deer Creek.” He also created a new website for teachers and homeschoolers, www.theeducationalfreelancer.com.

Charnock has been honored for his volunteer work on behalf of the Wissahickon, and serves as a member of the FOW’s Structures Crew which makes repairs and works on construction projects in the park. During a recent interview, we asked Charnock about his passion for the Northwest Philadelphia landscape that officially was added to Fairmount Park in 1868.

What do you love about Wissahickon Park?

It's very safe and easy to walk and bike on the Drive. As a trail ambassador (TA), I really enjoy interacting with the public, and fellow walkers seem to take pleasure in TAs initiating conversation. Finally, I like the sound of the creek, the cooling, dappled shade of the trees and even the challenge of the higher trails. What a great "job" I have!

What is one of your favorite moments from volunteering with FOW?

On Tuesdays, I love the challenge and camaraderie of the Structures Crew, which repairs and builds throughout the park. And it's always a pleasure to partner with a fellow TA to serve as a sort of docent on patrol, or simply pull duty at one of our outreach tables to help and laugh with park visitors, young and old, as well as their pets.

How does FOW contribute to the Philadelphia community?

This quiet and beautiful park, significantly maintained by FOW volunteers, is a great respite for inner rejuvenation.

What is your favorite spot in the park?

I get an especially good feeling when I am in the socially interactive hotspots like The Cedars House Café and Valley Green Inn, and I enjoy the then-and-now historical ambience of the physical structures along Forbidden Drive from buildings to bridges to statues to whatever.

What prompted you to write songs about Wissahickon Valley Park?

The Wissahickon has been romantically written and sung about by poets, authors and musicians who reflect upon the park's serenity and beauty, often referring to Forbidden Drive as a most inviting and invigorating experience. Although the historically prominent Edgar Allen Poe, Fanny Kemble and others opined about the Wissahickon, modern singers also praise the park and Forbidden Drive in songs such as "Walking the Wissahickon" by Susan Lawrence in 2010 and my album, "Songs of the Wissahickon," in 2020. Both are available via a Google search, the latter also at www.FOW.org/virtualvalley/reflections. By the way, I am not the fantastic singer but just the writer of the songs.