1. Introduction

Welcome to Glen Foerd on the Delaware! Glen Foerd is a historic riverfront estate and public park offering experiences that foster creativity, innovation, and an appreciation of the natural world.
The establishment of the Glen Foerd estate in 1850 seeded the development of the Torresdale neighborhood where we are today. Within a few short decades after the house was built, this site transitioned from a remote retreat for wealthy Philadelphians to a showcase of industrial wealth, complete with a farm, an art collection, and an abundance of architectural and horticultural treasures.

This self-guided tour will take you around the grounds of Glen Foerd, and finish inside the mansion. Please note that the mansion is currently closed due to COVID-19, but our grounds remain open to the public. We appreciate your commitment to practicing safe physical distancing on this self-guided tour! Stopping at twelve points of interest along the way, you’ll learn about the different structures within the landscape, the empire that built this estate, and its relationship with wider trends in design, horticulture, art, and entrepreneurship.

Glen Foerd is listed on the National Register of Historic Places, and its grounds qualify as a historic arboretum. The preservation of the site relies on grant funding and generous supporters of the Glen Foerd Conservation Corporation. Thank you for telling your community about Glen Foerd!

2. Riverfront

Glen Foerd is located on a high bluff at the confluence of the tidal Delaware River and the Poquessing Creek. The meeting place of the creek and river provides a rich habitat where birds, fish, reptiles and mammals thrive. The surrounding Delaware River Watershed was the land of the Unami Delaware tribe before European contact, and this specific site was likely a prime location for native Lenape people to hunt and fish before new settlers came to the area.

Attracted to the ports and the fertile soils in the region, the Swedish were among the first to settle in the Poquessing Creek area. English settlers began to inhabit the area after William Penn's surveyors arrived. Penn originally selected the lower portion of the Poquessing creek for his city before deciding on the land a few miles south, where Philadelphia stands today. For many years, this area was known as "Old Philadelphia."

Retreating from the city to hunt, fish, and enjoy natural beauty was already a practice on this site before Glen Foerd was built. Prior to Charles Macalester's land purchase in 1850, this area was owned by John Risdon, who ran the Robin Hood Hotel. Many wealthy gentlemen would go there to fish, sail and shoot game. The hotel even had its own casino, so guests could gamble here too.

At that time, the Delaware River was particularly famous for its shad fish. These fish were both wild-caught and, by the nineteenth century, cultivated at fisheries. You may have visited the historic shad fishery at Pleasant Hill Park, just south of Glen Foerd. Shad fish and oysters were both plentiful here in the 1800s, before pollution from industry and sewage eradicated their populations.
The boat house serves as a reminder of the prominence of river transportation until the development of State Road in the late 1800s and railroad service from Center City. Guests of the Robin Hood Hotel came by ferry, and eventually, excursion steamships. Most people traveling to Glen Foerd in its early days would have arrived by river transportation as well. The boat house has largely been reconstructed, but stands on its original foundation. The first boat house was unfortunately vandalized by fire in the 1980s.

Other prominent features of the riverfront include the historic gazebo and a statue of the original owners’ beloved dog, Little Ugly, who is buried nearby.

3. Mansion

Glen Foerd, originally known as Glengarry, was built as an Italianate country house in the mid 1800s. In this period, high profits of the owning class allowed them to build private getaways where they could escape the hustle and bustle of the urban center and assert their social standing through impressive design. Glen Foerd was constructed for Charles Macalester, a wealthy financier who purchased considerable acreage bordered by the Delaware River. Macalester not only created his own estate on his acquired land, but built several homes for relatives and other prominent Philadelphians to reside or retreat, establishing the area of Torresdale. Torresdale and Glengarry were named to pay homage to Macalester’s heritage, their namesakes both ancestral homes in Scotland.

The house was enlarged in 1902 after being purchased by the Foederer family. At that point, the estate was renamed “Glen Foerd” to represent both periods of ownership. The interiors were especially transformed with elaborate details, which you can see later in the tour. Smaller adaptations to the house and grounds continued for several years.

