

Recreational Resources of the Wissahickon Valley

The Wissahickon Valley is a natural wonder. Its dramatic geography and dense forest attract thousands of walkers, hikers, riders and bikers each year. On a weekend afternoon, so many people flock to the Wissahickon Valley, that it is transformed from a natural respite from the city around it into an urban jungle. To preserve the landscape and manage the different uses of the park for everyone's safety, use of the Wissahickon Valley's trails is regulated.

Permits are required to bicycle or ride horseback on all trails except Forbidden (Wissahickon) Drive. All users of the park are asked to stay on marked trails to protect the environment from erosion.

Trails in the Wissahickon Valley

Forbidden Drive A gravel road which follows the Wissahickon Creek from Lincoln Drive to the City Limit, Forbidden Drive is the most popular point of access to explore the Valley. Originally known as Upper Wissahickon Drive, Forbidden Drive got its popular name following the banning of automobiles on the drive in the 1920s. Forbidden Drive is the only trail open to bicyclists and equestrians without a permit.

A paved path connects Forbidden Drive to Ridge Avenue where the Wissahickon empties into the Schuylkill river. This path is a popular access point for cyclists coming off the River Drives or pedestrians using the R-6 Wissahickon Station or Bus Interchange.

Forbidden Drive is also accessible at its midpoint at the Valley Green Inn. Valley Green Road can be reached from Springfield Avenue in Chestnut Hill, two blocks west of St. Martin's Lane and the St. Martin's R-8 Station. Just above Valley Green, Wise's Mill Road meets Forbidden Drive, connecting it to Henry Avenue in Roxborough. Forbidden Drive ends at Northwestern Avenue after crossing Bell's Mill Road.

Upper Trails A number of trails climb out of the valley from Forbidden Drive to the "upper trails" which run along the walls of the valley. Many of the upper trails have been marked with colored blazes. A map of the Wissahickon Valley is available from Friends of the Wissahickon. It can be purchased on site at the [Andorra Natural Area](#) or at the Valley Green Inn. It is also sold at some area Borders Books, EMS, REI, and Bike Line stores.

The green blazed trail has been designated a multi-use trail approved for mountain bikers with permits. The blue blazed trail has been designated a hiking trail. Trails in the Andorra Natural Area are prohibited to all bicycles.

Bicycle and Equestrian Permits

All bicyclists and equestrians using the upper trails in the Wissahickon are required to register for a user permit. The permit, which is free, must be renewed annually.

Permit holders receive a trail guide and an identification tag - a wristband which must be worn while in the Wissahickon.

Pedestrians do not need a user permit, nor do equestrians or bikers using Forbidden Drive only. To apply for a permit, please read the following rules then print out, fill out and send in the application which follows.

Section 316. All Park Trails Including Upper Wissahickon (Forbidden) Drive

(1) Trail Users. All users of Park trails shall travel safely with common courtesy to all others in the Park. Users of Park trails include all people using trails whether on foot, bicycle, horse, carriage, horse drawn vehicle or any other permitted vehicle. The use of any motor vehicle, including but not limited to, snow mobiles, motorcycles, motorbikes, motor powered dirt bikes and motor powered ATVs (All Terrain Vehicles) is prohibited on all Park Trails.

Speed Limit. All users of Park Trails shall observe a speed limit of seven (7) miles per hour on all Park trails.

(3) Single File. All users of Park trails except pedestrians, shall proceed single file on all Park trails except on Upper Wissahickon (Forbidden) Drive.

(4) Horse Drawn Vehicles. Horse drawn vehicles may be driven on Park trails of sufficient width to accommodate them safely. Travel by horse drawn vehicles shall be single file on all Park trails including Upper Wissahickon (Forbidden) Drive.

(5) Upper Wissahickon (Forbidden) Drive. Except for horse drawn vehicles, all users of Upper Wissahickon Drive shall travel a maximum of two (2) abreast when trail conditions and traffic permit two (2) abreast to be responsibly accommodated

(6) Bicycles. (a) No bicycle may be used in the Andorra Natural Area, except on that certain trail known as Bell's Mill Trail. (b) In those Park areas where bicycles are permitted, bicycles are restricted to existing sidewalks, footwalks and designated trails. No person shall operate or place a bicycle on grass areas within the Park. Cyclists must relinquish the right-of-way to all other Park trail users, except during bicycle races that have been either sanctioned or organized by the Commission. (c) No person may operate a bicycle in any Park between the hours of 10:00 pm and 6:00 am.

