One of the smallest and most easily overlooked neighborhoods in Philadelphia is Squirrel Hill, a subsection of the Cedar Park neighborhood bounded by 46th Street in the east, 49th Street in the west, Springfield Avenue in the north and Kingsessing Avenue in the south, three blocks west of Clark Park. Despite its small size, Squirrel Hill is as reflective of the historical development of this area of West Philadelphia as any larger neighborhood.

**The History of Squirrel Hill**

Until at least the 1880's, much of the Squirrel Hill neighborhood was still farmland, as well as an oft-traveled route between country and city for millworkers and farmers bringing food into Philadelphia.

The first recorded residence within the boundaries of Squirrel Hill was the Twaddell Estate, a mansion which stood on Baltimore Avenue from what is now 46th Street almost all the way to 51st Street. The Twaddells, members of the high society back in Great Britain, came to America during the colonial era. James Twaddell started one of the first powder mills along the Schuylkill River, establishing the family’s estate at this site in 1817. His grandson, John H. Twaddell, went on to become a famous hotel owner and manager in the suburb of Royersford.

Unlike many wealthy West Philadelphia landowners at the time, the Twaddells did not divvy up their estate for profitable private development. In fact, according to Rosenthal’s 1963 history of the region, “the mansion remains within the memory of many
now yet alive,” meaning the demolition of the estate may not have occurred until well into the twentieth century.

The residential development of the rest of Squirrel Hill followed the same pattern as Cedar Park. An electrified trolley line was built that ran down Chester Avenue — the center of Squirrel Hill — in the late 19th Century, prompting a flurry of development beginning at the 49th Street station stop. The trolley tracks are still in use today; Squirrel Hill is serviced by Route 13, the Yeadon line.

Development in the area was taken on by several different developers, all of whom built large “Queen Anne”-style Victorian homes, mostly two units to a house. In order to create a sense of asymmetry, builders often made each unit of a house slightly different than its neighbor, by switching the position of the chimney, the main entrance, or otherwise. These strategies offered the homes the appearance of single family dwellings, a technique that made them attractive to better-off middle-class homebuyers. Nearly all of these duplexes in Squirrel Hill are still standing today.

There were some variations in architecture in the neighborhood, and the corner of 48th and Springfield is a perfect place to find them. On the northwest corner of the intersection is a giant stone mansion, which in the early 20th century became the residence of the local Methodist bishop. The stone building is still standing, now serving as a bed and breakfast called The Castle. It is one of at least three bed and breakfasts within Squirrel Hill, the others being The Gables at 46th and Chester and The Carriage House and 46th and Springfield.

Squirrel Hill, while almost entirely two family homes, had some notable exceptions throughout its history. For example, in the late 19th century, 47th Street below
Chester was actually a bustling commercial district, where local suburban residents would come to buy goods from farmers from the countryside and merchants from Philadelphia proper. There is no evidence of this market left today, but several corner stores have sprung up in the area. There are also several well-kept apartment buildings scattered among the single homes.

The most striking landmark of Squirrel Hill, though, has not yet been mentioned. Visible from any part of the neighborhood is the great golden Byzantine dome of St. Francis de Sales, a Roman Catholic Church on Springfield between 46th and 47th. St. Francis Church was built in 1907 by Henry Dagit, a local Church architect whose firm is still in existence today, in order to accommodate the booming population around the trolley line at the turn of the century. The church sits at the peak of the incline for which Squirrel Hill is named, giving it an impressive aura of command over the neighborhood.

**Squirrel Hill and St. Francis de Sales**

St. Francis de Sales is not just the physically dominant structure in Squirrel Hill; it is also a center of community involvement and activity. The grand interior of the church, last redesigned in 1968, is host to thirteen masses a week and has become a rallying point for immigrants to the neighborhood. An article last year from the Catholic Standard Times tells the story of Kuderha Mashanda, who was stuck in the war-torn Congo with ten of his children for three years after his wife had managed to flee to America. Last year, Kuderha and his children finally managed to escape the Congo and join his wife in the St. Francis parish. This diversity of the St. Francis de Sales community is evident in many other ways as well. A photo of Boy Scout Troop 152 — based out of St. Francis de Sales — features scouts of nearly every race and color.
Troop 152 was started in 1948 by the Father John Sefton, then pastor of St. Francis de Sales. Fed up with the St. Francis de Sales Battalion, which did not allow the boys who were members of it participate in the Penn relays, Father Sefton kicked the Battalion out and began a Boy Scout troop to replace it.

