

# PHILADELPHIA NEIGHBORHOOD RECOVERY TOUR

## TOUR STOP #10: KENSINGTON AND FISHTOWN: IMPROVEMENT PROJECTS FOR VACANT LAND

**CENTRAL LOCATION:** Greensgrow Farm, Cumberland Street between Gaul and Almond Streets

**BOUNDARIES:** Kensington Avenue to the Delaware River and Front Street to Lehigh Avenue

### Introduction

Hundreds of once-unsightly vacant lots improved for a variety of short- and long-term uses, including residential side yards, a garden center, and Greensgrow Farm—a grower of gourmet lettuce produced hydroponically on a former brownfields site.

### Neighborhood Background

#### KENSINGTON

Kensington was the original hub of working-class Philadelphia. Development had first spread along the early roads, such as Germantown and Frankford Avenues, and next to the canals created out of the Cohocksink and Aramingo creeks. Later the railroads spurred the greatest development.

Early 19th-century industries—relatively small in scale—included the making of wagons, glass, and pottery. By mid-century, textile trades dominated the area, in particular carpet making. Big manufacturers were Magee and John Bromley & Sons. Later, hosiery and knitting mills were added to the mixture. In the 1920s, one third of Kensington's work force was making socks, fabrics, scarves, and sweaters. Other industries included meat packing, tanning, and leather working.

#### FISHTOWN

Fishtown, originally within the core of Kensington, evolved over time into a distinct working-class neighborhood bounded by Frankford Avenue on the west, Norris Street on the northeast, and the Delaware River to the south and east. By the 1730s, owners of shipbuilding and repair facilities began moving north from the central city, and within 70 years, maritime trades dominated the community.

In 1830, at the foot of Otis Street (now East Susquehanna Avenue), William Cramp started a business that grew into one of the world's largest manufacturers of iron battleships and commercial boats. William Cramp & Sons Ship and Engine Building Company was a major Philadelphia employer during the city's 19th-century manufacturing boom. (It closed in the 1920s, but reopened temporarily to serve the needs of World War II. The site is now called Riverside Industrial Park.)

After the Civil War, the markets of the western frontier helped spurt Fishtown's industrial and community growth, which peaked between 1880 and 1900. Industries included manufacturers of textiles, furniture, elevators, and sporting goods; foundries for brass and bronze; breweries; and sugar refiners. Nearly two-dozen piers extended along the riverfront, each with its own railroad track carrying substantial amounts of coal, manufacturing supplies, and finished goods.

## **POST-INDUSTRIAL CHANGES**

The residents of Kensington and Fishtown lived in two- and three-story row houses within walking distance of manufacturing jobs. But the number of jobs dropped drastically in the second half of the 20th century. For example, in the Kensington neighborhood, the population declined by more than half (from 32,000 to 15,000). Over 30 years time, 2,000 of Kensington's 8,500 units of housing were demolished. Of the 6,500 that remained, 400 were unoccupied. Nonetheless, the Kensington neighborhood, as well as Fishtown, was relatively stable. Because the initial loss of population had been less severe and less rapid than in some other parts of the city, Kensington and Fishtown had not been victims of the "clean slate" urban-renewal demolition of the 1950s and 60s.

## **Development of the Venture**

In 1985, an organization was established called the New Kensington Community Development Corporation (NKCDC), to improve the combined areas of Kensington and Fishtown (two residential-and-industrial neighborhoods bordering the Delaware River). During its first decade of activity, NKCDC established a good record in rehabilitating vacant buildings, by using neighborhood-driven programs where community members set priorities. During discussions about future goals, neighbors described a need beyond rehabilitation of buildings.

NKCDC learned that many people were particularly concerned about derelict vacant lots scattered across the neighborhood, where—over a period of more than 30 years—abandoned row houses had been demolished. In Kensington, for example, there were 2,000 parcels (out of a total of 8,500) that were empty of housing. Although 900 of them had already been absorbed into the physical fabric of the neighborhood—for example, acquired by residents as side yards or as plots for putting up garages—the remaining 1,000 were still abandoned and unused.

In the mid-1990s, NKCDC launched a community-wide program to enhance vacant land. The goals were to find constructive uses for those parcels and to make plans in consultation with neighborhoods residents. Funding support came from two local foundations, The Pew Charitable Trusts and The William Penn Foundation. Technical assistance came from Philadelphia Green (a program of the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society).

