

East Falls Past-- East Falls Regatta

The Fallser, July 2010, by Ellen Sheehan

From 1925 until 1931 the East Falls Business Men's Association hosted an annual summer Regatta on the Schuylkill River at the foot of Midvale Avenue between the Falls Bridge and the Skew Bridge.

An elaborate program of swimming, canoeing and diving events drew thousands of spectators to the shady banks of the river. John B. Kelly, East Fall's winner of three Olympic gold medals, originated the Regatta and successfully conducted the races for four consecutive years. He was followed by Charles McIlvaine, also an Olympic World Champion.



Participants from all of the large boat clubs in the Schuylkill Navy were anxious to enter because of the short course, which impels the oarsmen to extend every muscle to emerge victors. A diving board was erected on a float anchored in the center of the river, just below the Midvale Avenue entrance to the park. The affair was endorsed by Samuel H. Truitt, the commodore of the Schuylkill Navy, the National Association of Amateur Oarsmen, The Middle States Canoe Racing Association and by officials of the Middle Atlantic Amateur Athletic Union.

On July 16, 1928, there was a near tragedy when the diving stand capsized as divers and swimmers crowded to the water side of the stand to get a better view of the oarsmen fighting for first place. Two girls and their escorts were thrown from their canoe and dragged under the surface by the capsized diving platform. With their progress blocked by the racing shells and other craft, Park Guards Patrick Corr and Daniel Furman (of Frederick St.) had a difficult time reaching the struggling canoeists with the patrol boat "Rescue." The two girls had gone under twice before being pulled from the stream. When the girls and their escorts were brought ashore, Furman and Corr who saved many lives in the Schuylkill, were cheered by the crowd.

The 1928 race featured the appearance of East Falls' own Charles McIlvaine, Paul Costello and John B. Kelly, gold medal winners in the 1924 and 1928 Olympics.

In 1929, outboard motor races were added to the program. The swimming and diving events were canceled that same year, being deemed a danger to participants and because the diving platform blocked the view of spectators.

St. Bridget's Naval Battalion acted as guides and furnished the music to enliven the time

between races. At the conclusion of the races, prizes were awarded to the winners on the steps of the Manayunk-Quaker City National Bank's East Falls office, at Ridge and Midvale Avenues (present site of the Sunoco station.)

The entire proceeds of the regatta provided funds for the building of the Women's Medical College in East Falls, at Abbottsford and Henry Avenues for which construction started in August, 1928.

Note: Information for this article was obtained from a scrapbook containing over sixty pages of newspaper clippings, patron books and photos relating to the Regatta from the Joseph P. Kelley collection of the EFHS archives. It is available for viewing by interested parties.