St. Francis is also home to a Catholic parochial school, which currently has 506 students in grades K-8. More than 86 percent of the student body there is black, and less than 5 percent are white. The school features after-school programs and adult education classes in addition to serving as a Catholic school to neighborhood residents.

The attachment of the Squirrel Hill neighborhood to St. Francis is clear after only a cursory view of the neighborhood. Lawn signs advertising the upcoming parish mission at St. Francis are posted outside the homes of many in the neighborhood. While Squirrel Hill is only a small part of St. Francis’ cachement area, it seems clear that the residents of this neighborhood take full advantage of what the church has to offer them.

**The Recent Past of Squirrel Hill**

Besides somewhat arbitraliy defined borders, there is little to signify Squirrel Hill as a neighborhood in itself. Some residents who live within its borders even make a point of ignoring the Squirrel Hill designation, opting instead to be known as living in Cedar Park. The preference by these residents to consider themselves part of the larger, more active neighborhood community makes sense, when one considers the relative lack of uniqueness or autonomy of the neighborhood. Many residents are fed up with the Squirrel Hill Community Association, who have been relatively inactive in recent years. To their credit, the SHCA was instrumental in bringing a Philadelphia Police Substation to the neighborhood almost a decade ago, a substation that has been lauded as a model of
community-police collaboration for neighborhoods around the country. Today, the substation is one of only two markers that let visitors know they are in Squirrel Hill.

The second indication that one is in Squirrel Hill is the source of much of the frustration among the neighborhood’s critics. Squirrel Hill Falls Park, an open-air theater on the corner of 48th and Chester, was first conceived in 1986 by the SHCA and its founder, artist Danielle Rousseau Hunter. Hunter designed the park, complete with a solar-powered waterfall, but was not able to complete it until a decade later. In the meantime, Hunter had stormed out on the SHCA, her own organization, after community leaders had demanded details on the financing of the project. When the park finally opened in 1997, the community raised questions about just how public the theater would be. In fact, the park is locked except during performances, which one resident claims only take place “about ten” times per year. Moreover, as many in the SHCA feared at the time of its conception, the park has proved too elaborate to maintain effectively. The solar powered waterfall is no longer running, and the park has fallen into disrepair. While few would question whether or not the green space was better than the empty lot that stood in the area before it, for many Squirrel Hill Falls Park has proven to be more of a headache than an asset to the neighborhood.

The rest of Squirrel Hill is delightful, however. No homes in the area showed signs of excessive disrepair, and the trolley line running down Chester Ave. is well-maintained. There are signs throughout the area of new renovations, fresh painting, and other residential improvements, heartening indicators that people have put down roots in the neighborhood. To the north, the Baltimore Avenue commercial corridor is active, home to several restaurants that drive the economy of the street. Recently, locals have
been mourning the loss of Soloman Amare, owner of Dahlak restaurant and by all accounts a community and civic leader among business owners on Baltimore.

**Conclusion**

Despite its disputed validity as an actual West Philadelphia neighborhood, Squirrel Hill has a history of its own, even if its just the tale of an ill-fated park. When the biggest trouble a neighborhood has is a skirmish over a park, though, they must be doing something right. The creation of the police substation was truly a boon to the neighborhood, leading to nightly bicycle patrols and giving local residents who want to keep Squirrel Hill safe a place to volunteer and help do just that. Judging by the green and inviting nature of Squirrel Hill, the substation has succeeding in its mission.

It is easy to think that all the land west of Penn’s immediate neighborhood is economically depressed and dangerous, but this simply isn’t the case. Squirrel Hill is a prime example of a quiet, colorful, diverse neighborhood where homes are kept in excellent condition, landmarks are cherished, and people really care about the neighborhood they live in. Before looking around Squirrel Hill, the idea of a bed and breakfast in West Philadelphia would have seemed like a joke to me. In this safe, green neighborhood, though, among grand Victorian homes, Byzantine churches, and trees everywhere, it makes perfect sense.