

# EXPLORING OAKWELL'S PAST AND PRESENT

By Greta Agnew

Have you ever heard of Oakwell? It is a 13.4 acre property in Villanova, and the Lower Merion School District has proposed using some of Oakwell to make playing fields for Black Rock Middle School. Oakwell has a fascinating history and is home to many trees and animals.

Some of the buildings at Oakwell were built by the famous architect Frank Miles Day, and the gardens were designed by the Olmsted brothers. Many animals live in the trees that we will soon hear about. Now, let's dive into Oakwell's history.

The first residents of Oakwell were the Bodine family, who lived there in the early 1900s. Mrs. Eleanor Bodine created a horticultural school for women on her property in the 1910s and the 1920s. Even now, you can see the victory garden that the women worked in during World War I. Today, the greenhouse that the women worked in still stands. It has a long brick wall with arched doorways, and there used to be a line of columns holding up a pergola. The wall is covered with ivy and feels like you're walking into Frances Hodgson Burnett's Secret Garden. There used to be many long connected greenhouses behind the wall field with flower and vegetable gardens. Beyond the greenhouse was an orchard of fruit trees, and two of Eleanor's apple trees are still there!

The head gardener, or superintendent, lived in a little brick cottage called Acom Cottage. It looks like an English Cotswold cottage, has the same brickwork as the greenhouse and a tunnel that runs to the greenhouse basement, so people think it was also designed by Frank Miles Day.

There is a teahouse that matches the design, too. It has a path and a telephone line that connects the teahouse to Acom Cottage so the staff could deliver food and drink to garden guests. There are original lanterns with dragonflies and more ornate brickwork.



Photo credit: Michael Bixler

If you walk a little further down the path, you will find the dormitory where the women from the horticultural school stayed. It is called Squirrel Inn and it is currently occupied by a single family. Squirrel Inn was built in 1916 in the Craftsman style with a Swiss chalet style balcony.

The Oakwell mansion was built in 1922, making it 101 years old! It was built in the English Tudor style. It has a huge collection of Moravian tiles in the interior flooring—and one animal, a dragonfly, just like the Teahouse lanterns! The cobblestone driveway leads to a porte-cochere, a covered entrance, and in the middle of the driveway is a rare Persian Ironwood from Iran.

When the mansion was built, the Olmsted Brothers made sure to save the old trees that are still located around the building. Nowadays, all of the machines used to build homes destroy all of the root systems and the trees as well. But when the Oakwell mansion was built, horses were used to transport the materials and none of the trees were destroyed.

Oakwell is home to over 80 types of trees, and 33 of them are native to our area. There are 114 heritage trees in Oakwell, which means they are important and old. These include Red Oaks and

White Oaks (“wisahkakw” and “wipunkokw” in the Lenape language). Many of these oaks are over 200 years old, which means some have been around since the Colonial era! Full grown oak roots suck up over 40,000 gallons of water a year. Oaks never stop growing. The white oak in front of the greenhouse has limbs that reach out all around it.

Many of the other tree species in Oakwell are important, too. For example, the China fir has long spiky needles that are good for birds to nest in and provide protection. Two out of the four types of cedar can be found here, as well as about five of the 40 types of birch. Honey locust, an American tree, is a favorite of white-tailed deer.

Now, we come to the animals at Oakwell. There are all types of animals, mammals, birds, amphibians and more. Deer, foxes, coyotes, squirrels, opossum, rabbits, groundhogs, and brown bats all thrive at Oakwell. Many types of birds live here too, including sparrows, American crows, downy woodpeckers, great-horned owl, red tailed hawks, and many more.

I hope you have enjoyed learning about the history and ecology of Oakwell!

## The Changing World of Real Estate

By Addie Wrona

Lately, many people in Lower Merion and around the country have been trying to move into new houses. But many are not able to do this because prices are so high. If you looked on a website to buy a house two years ago—before Covid—the house that you were interested in might have been \$350,000. After Covid, that same house may now be \$500,000. This means that people may not be able to buy the house they want. This scenario is occurring a lot, especially in Lower Merion.

Lots of people have been looking for homes to buy, but unfortunately, not a lot of people are selling their homes. This problem is called low inventory. This can be an advantage if you are selling your house because you can get a lot of money for it. If you are a buyer, this is a disadvantage because you might spend months searching for a house you like and still have no options that you can afford.



If you are a person who is trying to buy a house or have been trying for a while, you may have something called a price range. A price range is the amount of money that you're willing to spend or not spend. For example if my price range was \$500,000 to \$550,000 and a house was on the market for \$550,000, that house is in my price range but still a little high. It can be hard to stick to a budget in a very expensive market.

People will advertise houses that are for sale on websites such as Compass, Trulia, Redfin and Zillow. These websites are an important part of selling or buying a house because they tell you many things about what a house is like, how much it costs, and whether it's a good fit for you.

Someone who can help you find a house is called a real estate agent. An agent does research on different houses and makes deals for families. Sometimes they find out what the families are looking for, or not looking for, and then they can assess the house's quality to see if it's a good fit. Another thing a real estate agent can do is something called “running the numbers.” This means that they will find out how much money you are going to have to pay each month to eventually own the house. Agents also investigate

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