NKCDC partnered with city agencies on long-range problem solving. For example, it encouraged the Department of Licenses and Inspections (L&I) to improve its handling of demolitions. By using more sophisticated cleanup methods, L&I now makes it possible for the community to give a "horticultural" treatment to its vacant lots. This "greening" helps prevent the offense of trash dumping and the spread of weeds.

Additional NKCDC initiatives for improving vacant land include:

- building a garden center (Frankford Avenue at Berk Street) that provides information and advice, serves as a clearing house for donated landscaping materials, and includes a community garden
- creating a side-yard acquisition program, which enables people to obtain abandoned empty parcels that are adjacent to their houses
- "cleaning and greening" more than 350 vacant lots
- developing more than 20 community gardens
- facilitating the creation of a nonprofit enterprise, Greensgrow Farm, to produce gourmet vegetables

Greensgrow Farm is on the three-quarter-acre former site of Boyle's Galvanized Steel plant, demolished in 1988. Contaminated with lead and zinc, the soil was cleaned up in compliance with regulations of the Environmental Protection Agency. However, the two partners who started Greensgrow Farm in 1999 decided it still made public-relations sense to use a hydroponic system, where crops grow in tubs of water or sacks of imported soil. The urban farm's specialty is baby lettuce sold to upscale local restaurants, although founder and still owner, Mary Seton Corboy (her partner has withdrawn from the business), also grows eggplants, onions, radishes, zucchini, artichokes, potatoes, carrots, and 10 kinds of tomatoes. The addition of a greenhouse now makes year-round production possible. Corboy focuses on hiring local residents and, despite the many challenges she has faced (see *A Personal Perspective*), still dreams of starting additional urban farms.

The success of NKCDC shows how a complex issue, in this case the problem of unsightly vacant lots, can be addressed through a combination of innovative ideas and community involvement. To date, more than 50 percent of the vacant land in the two-square-mile area of Kensington and Fishtown has been treated. Public investment is the catalyst, providing for support, planning, and the acquisition and development of property.

- In the book *Neighborhood Recovery*, John Kromer describes the strategy used by the NKCDC for developing and improving vacant land. (Chapter 2, "Advancing the Plan.") [www.neighborhoodrecovery.com](http://www.neighborhoodrecovery.com)
- NKCDC is discussed in *21st-Century Neighborhoods: Assets & Advantages of the Older American City*, a 38-page illustrated booklet available from the Community Design Collaborative (\$8).

- For information about the NKCDC, contact:

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215/427-0350 voice  
215/427-1302 fax  
[www.nkcdc.org](http://www.nkcdc.org)

- For additional background information, contact:

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- For information about Philadelphia Green, contact

Philadelphia Green Public Landscapes  
Pennsylvania Horticultural Society  
100 North 20th Street, 5th Floor  
Philadelphia, PA 19103  
215/988-8800 voice  
215/988-8810 fax  
[www.pennsylvaniahorticulturalsociety.org](http://www.pennsylvaniahorticulturalsociety.org)

- For information about Greensgrow Farm, contact

Greensgrow Philadelphia Project  
2501 East Cumberland Street  
Philadelphia, PA 19125  
215/427-2702  
[www.greengrow.org](http://www.greengrow.org)

## **A Personal Perspective**

### **Comments by Mary Seton Conroy**

Founder  
Greensgrow Farm

This article originally appeared in *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, August 1, 1999, "Community Voices" section.

A letter from my father: "Your mother tells me you are thinking of becoming an inner-city farmer. In the 60s and 70s, many people ran off to Vermont and New Hampshire to live off the land and sell

produce to the people who can't tell the difference between a homegrown tomato and a 28-ounce can of Progresso. Most of these cooks are not working in brokerage houses. Let Archer Daniels Midland take care of supplying food for the masses. Your ancestors came to this country because they hated farming. They became politicians, doctors, dentists, gamblers, and inventors to avoid the earth."

I think my father knew I'd made up my mind and no amount of protestations would keep me from it.

My partner, Tom Sereduk, and I are building an inner-city farm. We're in the middle of our second year growing produce on a former galvanized steel plant in Kensington. We hope to develop a blueprint of technologies, crops, systems, designs, and schedules for building small, for-profit farms that use vacant land and create jobs in decimated neighborhoods.

