

POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Responsible GOVERNMENT

Gifts everyone can enjoy at Christmas

My wife Frances and I greeted the first snowfall of the season this past weekend by walking amidst the downy flakes from our Chestnut Street home to Hanover Street and then south four blocks to Riverfront Park.

The pathway through the park was serenely beautiful, with trees draped in white on either side and the abundant waters of the Schuylkill River flowing swiftly nearby.

It is always something of a wonder to enjoy this pristine woodlands just a stone's throw from downtown Pottstown, and to be able (on a warmer day, perhaps) to walk west on the path to Birdsboro and beyond, sheltered by woodlands, farm fields, and the ever-present river.

The person I associate most with Riverfront Park is Tom Harwood, our former borough manager, who died a year ago this month. Harwood was assistant borough manager in 1976 when a study team from the Urban Land Institute first suggested a park along the Schuylkill. When Harwood became borough manager in 1985, he made creation of the park a top priority and found the funding to do it.

The park is one of many gifts to Pottstown that is especially wondrous on a snowy day at Christmastime. Let's look at a few others:

Continuing our walk, we crossed the pedestrian bridge over the Manatawny Creek and turned north from the park to see another Harwood legacy: the Montgomery County Community College West Campus on College Drive.

As borough manager, Harwood was the legman for the community-wide effort to bring the college campus to Pottstown, but a lot of other people and institutions were also involved, from The Mercury to the Hill School, from then-Mayor Barry Robertson to Republican leader Joe Cain, who was Pottstown's representative on the community college board and the first person to promote the Pottstown campus idea. Cain died two months ago, but the college campus lives on.

Frances and I continued our walk past the main college building and through the pedestrian underpass to the former Nittany warehouse on High Street, now a

magnificent college classroom building, marked by bright red Montco banners hanging from poles along the street.

It's hard to believe this marvelous old brick structure was once a Superfund site filled with drums of toxic chemicals, but developer Gary Silvi had the vision and the persistence to restore the building and sell the college trustees on the idea of extending the campus north to High Street. I well remember Silvi carrying about a photo of a pedestrian underpass in New York's Central Park to demonstrate that a similar underpass could be viable here.

Crossing High Street, we walked past the future office of the Pottstown Parks and Recreation Department, and the future home of the Carousel at Pottstown, to King Street and beyond to our newly rehabilitated Memorial Park. Former parks director John Reber helped the community develop a park master plan and find grant money to reconstruct the playing fields and build the lovely pathway north along Manatawny Creek to the Memorial Park Island.

Memorial Park is treasured by all, but few can remember when or how it was created many generations ago. The names of those involved are lost to the public, but their achievement is not.

And as we continued our walk back home, past the lovely historic homes and stately churches of downtown Pottstown, we gratefully enjoyed the handiwork of countless unknown Pottstonians who designed and built them a century or so ago.

Our ancestors created many wonderful works of art, but the ones that affect us most are those we can enjoy every day. Our parks and buildings are a proud part of our heritage, precious gifts handed down from one generation to another.

They enrich our lives and give our town its sense of place and identity.

Later this week, thousands of area residents will happily unwrap presents under the Christmas tree. Delightful — but the best gifts are those we can all enjoy.

This column expresses the personal views of Tom Hylton and does not represent the views of any public or private organization with which he is affiliated.



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