

## East Falls Past-- Boat Houses and Their East Falls Social Clubs

*The Fallser*, June 2010, by Ellen Sheehan

Summertime brings thoughts of summer activities, of East Falls association with the Schuylkill River and of the various boat clubs that have been part of East Falls.

The Montrose Boat Club was organized on November 25, 1837, in a house on Ridge Avenue, as a *social* Club. The Club negotiated with the Crescent Boat Club, and raced in a four-oared paper shell. On July 5, 1895, they entered and won the Junior Eight in the People's Regatta, defeating the Vesper, Fairmount and Americas Boat Clubs. John B. Kelly, winner of three Olympic Gold Medals, received his first lessons in rowing with the Montrose Club.



In 1683, William Penn granted 500 acres of land at the mouth of Wissahickon Creek known as "Sumac Park" to Robert Turner. A grist mill and a saw mill were constructed on opposite sides of what is now Ridge Avenue. Additional buildings constructed included Riverside Mansion and Colony Castle. When the Fairmount Park Commission was formed in 1868, the state legislature gave it power to purchase the property near the stream. Shortly afterward, the commission demolished all of the buildings with the exception of Riverside Mansion and Colony Castle.

From 1876 until 1887 the Schuylkill Fishing Company occupied Colony Castle. Riverside was torn down prior to World War I, leaving Colony Castle the only remaining historic structure.

On May 2, 1906, a group of East Falls residents decided that the old building at the mouth of the Wissahickon Creek would be the ideal home for a canoe club. The resulting Philadelphia Canoe Club can be found today on the Schuylkill River behind SEPTA's Wissahickon Transfer Depot.

There are two social boat clubs in existence today in East Falls, both located between Ridge Avenue and Kelly Drive above the Falls Bridge. Their affiliated boathouses are on "Boat House Row" at Fairmount Dam on the Schuylkill River.

Undine's social clubhouse was dedicated on May 13, 1876, the twentieth anniversary of the founding of Undine Boat Club. The occasion was celebrated by a large turn-out of members and their friends. The entire party rode upriver to the "Castle Ringsteten," as the clubhouse is called, in the steamer "Gazelle" accompanied by a band. The house and grounds were beautifully illuminated with gaslights and Chinese lanterns, and the rooms decorated with flags.

Bachelor's Boat Club, the oldest active rowing club in the United States, was established on "Boat House Row" in 1853. "The Button," its social clubhouse, was built in East Falls in 1883, and remains in use today for dinners and meetings of club members. The nickname "The Button" acknowledges the proliferation of Bachelor Button blue flowers surrounding the entrance to the building.