Italianate features of the house include the hipped roof and ornamental brackets. You can still conjure the house’s exterior in its original state: Imagine a wrap-around porch encircling the central three-story structure, with the north wing removed, and a cupola at the center of the roof.

3. Gas House (Private Residence -- Please do not disturb)

Glen Foerd’s first owner constructed this building as a "gas house" to fuel his own house as well as the surrounding residences in the Torresdale community. Gas for the buildings was manufactured every Monday and stored here until used. By 1903 with the introduction of electricity, gas was no longer needed for illuminating households. At that point, this structure was converted to a boathouse, and in 1915 it was redesigned as a Swiss chalet to be used as a residence or guest house. Please be respectful of the current residents while touring the grounds.
Across the road, you’ll see our twenty-plot community garden, where our neighbors rent space for growing their own vegetables.

4. Water Tower

In the 19th century, this stone water tower supported a large wooden tank, which held enough water for the Glen Foerd estate as well as some neighboring homes. Water was pumped up to the tank by a steam pump. After the tank was removed, it served as an observation tower, and is in need of much repair.

Macalester, the original owner of Glen Foerd, was a resourceful man and successful financier. When he purchased the 84 acres of land he named Torresdale, Macalester divided it into several plots and called upon relatives and peers to settle in the area. The water tower and gas house served not only the Macalester’s estate, but the surrounding homes as well. Other residents could purchase water and gas from Macalester, making Torresdale an attractive enclave. Even a mayor, Edwin Fitler—after whom Philadelphia’s Fitler Square and Torresdale’s Fitler Street are named—joined the community.

North of the tower and across the Poquessing Creek, you’ll see an apartment complex. That land was once part of another entrepreneurial endeavor at Glen Foerd: the farm. Glen Foerd’s Foerderer family was deeply enthusiastic about business and product performance, as were their in-laws, the Tonners. The Foerderers were renowned for their leather company, Vici Kid, which used revolutionary techniques in the tanning process. The Tonners were hosiery moguls. Glen Foerd Farms was the brainchild of William Tonner, husband of Florence Foerderer Tonner. The claim to fame for the farm was its award-winning Ayrshire cattle and milk. You can learn more about both of these businesses at the Rathskeller tour stop.

5. Carriage House

Built in 1898, the carriage house still has many of the features needed for horse-drawn carriages and related tack. Its stalls, feed bins, and manual elevator remain. Shortly after it was built, the structure also served as a garage and a storage space. Today it houses the boat shop for Glen Foerd’s partners, Philadelphia Waterborne. Philadelphia Waterborne brings structured boat-building programs directly to local high schools and middle schools. This engaged learning program is designed to demonstrate the crucial importance of the arts in supporting successful student educational outcomes.

Just northeast of the carriage house, you’ll see remains of two grass tennis courts, bordered by brick walls and pillars. These courts provided year round entertainment. In the winter months, the Foerderers would flood them for ice skating.
6. Gate House  (Private Residence -- Please do not disturb)

The stone portion of the Gate House was erected in about 1820, making it the oldest structure on the estate. The wooden addition at the rear was added much later. Caretakers of the property have lived here in the past. The Gate House is now a private residence, and occasionally is available for rent! Please do not disturb the Gate House.

7. Grounds

During the Gilded Age, new fortunes in the United States made it possible for wealthy city-dwellers to commission extravagant country estates with picturesque grounds. Glen Foerd’s landscape design reflects styles of the Country Place era, which gained popularity in the late 1800s as a result of economic change and pervasive interest in the benefits of natural environments. Remote scenery and fresh air were widely believed to promote moral and physical well-being. Popular sentiments for the natural world grew with the rise of romanticism in painting and literature, while similar perspectives influenced architectural thought and urban planning.

The availability of attractive land and professionalized landscape architects facilitated the development of extravagant residential grounds across the east coast. Influenced by widespread manuals on style and large-scale global exhibitions, Country Place Era landscapes share a common aesthetic language emulating European designs and designating specific zones for different plants. Check out the Rose Garden to learn more.