Philadelphia has more than 1,000 acres of vacant land. Much of it is postindustrial wasteland—abandoned by companies that left behind buildings, contamination, and rubble. There are small parcels and vast tracks—dumping grounds, urban eyesores, reminders, that no one cares. As this land rots, farmland surrounding Philadelphia is turned into golf courses, strip and megamalls, sprawling office complexes and planned communities with six-bathroom houses. Brownfields vs. greenfields.

As the farms disappear, our food source moves farther away and, with each mile produce is grown to be shipped and sold, it becomes more like the carton it is shipped in—sturdy, resilient, and cardboard-tasting.

Over dinner one night, while I bit into a midsummer tomato as hard as a rock, Tom and I wondered why at least the restaurant demand for local produce couldn't be met by the city land available for growing. OK, it isn't pristine, but couldn't the big issues of ground contamination, buried rubble, neighbors, and small parcels be overridden? And weren't we the two to do it?

Tom was a working chef and former plant biologist who wanted to be neither. I was a former chef with a handful of useless degrees, searching for ways to avoid a career path. Somehow we decided that between us we could design, configure, and build a farm, then seed, grow, pick, pack, sell, distribute, market, and deliver our product—a specialty lettuce mix. True, we weren't engineers or carpenters or plumbers, and neither of us had ever actually designed or built anything. True, we only had half a toolbox between us (including a hammer head but no handle). True, neither of us liked detail work (like bookkeeping). True, neither of us had any sales experience. So what? We had an idea. We just needed land and money.

Through the New Kensington Community Development Corporation and John Kromer at the Office of Housing and Community Development, we found land: 100 bucks a month for three-fourths of an acre recently cleaned up by the DPA; no water, electric, or sewage. The Ben Franklin Technology Center, we heard, lent money for "innovative uses of existing technologies."

"Hello, Ben, it's Mary Seton and Tom. Have we got an idea for you."

While we practiced farming in New Jersey, we talked to every person we could think of; and every variation on the urban agriculture theme was plugged into an Internet search until we had enough information to get started.

Tom and I designed a hydroponic (water-based) system, a giant aboveground plumbing apparatus that was water-and-energy efficient. Because it was built above ground, it didn't matter what was in the soil. It was, we thought, the answer to inner-city growing. The neighbors thought otherwise.

To quell the rumors, we held an open-lot meeting. Fifty people came. We told them our plans, showed them a model, and made some promises: We would operate in full view, we would always answer questions, we would test our crops (once a month, we send plant material to Penn State's agriculture analysis lab to test for airborne pollutants), and we would keep our block clean. The neighbors viewed us skeptically, to say the least.

We started from nothing on March 17. By some miracle, we sold our first cases of lettuce on June 1. By July, we were still way behind in building. We constantly ran into plumbing problems; production was off; seedling survival was low. What kept us going was that we sold out of product—100 cases a week loaded into Tom's old Ford Ranger. Weaver's Way bought; Metropolitan Bakery started carrying us. Chefs from restaurants where we couldn't afford to eat were calling.

The neighbors started to come around. One of them, Kevin, told people to mind their own business when they asked about our project. Theresa talked to the mother of some kids who tossed rocks over the fence (we never saw those kids again). Al brought us sodas and jokes he heard on the bus to Atlantic City. Chino from the car-detailing place lent me tools and watched in bemused benevolence. When I went to pick up beer at a local tavern, the guys called out, "Hey, it's the cabbage lady." I could hear my dad's heart start to fibrillate.

Through the summer, Tom and I kept up appearances, but, as in a marriage with a secret, we were struggling. By August we were both ready to quit. We were mentally and physically exhausted. We were barely speaking. We had no money. We were still trying to fix leaks, find ways to automate the system, deal with pests (the bug kind—our product is pesticide free), find time for meetings and sales and answer the constant onslaught of questions from every person who saw our operation for the first time. ("What the hell is that thing?")

Seven days a week we came to work at 7 a.m., and some nights we were packing cases at 9. We were sunburned, filthy and working out of a garage with half a roof and a door that kept getting jammed. On a broiling August afternoon, while Tom was off at his second job trying to make rent money, I sat in a mud puddle next to a broken pump and cried. My father's letter echoed in my head. What exactly did I have to do to become a broker?

