

# SPATIAL STORIES OF SUSTAINABILITY

The Women Building Philadelphia's Green  
Spaces





This report was researched and written by Elizabeth Riedman, PhD candidate in the Department of Geography and Urban Studies. The research and writing for this report were under the supervision of faculty mentor Dr. Hamil Pearsall.

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Graduate Research Award  
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# **Spatial Stories of Sustainability: The Women Building Philadelphia's Green Spaces**

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*Graduate Research Award Sustainability Program recipient, 2022*

Philadelphia, PA has a long history of urban greening initiatives, although less is known about those who have contributed to these projects, in particular the volunteer work of women. The work of feminist and Black geographers provides us with a way to find 'spatial stories' that actively reveal what is often suppressed, what Katherine McKittrick's defines as "the connections, across the seeable and unseeable, the geographic and the seemingly un-geographic, and the struggles that indicate that the material world is assessed and produced by subaltern communities" (2006, p. 13). With this in mind, this project aims to collect and highlight the 'spatial stories' of women volunteers in Philadelphia, in order to understand the role of nontraditional 'labor' in the construction of urban green spaces, both today and in the past. This map below, combined with memories, experiences and photographs, works to visualize the often 'invisible' labor that women often contribute to both the homespace and beyond. Collected as part of my dissertation research in the department of Geography and Urban Studies at Temple University, I hope to build upon feminist historical accounts to shed light on the work that goes into greening our cities.

Over the course of one of the hottest summers Philadelphia has yet to experience, I set out to collect the stories of ten women who have worked throughout their lifetime to build and maintain a range of green spaces in the city. Collectively, these women have planted trees, organized greening community groups, founded urban gardens and school gardening clubs, saved parks from becoming parking lots, and led tree-planting initiatives throughout the city. Many of these women were involved in multiple initiatives simultaneously, most of which were volunteer-based. They contributed significant time, labor, and organizational skills to these green projects, while balancing full-time jobs or home responsibilities.

This StoryMap “Spatial Stories of Sustainability: The women building Philadelphia’s green spaces” offers snippets of their experiences:



*The aim of this project was to expand the public’s understanding of gendered labor that has contributed to the establishment and growth of Philadelphia’s green spaces. It works to contribute to traditional archival accounts in adding a focus on gender, revealing the often-hidden identities of women philanthropists, garden club leaders and landscape architects. In conducting oral histories and creating a forward-facing StoryMap, this project emphasizes the importance of adding diverse accounts to the archive.*



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