

# Italian Fountain Restoration

## History

The Fountain of the Seas Horses was given to the City of Philadelphia by the Italian Government for the Sesquicentennial and is a replica of the *Fontana dei Cavalli Marini* (c. 1740) attributed to Christopher Untenberger in Rome.

The basin of the fountain is 64' in diameter with four sea horses (128" high) in the center representing the four corners of the world.

The inscription carved into the rim of the basin reads, "La Nazione Italiana Alliazione Americana Nel 150 Annuale Della Dichiarazione Indipendenza 1776-1926 To the American Nation Upon the Sesquicentennial Anniversary of the Declaration of Independence 1776-1926." (Note Independence is misspelled in the carving.)

The fountain was shipped to the United States in 79 pieces and assembled on site by Italian craftsmen upon its arrival in 1928.

Comprised of travertine stone, the fountain has not historically held up well in Philadelphia's climate. A natural white stone consisting of calcium carbonate, travertine is primarily quarried at Tivoli, Italy, near Rome. During the current restoration, new travertine stone from Turkey was used.

As early as 1942 the fountain was reported "beyond repair" as an eight foot section had fallen into the basin but by 1954 the fountain had been "restored" and was operational for some unknown period of time. The fountain was again inactive for many years prior to the 1976 Bicentennial due to a leaking basin created by cracks and freeze thaw cycles. In fact, in 1971 the Park Commission voted to demolish the fountain, but with assistance from the Philadelphia Chapter of the Sons of Italy, it was spared and repaired in 1976.

## Project Background

Thirty years later the fountain was again in need of repair and was included as Phase 1 of a 3 phase project to upgrade the landscape and amenities between Boathouse Row and the Fairmount Water Works. By 2006 the fountain was no longer functional due to problems associated with the drainage system.

Prior to restoration, the fountain itself had suffered from numerous issues. There were several areas of complete loss, notably at the tails, where elements had broken off and were missing. Large voids and open joints exist throughout the piece and the major seam holding the primary basin together was missing approximately 75% of its mortar. There was significant loss of original fabric, areas repaired with concrete and the sculpture was stained with black accretions that were streaking down the horse figures. Inappropriate blue and white paint cover some sculpture surfaces and was found covering all the coping stones. There was no plaza and the traffic lane was immediately adjacent to the fountain. Before restoration, the landscaping, consisting of large shrubs, and the grading plan made the fountain completely inaccessible to the public.

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The new design focused on eliminating the physical barriers to fountain, adding the new paving surfaces and seating area and changing the basin grade to make it more in keeping with the original design intent. The landscape was designed to highlight the foundation while framing views to the fountain from the public spaces around it.

The sculpture restoration began with a documentary phase including a 3D Laser Scan and digital photography. In April 2012, the conservation team Materials Conservation Collaborative, working with subcontractors George Young Group safely disassembled the entire foundation, comprising over 40 tons of travertine, and moved it to a secure studio for conservation treatment. We would especially like to congratulate the expert riggers and crane operators who so carefully lifted and maneuvered the fountain components onto flat bed trailers. MCC then proceeded to clean and conserve each individual unit, including the 36 coping stones bearing the inscription in Italian and in English.

Meanwhile, JPC began the site improvements including dismantling the entire fountain walls and basin with the exception of the central core where the main sculptural form rests. A new basin was poured, incorporating new light fixtures, all the fountain plumbing was replaced and new electric was added. The sculpture components were re-installed in May and June of 2013 and then the remaining site improvements, including new permeable brick pavers and new landscaping featuring native plants were added.