Fall came. We had finally finished building the system. With shorter days, the plants slowed down. We slowed down. In the last few days, we leisurely ate our lunch on the lot, soaking up the last of the sun. After we delivered the last cases of lettuce, we drove away, wondering if we'd be back. Tom went back to cooking. I bought lettuce at the store for the first time in sixth months. It had no flavor. I went to the office in my basement, thinking about what Tom and I had done wrong, what we had done right.

Chefs called and asked when we'd be back. I went from saying, "I don't know" to "In the spring." Tom joined me in the basement. We eyed each other, weighing whether we were ready to commit to spending the next 10 months pushing the Sisyphean rock around Kensington. Neither of us had kids or families to support, but we couldn't face another year of working second jobs just to support the basics. We needed money; we needed help. Even if we got both, we knew that it would be another very hard year. We eyed each other again. We started seed—just in case (a toe in the water). We went back to Cumberland Street and took the lock off the gate (a leg in).

Over the winter, I had written a number of grant proposals. I didn't know a grant proposal from a marriage proposal, but I sent them in anyway. People who knew about such things tried not to laugh. I told Tom he had to quit his job. He did. The next day, the first grant came through.

A couple of local foundations decided to support us. We borrowed equipment and begged materials. We built a nursery and rented a trailer (I was tired of running to St. Anne's Senior Center to use the bathroom). We added tomatoes and herbs in a whole new system and built flower beds. When the neighbors went by with friends, we heard, "Oh that's a hydroponic farm." We hired three women from the neighborhood to work with us, single moms who rode their bikes to the farm and first thought the lettuce would look like heads of iceberg when it "grew up."

Halfway through our second season, Tom and I are once again sunburned, exhausted and filthy. The system still leaks. Tom has to seed 20,000 new plants a week (I'm older and have convinced him that it will ruin my eyesight if I have to do it). Kelly Simon still can't tell one lettuce from another; Indora Johnson has taken over my collection of hats, and Elaine Williams can regularly be heard chiding the others when they don't toss a proper red-to-green mixture on packing days. They all claim to hate lettuce and can't believe that Tom and I eat it for lunch every day.

In one of the hottest summers in memory, we still manage to pump out 130 cases a week to the kitchens at Fork, London, Pasion, Fega Grill, Opus 251, and others. Chefs meet their grower face to face; they tell me what they'd like, what they don't want, how they're overworked and underpaid, and that it's hot out. Sounds familiar.

Tom and I know that the feasibility of urban agriculture won't be determined by our project alone. A farmer friend told us that you never want to be first at anything; you have all the problems and the second guy gets all the glory ... and money (ask Bill Gates). Among the things we have learned, though, are that the savings on transportation and land costs from city growing are offset by higher wage taxes, parking tickets, smaller volume and way higher auto-insurance rates; that L&I has no provisions for agriculture; that too many chefs don't know where produce comes from; that farm bugs can find their way into the city easier than suburbanites; that payroll services aren't equipped to deal with agriculture operations, and that sunscreen (large quantities) is not a tax write-off. We'll manage to pay our bills again this year, but we know that we have to find ways to extend the season, increase the yields, and grow things in different systems. Farms aren't built in a year ... or two.

There are many days I'm ready to throw in the towel. The frustration, the workload, the heat, the problems and the paperwork overwhelm me. I have nightmares about forgetting orders and pumps breaking down.

But there are other days.

Days when I turn the corner and see a full city block of bright red lettuces, flowers, and tomatoes where once people left behind car parts and syringes. Days when I see Tom in the nursery having successes with new growing media and hear chefs asking when the tomatoes will be ready, like children wanting to know when the cookies will be done.

Last fall, as we were readying to close down, my father visited. I showed him around, explained the mechanics and design concept, told him how efficient the system was, had him taste all nine varieties we were growing. He didn't say much. But on a visit home this spring, I overheard him explaining to my sisters the photo of the farm I'd brought down: "It's amazing what they've accomplished. Much bigger than I thought. You really should see it." On days like that, I know why I'm an urban farmer-dreamer. Thanks, old man.

