

Parks Profile: Dr. Rob Armstrong

By Patty-Pat Kozlowski

Visiting the office of Rob Armstrong, Historic Preservation and Development Specialist for Parks and Recreation, is like stepping into a one-stop peep show for Philadelphia's museums, arts, culture and mostly history. One cannot ignore the artwork, artifacts, magnets, signs and, dare we even say, bric-a-brac all neatly displayed and organized around his workstation desk. Nothing out of place, like an executive 5-star chef having everything *mise en place* in front of his chopping board.

What more do you want from a guy who earned his Ph.d in American History from Lehigh University? The guy who works on projects related to trails and active transportation, historic preservation and park improvements is also the guy who wrote his thesis titled: *Greenspace in the Gritty City 1854-1929*.

1854 was the year our City was consolidated river to river, and 1929 was a time when the Philadelphia City Planning Commission was created and took a lot of power away from the Fairmount Park Commission, who up until that time was using all of its energy and power mainly on the Ben Franklin Parkway and Roosevelt Boulevard.

Which brings us to a very interesting fact about the Boulevard: We know the Boulevard as a multiple traffic lane cluster of chaos that is a last resort to take when I-95 is on fire or a parking lot, but Armstrong tells us that the creation of Roosevelt Boulevard was "a planned parkway linking Hunting Park to Tacony Creek Park to Pennypack Park." He goes on to say that once the Boulevard was developed, Northeast Philadelphia then was planned and it was simply cheaper during the City's survey to save the valleys of Tacony and Pennypack than to grid over it.

The Boulevard was the Park Commission's domain and it ruled on height limits, building development and even restricted gas stations from having advertisements on its property, because again, the Boulevard was parkland. Park Guards patrolled the Boulevard and maintained the medians. "The struggle between people and power was very intense in the 1920s," said Armstrong. "But finally after decades of trying, the demise of the Park Commission happened."

But it's not just in his thesis paper that Dr. Armstrong is exploring and detailing our City's park history. We found an archive of him delivering a talk back in 2011 at the infamous Philly Nerd Nite at MarBar (40th and Walnut Streets) with the intriguing title: "The Whole World Revolves Around Philadelphia: The Great Centennial Exhibition of 1876."

Here's a little teaser on the good Doctor's presentation: *In 1876, Philadelphia was the center of the world as it hosted the first major World's Fair in the United States. The great Centennial Exhibition, officially known as the International Exhibition of Arts, Manufactures and Products of the Soil and Mine,*

PHILADELPHIA
**PARKS &
RECREATION**

took place in Fairmount Park. It was a grand, sprawling Victorian marvel to behold, attracting roughly 10 million visitors between May and November of 1876.

(Editor's note: Can you imagine the special events permit process for this one?)