(7) Permits. On all trails in the Wissahickon Valley, all users over the age of 16, except pedestrians, are required to have a permit. These users include cyclists, equestrians and any operator of a carriage, horse drawn vehicles or other non-motorized wheeled vehicle. Horse back riding and cycling on paved trails and the Upper Wissahickon (Forbidden) Drive are exempt from this regulation

PERMIT APPLICATION

Please fill out the following application for the permission to legally use the trails of the Wissahickon. Your information helps Fairmount Park better serve you.

___ Cyclist
___ Equestrian

Name: _____

Address: _____

Phone: () _____

Date of Birth: _____

Height: _____

Weight: _____

Eye Color: _____

Sex: _____

Sign Here: _____

Any false information will render permit invalid. This permit is non-transferable and will expire at year's end. Send this form to:

Fairmount Park Commission
Attn: Permits Office
PO Box 21601
Philadelphia, PA 19131-0901

Any questions call: (215) 685-0052

Rock Climbing

Livezey Rock on the eastern slope of the Wissahickon Valley, approximately one mile downstream from Valley Green, is a popular spot for Philadelphia rock climbers. Thirty five feet high and sixty feet long, Livezey rock is the largest and steepest climbable rock in the valley. A plaque dedicated to Livezey veteran climber Lou Lutz can be found 20 feet up the rock... if you can get to it.

Friends of the Wissahickon

The Friends of the Wissahickon represent the users and community groups who are concerned for the preservation and restoration of the Wissahickon portion of Fairmount Park, and in its protection through balanced use. The Friends provide leadership, education and coordination for various activities on behalf of the Wissahickon.

Friends of the Wissahickon publishes a quarterly newsletter, and sponsors lectures and events centered on the park. The Friends can be reached at 8708 Germantown Ave., Philadelphia, PA 19118. (215) 247-0417

The Natural Landscape of the Wissahickon Valley

The Wissahickon Schist provided the early settlers of this region with the finest mica, quartz and sandstone to build their homes. The woodland continues to be a source of magical escape for Philadelphia and non-city residents alike. The history of this area of Philadelphia begins with the Schist and continues through the construction of the mills along the riverbank, which produced wealth and beckoned the highest of society to gather in what are now publicly owned historic homes.

The irregularly shaped Wissahickon, situated between Chestnut Hill and Roxborough, is about six and a half miles long, covers 1372 acres, spanning Carpenters Woods, Clifford Park, Lincoln Drive, Pastorius Park, and Woodward Pines. Travel guru Baedeker recounted Wissahickon Creek as winding through a "miniature Alpine Gorge with cliffs and forests on both banks to form a canyon stronghold."*

Woodlands of the Wissahickon Valley

In this valley gorge, among the most widespread of trees are the Lofty Hemlocks. These conifers produce verdant Hemlock Glens that flourish along Rex Avenue and the streams, near [Devil's Pool](#). At the entrance to the gorge, American White Elm, Native Beech, Black Walnut, Soft Maple and Hickory trees are planted. *Penn's Tree* is marked with a bronze plaque, where it stands at the Walnut Lane Bridge. Considered the noblest tree in the Valley*, this "Forked Hemlock" has historical value in its grandeur of size and history.

The Wissahickon Schist

The distinctive rock of Fairmount Park is Wissahickon schist, a variety of schist named for the craggy valley of Wissahickon Creek where the stone was first studied. With its flecks of glittery mica and its many-toned shadings of gray, brown, tan, and blue, Wissahickon schist is so attractive that it became a common building material in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Geologic History

Over 550 million years ago, geologists believe that the Park laid under the ocean. Sand and clay sediments were deposited in thick layers. As more and more layers accumulated, the sediments underneath slowly compacted to form a massive rock unit of sandstone and shale, probably much thicker than the formation we see today. Then came an interval of mountain building, then the enormous plates of the earth's surface collided to produce a great mountain belt, thought to be as high as the present-day Rockies or Himalayas. These mountains extended from the southern states to New England. Deep underground, the extreme heat and pressure transformed sedimentary rocks into metamorphic ones, melding the sandstones and shales into Wissahickon schist. Rock strata were also bent, cracked, and tilted, producing steeply angled layers we see today.