Several structures that once stood on the grounds of Glen Foerd have been removed since the early 1900s. Southeast of the house, the original owners had a series of large greenhouses for the cultivation of warm-weather plants. A small residence from the Macalester era of ownership once stood at the position of the lily pond, which is emptied but still remains just south of the house. The Foederers razed the small house and installed the lily pond, which featured beautiful water plants, a fountain, and figure sculptures that are now stored away.

In the springtime, Glen Foerd’s grounds bloom with roses, azaleas, daffodils, and hyacinth. Year round you can also find historic shrubs and many mature trees. The estate’s heritage trees include cucumber magnolia, sargent weeping hemlock, little leaf linden, fullmoon maple and a weeping japanese pagoda tree.

8. Garden House & Rose Garden

The garden house that faces the Rose Garden was the head house of five large greenhouses erected by the original owner of Glen Foerd. The greenhouses were altered with new ownership and dismantled entirely by the late 1920s, allowing the rose garden more
prominence. At that point, the garden house became a playhouse for the children who lived at the estate, and today it houses gardening supplies.

The rose garden was part of a major redesign of the grounds by Thomas Sears and James Bush-Brown, notable landscape architects. Adjacent to the rose garden, you’ll see two rows of dogwoods: this is the dogwood allee. The trellis of the rose garden is original, and some of the roses that you see are surviving historic plantings. The hollies and dogwoods in the dogwood allee are also partly historic. The Sears and Bush-Brown design also included the many paths and terraces that you’ll see wandering through the grounds. These feature largely remain intact, but are in need of restoration.

9. Interior Features

The mansion’s 1902 renovation entailed a substantial expansion, adding the northern wing of the house, while incorporating opulent detailing through every room. The monumental staircase is the heart of the house, flanked by ionic columns. Throughout the first two floors you’ll find impressive molding, ornamental plaster ceilings, parquet floors with mahogany borders, and a series of leaded glass skylights with intricate patterns.

The Haskell pipe-organ, while in need of repair, is one of Glen Foerd’s rare treasures. Embedded into the central staircase, the organ could be played from the stair landing. Its size is unique for a residence and exemplifies a revolutionary turn-of-the-century design. William Edward Haskell patented a way to consolidate low-tone pipes without sacrificing sound quality, making it possible to install an organ like this one into a residential space rather than a church. The organ has fourteen sets of pipes and a mechanized auto-play system, a unique feature. Glen Foerd hopes to eventually repair the organ to its former glory.

10. Rathskeller

In the basement of the mansion you’ll find a room that best reflects the second owner’s German heritage, the Rathskeller, which translates to “council’s chamber”. Rathkellers were historically bar and restaurant establishments found in the basements of city halls throughout Germany. The Foerderer family used this room for playing billiards and card games. You’ll notice some sparkle in the green walls and ceilings, which was achieved by grinding mica into the paint. You’ll also find several trophies displaying the prominence of Glen Foerd Farms, which produced award-winning Scottish Ayrshire cattle and milk.

As demonstrated by the custom Rathskellar design and Glen Foerd’s commemorative Scottish name, it’s clear that the owners of the estate felt connected to their heritage as first and second generation Americans. The businesses that financed this estate also depended on immigrant labor. The Foerderer’s leather company, Vici Kid, as well as Glen Foerd Farms, both employed new Americans from around the world.
Throughout the late 1800s, industrialization fueled the need for more labor, while more shipping lines, faster ships and lower travel costs made transoceanic travel easier than ever before. As cities like Detroit and Pittsburgh attracted large masses of immigrants and others to work for a small number of large dominant firms, Philadelphia was defined by its generally diverse, small-scale enterprises and workshops that often required employees with special skills. The city’s reserve of specialized labor drew many entrepreneurs, like Robert Foerderer, to start American plants here, where he had access to interindustry connections that could improve his leather products. Chemists Rohm and Haas, another local, German entrepreneurial team, developed a special chemical product for leather tanning that Foerderer harnessed into a revolutionary production process. At the time that Vici Kid was in business, Philadelphia held the nation’s largest concentration of leather works. Leather was one industry that did demand unskilled labor for production, unlike textiles and other dominant workshop industries in Philadelphia. This meant that factories like Vici Kid drew in many employees who could not find work elsewhere. Many of Foerderer’s 1000 local employees were Polish immigrants, who settled near the Vici Kid factory in the Philadelphia neighborhoods of Bridesburg and Port Richmond.