## Nearby Points of Interest

### **PENN TREATY PARK**

Beach Street at East Columbia Avenue (off Delaware Avenue)

Within this oasis of greenery is a pylon marking the site of the Great Treaty elm tree, depicted in Benjamin West's 1771 painting Penn's Treaty with the [Lenni-Lenape] Indians. More than a century after the legendary signing, Penn's son, Thomas Penn, commissioned the oil-on-canvas masterpiece. It hangs in Philadelphia's Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. Penn Treaty Park provides excellent views along the Delaware River.

### **MURAL ARTS PROGRAM**

#### **PHILADELPHIA DEPARTMENT OF RECREATION**

[www.muralarts.org](http://www.muralarts.org)

[www.gophila.com/murals](http://www.gophila.com/murals)

215/686-8366

Established in 1984 (initially as an anti-graffiti initiative), the Mural Arts Program has created more than 2,000 painted walls. This extraordinary, nationally recognized program emphasizes collaboration between the artist and the community—resulting in bold, colorful compositions that have altered the architectural landscape of the city and fostered civic pride. In the words of director Jane Golden, the murals "serve to provoke thought, to inspire dreams, to bear witness, and to remind people that they are part of a larger world." In 1996, the program became part of the Philadelphia Department of Recreation. Murals locations near Tour Stop 10 include:

2602 East Dauphin Street (at Almond Street)

#### **ITALIAN LANDSCAPE**

**Artist:** Diane Keller. 1996.

**Notes:** Originally titled *Mountain Vista*, the mural was created using a small garden print from the 1920s as a model. At the neighbors' request, artist Diane Keller added the mountain. The wall of the building was particularly crusty; Keller had to spray paint a base "underpainting" and then layer color on top.

**Sponsor:** Philadelphia Green.

Frankford and East Susquehanna Avenues

**THE MUSIC MURAL**

**Artist:** Barbara Smolen. 1999.

**Notes:** This parcel was one of the first to be “cleaned and greened” as part of the community-wide program in Kensington and Fishtown to enhance vacant land. The mural beautifies the party wall that once separated the extant row house from the now-demolished end house. It was a collaboration between the artist Barbara Smolen and a composer, Tina Davidson. Each conducted a month-long workshop (mural making and music composition) with a 3rd-grade class at nearby Hackett Elementary School. The musical notes of Davidson’s composition are incorporated into the mural. The students helped paint the mural, sang the song at the dedication, where they ate a cake frosted with a picture of the mural. Smolen says, “You can’t ‘see’ music,” so she made the design an abstract, but she worked with the jagged outline of the house and used colors found in the neighborhood. “Music and art convey community,” Smolen observes.

**Sponsor:** The Philadelphia Foundation.

2144 East Arizona Street (at Trenton Street)

**TROPICAL LANDSCAPE**

**Artist:** Diane Keller. 1999.

**Notes:** To create the design for this mural, Diane Keller made a collage of pictures from various sources, including an illustrated dictionary, used for making the undersea animals.

**Sponsor:** Pennsylvania Horticultural Society.

## Directions

### TO KENSINGTON AND FISHTOWN

Greensgrow Farm, Cumberland Street between Gaul and Almond Streets

### FROM BEGINNING POINT

READING TERMINAL

12th and Market Streets

**By Car:** East on Market Street (away from City Hall). Left onto 5th Street. Right onto Race Street. Left onto Columbus Boulevard, which becomes Delaware Avenue. At Interstate 95 overpass, bear Left onto Aramingo Avenue. Turn Left onto Huntingdon Street. Turn Left onto Gaul Street to Cumberland Street.

**By Mass Transit:** SEPTA Market-Frankford El (“blue line”) east toward Frankford. Board at 13th and Market Streets. If rush hour, take B train only. Get off at York-Dauphin stop. Board SEPTA bus #39 eastbound toward Richmond Street. Get off at Gaul and Cumberland Streets.

Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority Information line:

215/580-7800

[www.septa.org](http://www.septa.org)

### FROM PRECEDING TOUR STOP

CARIBE DEVELOPMENT ZONE

100-Block West Allegheny Avenue

(at 2nd Street)

**By Car:** West on West Allegheny Avenue. Left onto Mascher Street. Left onto Cumberland Street. (Cumberland Street bears Right crossing Kensington Avenue.) Right onto Gaul Street.