The Wissahickon schist lay at the root of the huge mountain belt. Over millions of years, erosion brought it to the surface. The Schuylkill River was the main erosive force, cutting a path of least resistance through the fractures, joints, and layers of the rock - a process that accounts for the river's delightful meanders. Human beings, in their quest for this valuable building material, have also helped to expose it to view by extensive quarrying.

Mineral Foundation

Wissahickon schist is characterized by alternating layers of minerals, chiefly mica and quartz. Mica derives from the ancient shale, quartz from sandstone. A shiny, flaky mineral, mica gives the schist its glassy or metallic appearance. Quartz is often chalky white or clear, though it may also occur in smoky blue, gray, or other shades. Whatever its hue, quartz is hard - it can scratch the surface of a coin. Other minerals found in the Wissahickon schist include feldspar (often pink, perhaps glassy, hard like quartz, frequently blockish in shape), biotite (a black form of mica), and garnet (small pellets of reddish-brown). Children especially enjoy scouting for the embedded garnets.

The characteristics of the minerals influence the rock as a whole. For instance, because of its molecular structure, mica has cleavage, a tendency to fracture along planes. For this reason, the Wissahickon schist also tends to split into thin layers, parallel to the cleavage of the mica. The splitting, plus the work of erosion, produces the typical contours of the rock outcroppings, including what the literary sketchbook called their lack of "frightful smoothness." In addition, the many fractures in the schist provide seepage outlets for groundwater - hence the large number of springs in the park.

In contrast to mica, quartz has no cleavage and is very difficult to break. Along with other hard minerals from the original sandstone, quartz resisted the heat and pressure of orogeny, and by doing so it created features known by the imported terms *bouginage* and *augen*. A *bouginage* (French word for sausage) occurs when quartz or feldspar, sandwiched between layers of mica, bulges out and pinches in like a sausage, or in some areas like a string of sausage links. A *bouginage* can be about the size of a football. An *augen* is much smaller, typically the size and shape of a human eye ("eye" being the literal meaning of the German word). An *augen* originates during metamorphism when less resistant minerals such as mica slide across more resistant quartz or feldspar, so that the harder mineral begins to roll, creating the elliptical shape. For examples of *augen* and *bouginage* structures, look at the outcrop on Neil Drive northwest of the Falls Bridge. Also visible at this site is the type of structure called a *crenulation*, a series of small folds in the rock caused by bending under high temperature and pressure.

Devil's Hole

A.k.a., Devil's Pool, it is best reached from Valley Green by taking the footpath on the eastern bank and going downstream to the mouth of Cresheim Creek. As the ravine widens into Cresheim, waters gather in the basin before leaping into the Wissahickon Creek. Legendary lore has it that the Lenape tribes used this as a spiritual area. The final word is that it is, "one of Nature's own sanctuaries." (‰)

Lover's Leap

One of the most romantic hikes in this park leads to a precipice overlooking the gorge. To find it, enter the main footpath at the Ridge Avenue entrance and follow the west bank to Hermit's Lane Bridge. Coming from Blue Stone Bridge, follow the path at the west end to Lover's Leap. The legendary account comes from the 1927 text, *Wissahickon Valley*, that "the daughter of a mighty Indian chief and her young lover plunged to their death in the waters below. Promised to the warrior who could outrun his competitors, the faithful young Indian girl had witnessed a wily old chieftain gain the race but not the prize. Probably on this rock, on a moonlit night in May 1847, George Lippard, romancer of the Wissahickon, was married by Indian rites to his frail young wife." (‰)

credits:

* indicates references made from Esther M. Klein's canonical text on Fairmount Park history (1974, Harcum Junior College Press).

(‰) refers to Wissahickon Creek History....

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