

# The National Humane Alliance Fountain

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In a hillside recess along South Park Drive west of Van Buren Street rocky walls shelter an impressive granite horse trough. The round bowl, measuring six feet in diameter, stands on a substantial square pier and overall the fountain is about four feet tall. Small basins around the base once captured water provided for dogs. Originally, the square pier surmounting the bowl stood substantially taller and displayed lions' head spigots on three sides, each dispensing water from its mouth. On the fourth side, a plaque declared the fountain a gift of the National Humane Alliance and identified Hermon Lee Ensign the organization's founder. When the fountain was first erected, it was six feet tall and a tall light standard with a large electrically illuminated globe stood atop the square pillar.

The National Humane Alliance Fountain in Brandywine Park not only reflects a time when horses played a crucial role in the life of the city but it also links Wilmington to several dozen other cities across the nation that also received identical fountains between approximately 1904 and 1912.

Current practices to address issues of animal cruelty date largely from the Victorian era. In 1866, Henry Bergh founded the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, an organization that sought to enact and then enforce anticruelty laws. The Delaware SPCA dates from 1873. Both organizations undertook to intervene actively on behalf of mistreated animals. In 1870, Ferris Bringham gathered a group of benefactors to form the Wilmington Fountain Society, aimed at providing fountains and

water troughs around the city. By 1909, the Society had erected and was maintaining twenty-six water fountains and troughs.

When Hermon Lee Ensign founded the National Humane Alliance in 1897, he intended the organization to "spread about humanitarian ideas among the people." Such education, Ensign hoped, would instill in people, "especially the young, ideas of humanity both to the lower animals and to each other."



*Photo Courtesy of Chad Nelson*

Ensign, an advertising man, journalist and writer, died in 1899 and, after his death, the organization shifted its focus from education to more active efforts by offering fountains to cities across the country. At least forty-five of the fountains survive, though some sources indicate that the Alliance may have distributed as many as 100. The organization set specific conditions for fountain donation, installation, and operation. After the Wilmington Fountain Society provided a drawing of the proposed fountain site, the Alliance secretary indicated that when the local society

installed it, it had to be "20 ft away from (streetcar) tracks, telephone poles and curbs and keep it supplied with water continuously." In Topeka, Kansas, where the proposed location was the corner of Quincy and 6<sup>th</sup> streets, local officials were instructed that the fountain be "not more than 30 feet from 6<sup>th</sup> Street."

The fountains apparently were produced in Maine. Although they are described as being different colors, the difference may lie in the viewer's perception rather than the granite itself. Given the crystal nature of the stone, it

can appear to be any of several colors. The Brandywine Park version is a pink-grey granite, but observers have described Evansville, Indiana's fountain as pink and have characterized Camden, South Carolina's fountain as brown.

Most cities have kept the fountains but moved them away from the busy intersections where they first stood. Some, after moving their fountains, replumbed them so that they again bubble with water. Abbeville, South Carolina's fountain, standing near its original location, still flows with water. In Derby, Connecticut, the Department of Public Works moved the city's 1906 fountain to the Derby Greenway, repaired its plumbing, and rededicated it as part of a long-term greenway development project. In Lincoln, Nebraska, the restored fountain became part of a downtown redevelopment effort and it again supplies water, now to thirsty visitors to the Haymarket Historic District.

In Wilmington, the National Humane Alliance Fountain first dispensed water in the spring of 1910. The process of accepting and then installing it required close collaboration among city departments plus the participation of the



*Photo Courtesy of Delaware Historical Society*

Wilmington Fountain Society. The Alliance gave the fountain to the city. The local Fountain Society arranged installation, starting with a request to the Board of Park Commissioners for a parcel of parkland for a site. The Park Commissioners gave a small triangle of ground at Market, King, and 16<sup>th</sup> streets and the Street and Sewer Department erected and plumbed the fountain. The department also offered to maintain the light on top of the fountain, if the Park Commission agreed to supply and install the light. The Wilmington Fountain Society took charge of maintaining the fountain once it was running.

When the city built the current Market Street Bridge in 1929, the National Humane Alliance Fountain obstructed the new traffic pattern that the bridge created, so the fountain moved to South Park Drive where a spring along the drive could supply water. An earlier fountain on that site had proven less than ideal so the massive granite trough took its place. By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the fountain had fallen into serious disrepair. In 2002, the Delaware Division of Parks and Recreation cleaned the granite, stabilized and improved the area around the fountain, and restored to it something of its former dignity.