

Why I love history

I love history. I did not love the kind of history that I was taught in school. This was because most of the history that I was taught required memorizing dates or short facts that had no “meat” behind them. For example, I knew that Eli Whitney invented the cotton gin. However, I never really learned until I was older what a cotton gin did or its importance in history.

I have lived my entire life in Philadelphia. I learned at a young age about Philadelphia’s place in our country’s history, such as the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Stars and Stripes. All the Philadelphia history that I learned took place in Center City. I was not only a mother but also a grandmother before I was educated on Northeast Philadelphia’s role in the pioneering of solar energy, or that some members of Charles Macalester’s immediate family were buried on the grounds of his estate, Glengarry (now Glen Foerd), and many other interesting people and facts.

History should tell stories. It should not just be a list of Presidents’ names, or the dates of battles won or lost. It should be about those who risked and often gave their lives in those battles to make Philadelphia and all of America a cherished place to live. History should be about people. It should include their beliefs, accomplishments, sacrifices, homes, businesses, and families. History should be about structures where relevant events occurred, or notable people lived. It is about those once groundbreaking inventions that, although commonplace today, changed the course of our lives.

April 24, 2025, ended Holocaust Remembrance Day. This marked 80 years since the Allied Forces liberated captives who were overwhelmingly Jewish, but also other marginalized peoples, from concentration camps in Europe. Although this is not Northeast Philadelphia history, nevertheless, history reaches far and runs deep. Some of those survivors and their descendants either live or lived in Northeast Philadelphia, creating a profound connection. By remembering past horrors, we can hopefully avoid them in the future. Conversely, we must also honor both the people, the triumphs, and the small and large victories of our local past so that all worthwhile accomplishments become part of our culture and a way of life.

In the future, we plan to write historical stories and post them on our website (<https://nephillyhistory.net>). Hopefully, the subjects will be on material that you never knew or expand your present knowledge of Northeast Philadelphia. Most topics will be serious, but some might make you smile. For example, did you know that the ice cream soda was invented in Philadelphia? Unfortunately, this invention did not happen in the Northeast. Robert McKay Green was selling sweet cream fountain sodas at the October 1874 Semicentennial Celebration of the Franklin Institute. He ran out of sweet cream and, unable to find more, substituted vanilla ice cream. The ice cream soda was born! When I

said the ice cream soda was not invented in the Northeast, that was true. However, the inventor's son was Robert McKay Green, Jr., whose wife eventually owned the Knowlton Mansion, William Rhawn's Frank Furness-designed home at Rhawn and Verree. So, although not invented there, I am sure that many an ice cream soda was enjoyed in that Northeast home.

More interesting information on Knowlton Mansion...William H. Rhawn, a prominent banker and one-time president of the American Bankers' Association. He hired famed architect Frank Furness to design his summer home in Fox Chase in 1879. The home was completed in 1881 at a cost of \$32,636.16. The house was named after Rhawn's wife, Hettie's great-grandfather, John Knowles. When Rhawn died in 1898, his estate sold the home to John G. Powell and his wife, Elizabeth. When the Powells passed away, Knowlton was inherited by their daughter, Nettie Powell Green, wife of Robert McKay Green, Jr., the son of the inventor of the ice cream soda. The house stayed in the Green family until Conroy Catering purchased it in 1999. Knowlton has been on the National Register of Historic Places since 1974.

The above information on the history of ice cream sodas and the owners of Knowlton is a tease of the type of subjects that will appear in the articles.

Historical information will continue to be provided at our meetings on the first Wednesday of the month at Pennepack Baptist Church, 9732 Krewstown Road, in Bustleton. These articles will be an addition to our monthly meetings. They will be short stories to give you a taste of past events and/or people who lived in the Northeast in earlier times. Hopefully, you will find the topics interesting. Whether oddities, tragedies, biographies, or everyday experiences, we will strive to make all the content truthful. Many of the Northeast's tales are just that...fairy tales printed or told once and then repeated hundreds of times until someone is willing to question their veracity. All these articles will be checked and double-checked for accuracy. If you have proof that we are wrong, call us on it, and we will make necessary corrections and credit you with the changes. We want to give everyone the truth, not a legend.

If there is a subject that you would like to know more about, contact us at phillyhistory@gmail.com.

History is interesting, informative, powerful, and sometimes transformative. Let's keep it alive!

Patty O'Connor McCarthy