



John F. Collins Park

Overview

John F. Collins Park is a tranquil park nestled in the heart of Center City Philadelphia's bustling business district. Originally known as Chestnut Park and renamed to honor its principal designer, this urban oasis demonstrates how small spaces can provide significant respite in dense urban environments. The park exemplifies the "pocket park" concept—small public spaces designed to offer city dwellers a peaceful retreat from the surrounding concrete and commerce.

Size: Approximately 4,200 square feet (less than one-tenth of an acre)

Location: 1707 Chestnut Street

Original Dedication: 1979

Rededication as John F. Collins Park: 2012

Historical Background

The Pocket Park Movement

The concept of "pocket parks" emerged in the mid-20th century as a response to the need for small-scale public spaces in densely built urban areas. These miniature parks were designed to transform underutilized urban lots into welcoming green spaces that provide psychological and physical relief from urban density.

Dorothy Haas and the Vision for Chestnut Park

In the 1970s, Philadelphia philanthropist Dorothy Haas proposed creating a pocket park in Center City. Her vision was to provide a green sanctuary where workers, residents, and visitors could escape the intensity of the surrounding commercial district.

Design and Construction

In 1978, the William Penn Foundation purchased the former parking lot at 17th and Chestnut streets and solicited designs for a park celebrating the region's indigenous landscape and peoples. The winning design was led by John F. Collins, a landscape architect with a deep appreciation for native plants, natural systems, and the cultural history of the Mid-Atlantic region before urbanization.

The original Chestnut Park was dedicated on June 5, 1979, to celebrate the legacy of William Penn's vision of Philadelphia as a "greene countrie towne" balancing urban development with access to nature and green space.

Rededication as John F. Collins Park

In 2012, the park was renamed John F. Collins Park to honor its principal designer following his death in 2011.

Key Elements

Design Concept

Visitors enter the park slightly elevated from street level via shallow steps, creating both physical and psychological separation from the surrounding city. The park extends from Chestnut Street to Ranstead Street, creating a mid-block passage that offers an alternate route through the dense urban fabric.

Roughly the size of a single building footprint, the space is bounded by buildings on three sides, with the open side facing Chestnut Street. This configuration provides enclosure and intimacy while maintaining visual connection to the street, inviting passersby to enter.

Features

Fountain: The fountain's three carved totems, sculpted by Collins' sons and nephew, represent the three clans of the Lenni Lenape who inhabited the region before European settlement. The fountain design incorporates native mica, gneiss, and schist stone embedded in concrete—materials that reference the geological character of the region and particularly the Wissahickon Valley.

Ornamental Gates: Two wrought-iron gates, sculpted by Philadelphia artist Christopher T. Ray, represent the diversity of natural environments native to the region and provide spectacular works of public art for passersby.

- **Wissahickon Gate (Chestnut Street entrance):** This gate features intricate metalwork depicting the flora and fauna of the Wissahickon Valley (including native plants, an owl, and insects) that served as inspiration for much of Collins' work.
- **Estuary Gate (Ranstead Street entrance):** This gate depicts marshland plants and animals from the tidal landscapes of coastal New Jersey and Delaware, including turtles, birds, lizards, and wetland vegetation.

Plantings & Materials: Trees provide a canopy of green for shade and cooling, while the plantings emphasize native species.

Fixed & Movable Seating: Fixed benches and moveable tables and chairs offer visitors options for both quiet moments and social gatherings.

Ground Surface: Rough-hewn granite pavers extend from inside the park across the sidewalk to the street curb, creating visual continuity and distinguishing the park from the surrounding concrete paving.

Park Namesake

The park's rededication recognized the significant contributions of John F. Collins (1936-2011) to Philadelphia's physical environment and his mentorship and influence on multiple generations of landscape architects and urban planners.

Born in Conshohocken, Collins started a plant nursery on his family's property at age 15, later studying landscape architecture at Penn State and earning his MLA from Harvard in 1962. A co-founder of the Adleman, Collins & DuTot landscape architecture firm, which later merged to form The Delta Group, he also became Chairman of Temple University's Department of Landscape Architecture and Horticulture in 1988.

Throughout his 50-year career, he propagated and grew native trees and shrubs, continued his work at Collins Nursery using environmentally friendly methods, and established another native plant nursery at Temple's Ambler campus.

Recognition & Impact

The Delta Group received an ASLA (American Society of Landscape Architects) Honor Award for John F. Collins Park's design in 1983, recognizing excellence in parks and recreational planning. In 1999, the park was awarded an ASLA Centennial Medallion, a special recognition given during the organization's 100th anniversary to celebrate exemplary landscape architecture projects.

The Associated Landscape Contractors of America gave the park an Environmental Improvement Award and Judges Award in 1980.

Ownership & Operations

For its first two decades, the park was owned and maintained by the PenJerDel Regional Foundation. In January 2010, ownership was transferred to the Center City District Foundation. Center City District maintains the park in its entirety, including the fountain, plantings and landscaping, infrastructure, and seating.

Visitor Information

Address: 1707 Chestnut Street, Philadelphia PA 19103

Hours: Monday 9 a.m. - 5 p.m. | Tuesday-Saturday 9 a.m. - 5:30 p.m. | Sunday 12 p.m. - 5 p.m.

Public Transit:

- Multiple SEPTA bus routes serve Chestnut Street
- Nearest subway stations: City Hall Station (Broad Street Line) and 15th Street Station (Market-Frankford Line)
- Walking distance from SEPTA and PATCO transit hubs

Accessibility: ADA accessible with no stairs or barriers from street level.

Admission: Free and open to the public

For information about seasonal operations, special events and rentals, and park programming, visitors are encouraged to contact the Center City District or visit ccdparke.org.