

RAVENHILL
(Weightman Estate)
(Ravenhill Academy)
3480 West School House Lane
Philadelphia
Philadelphia County
Pennsylvania

HALS PA-16
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WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN LANDSCAPES SURVEY
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20240-0001

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HALS NO. PA-16

- Location:** 3480 West School House Lane, Philadelphia, Philadelphia County, Pennsylvania 40.02354,-75.19067 (Center of site, Google Earth, Simple Cylindrical Projection, WGS84).
- Significance:** Ravenhill's significance comes from both its use as a residential retreat and as a private school. As a residence it was the home of one of Philadelphia's most prominent chemical manufacturers, who played a significant role in the Union war effort during the American Civil War. As a private school, it educated many generations of girls, most famously, Grace Kelly, future Princess of Monaco.
- Description:** Ravenhill (Weightman Estate, Ravenhill Academy) is located on West School House Lane in the East Falls neighborhood of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. This former residential estate has been in institutional use since 1919 and is currently owned and operated by Philadelphia University. Today the site has been greatly expanded, including both the Weightman and Powers Estates. The site has changed significantly over the years and very few of its original landscape features remain. Gardens, greenhouses, a cemetery, and agricultural fields have all been replaced by asphalt parking areas and manicured grass athletic fields. Concrete pathways wind throughout the site, connecting the eight buildings of the property together and to the greater Philadelphia University campus. Modern street lighting and furniture has been added to the site, reflecting its current usage. The curved drive from School House Lane is asphalt paved, with smaller driveways branching off towards the buildings and parking areas. Mature trees remain throughout the site, concentrated most heavily along the front drive and on the front lawn, although others can be found scattered throughout the site.
- History:** Ravenhill was first developed in 1802, with the construction of a manor house and gardens for William Allison, later passing through several owners until 1849 when it was bought at a sheriff's sale to four men, including William Weightman, a Philadelphia chemical manufacturer known as the "Quinine King" for his introduction of the remedy to the United States.¹ Over the next four years, the three other men all sold their shares to William Weightman, who took complete control of the property. During his time as owner of Ravenhill, Weightman expanded the house to its current size and configuration in 1886 and invested heavily in the cultivation of its grounds. By 1900, Weightman had hired John McCleary as a full-time gardener, who moved into the Gardener's Cottage

¹ Garrison, James B. *Houses of Philadelphia: Chestnut Hill and the Wissahickon Valley 1880-1930*. (New York: Acanthus Press LLC, 2008). 51-55.

with his family and staff. Mr. McCleary was in charge of maintaining the seventy-five acre estate's lawns, vegetable and flower gardens, and greenhouses. He cultivated many different types of plants, having oleanders and azaleas as early as the 1850s. By the time of McCleary's employment there were seventeen greenhouses on site, including one devoted to ferns, one to palms, and two to chrysanthemums. The estate was mentioned in many publications from the time and won many horticultural awards. Massive trees were planted throughout the site, and exotic plants along the driveway to School House Lane.²

Following Weightman's death in 1904, the property was inherited by his daughter, Anne Marie Weightman Walker (after 1913, Anne Penfield) who owned the site until 1919, when she donated the seven acres of the estate, including the greenhouses, Gardener's Cottage, carriage house, and fully-furnished mansion to the Archbishop of Philadelphia.³ In October of 1919, Mother Agnes Marguerite and three sisters of the Congregation of the Assumption arrived at Ravenhill to open the order's first North American school for girls. Significant changes to the landscape began in the 1931 with the construction of the Convent (now Mott Hall), a three-story Gothic Revival building directly adjacent to the mansion. In 1938 the landscape was altered again by the construction of St. Eugenia's Chapel (now Ravenhill Chapel), which required the terracing of the sloping site to accommodate the new building and an extension of the estate's driveway in order to loop around in front of the building. The driveway would be altered again after the purchase of the Powers Estate, whose driveway was connected to Ravenhill's driveway in order to create the semicircular drive seen today.⁴ The mansion's front lawn and its mature trees remained unchanged during its ownership by the Academy, which used the open space for festivals. Behind the buildings were several new gardens, including a grotto aligned with the mansion's rear entrance, a garden dedicated to St. Francis, a rose garden, and a cemetery separated from the rest of the gardens by a hedgerow. Further behind the buildings were agricultural fields including a cow pasture, chicken coops, and later a tennis court for the school. The site was also the home of the Von Trapp family of Austria for a short time.

In 1980, the vacant site was acquired by the nearby Philadelphia College of Textiles and Science (now Philadelphia University), which renovated and outfitted the campus for use as dormitory and classroom space for the University, completing its projects in fifteen weeks. Following the University's acquisition of the site, the grounds were altered significantly, with the

² Breiner, Dr. David M., "History and Significance of 11 Campus Sites." Philadelphia University Campus Heritage Project. (Philadelphia University: 2005-06). 52.

³ Breiner, 53.

⁴ Mattison, Susan. "Landscape Report." Philadelphia University Campus Heritage Project. (Philadelphia University: 2005-06). 5.

conversion of the agricultural fields to athletic fields, the conversion of the gardens to parking lots, and the moving of the cemetery off site. The addition of new concrete pathways and institutional lighting and street furniture also changed the look of the site into its current arrangement.⁵

Sources: Breiner, Dr. David. *Philadelphia University Campus Heritage Project: History and Significance of 11 Campus Sites*. Philadelphia: Philadelphia University, 2005.

Garrison, James B. *Houses of Philadelphia: Chestnut Hill and the Wissahickon Valley 1880-1930*. New York, NY: Acanthus Press LLC, 2008.

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⁵ Mattison, Susan. 4-7.