### 11. Servants’ Staircase

Contrasting the grandeur of the open-air monumental staircase, this staircase is tight and tucked away. The owners of Glen Foerd employed several domestic workers who used this staircase to navigate the house, the majority of whom were not born in the United States. One exception was Arthur Laws, an African American butler, who received considerably less pay than his white coworkers despite holding a much higher rank in the household team.

At the turn of the century, factory jobs were generally preferred over domestic trades by white, American-born workers who had more selective privilege than immigrants and African Americans. The Foederers, the second owners of Glen Foerd, employed a few Irish folks along with several Swedes and had a French butler before Arthur Laws was hired in 1908.

Laws was a dedicated worker who spent almost all of his time at Glen Foerd, while his children and wife lived in a house they owned in North Philly. Stories from his descendants make note of his occasional visits home, when wore his fine butler’s uniform, livery he wore at Glen Foerd, set the table with fresh flowers, and treat his own family with all the elegance as he would at Glen Foerd. Arthur and his wife Mary died by the time his children were teenagers, after which point the Foerderer family paid for their care and education. Descendants of Arthur Laws still visit the Mansion today.

### 12. Art Gallery

Like the establishment of a prominent country estate, collecting art was another way that the upper class enjoyed demonstrating their stature and wealth in the Gilded Age. What makes this
period distinct is the tendency to build eclectic collections of work from a variety of periods and origins. Wealthy Americans, like the Foederer family who expanded Glen Foerd at the turn of the century, had access through travel and trade to art from around the world, and the financial power to acquire it.

In the late 1800s, eclectic collecting required serious study to achieve a harmony of diverse elements between architecture, fine art and the decorative arts. Rigorous eclecticism expressed thoughtful diversity, rather than a hodge-podge of things. Collectors worked with knowledgeable dealers and traders to find meaningful artworks for their collections. The success of a collection depended on informed decision-making. Whether or not this collection was successful is up for debate-- What do you think?

The art gallery was built as part of the Foederer family’s 1903 mansion renovation. It was designed to demonstrate grandeur, and to house a large collection. Beneath the intricate glass ceiling was far more artwork than what can be seen today, arranged in a salon-style with paintings wall to wall, hanging in groups that extended high and low, rather than in an eye-level row. There was also a lot of grand furniture, so the gallery could function well for entertaining. The family purchased a great portion of classical European art in 1898. Several of the other paintings seen here were likely acquired at a local auction in 1899. Florence Foerderer Tonner, of the family’s second generation, continued to collect art throughout her life, but likely kept the family collection hung in this room as it had been. Some of her own acquisitions can be seen in other parts of the house.

In 1997, Glen Foerd restored the gallery’s skylight, replaced the floor and wall fabric, and rehung the collection. The new arrangement of paintings is modeled after the Tate Gallery in London, grouped according to subject matter. The collection includes work by renowned artists like Jan Van Dyck, Rembrandt Van Rijn, and Joshua Reynolds, among others, but we have questions about authenticity for many of these. Several are attributed to well-known artists but may have been worked on by members of that artist’s atelier, or simply painted in a convincingly similar style. We’re working on an online resource where you can learn more about the individual artworks in the gallery. Stay tuned!

Glen Foerd is committed to keeping the arts central to its offerings. We’ve partnered with The Center for Emerging Visual Artists since 2015 to present our Artists-in-Residence program, which brings local working artists to create new work in response to the site. We also regularly presents hands-on art making activities for children and adults throughout the year.

Thank you for spending time at Glen Foerd! We hope to see you soon. If you have any questions about the tour, don’t hesitate to reach out to our staff.