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Something New is About to Bloom on the Main Line

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By Natural Lands

From Haas family estate to Natural Lands Trust public garden

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Media, Pa. – On April 20, 2016, the children of the late John and Chara Haas donated the family's 42-acre Stoneleigh estate in Villanova to Natural Lands Trust—the region's oldest and largest land conservation organization.

The organization, which owns 42 nature preserves across eastern Pennsylvania and southern New Jersey, plans to open the Haas family estate as a public garden that showcases and educates visitors about the joys and benefits of gardens that emphasize the use of native plants.

"This remarkable act of generosity marks a turning point for both Stoneleigh and for our organization," said Molly Morrison, Natural Lands Trust's president. "We are deeply honored to be entrusted to carry on the Haas family's legacy of stewardship for this

magical place, and
ed beyond
sure to add
Stoneleigh as a unique, shining star in our constellation of preserves."

Photo by Mae Axelrod, Natural Lands Trust staff member

Stoneleigh's history dates back to 1877 when Edmund Smith, a rising executive with the Pennsylvania Railroad Company, purchased 65 acres of land in Villanova and constructed a residence there. In 1900, Samuel Bodine, head of United Gas Improvement Company, acquired the property.

Following Samuel Bodine's death in 1932, Stoneleigh was subdivided and sold. Otto Haas, entrepreneur and co-founder of Rohm and Haas Company, purchased the southwestern portion of the estate, launching a more than 80-year tenure of careful stewardship by the Haas family.

Otto and Phoebe's son, John, and his wife, Chara, acquired Stoneleigh in 1964 and lived there for the next five decades. The property includes stately trees, winding pathways, and lush gardens that the Haas family has carefully stewarded over the decades The gardens were designed by a number of notable landscape architects over the past century – including Olmsted Brothers, sons of the famed Frederick Law Olmsted.

"Our parents took great joy in caring for their lovely gardens and natural areas," said John and Chara's son David. "It was their wish that the property's overall beauty, native habitats, and historic gardens be preserved. We believe that Natural Lands Trust shares our family's vision and will work to honor the legacy of our parents by making the property a unique natural resource for the community and region."

The late John and Chara Haas at Stoneleigh
(Photo courtesy of David Haas)

After a period of transition, Stoneleigh: A Natural Garden will be open—free-of-charge—to visitors. Natural Lands Trust will also offer a variety of public programs with a primary focus on natural gardening and landscaping techniques. They also anticipate hosting family and child-oriented programs as well as volunteer opportunities. It is expected to take approximately 18-months to make the improvements needed to transition the property from a family home to a public garden.

"Stoneleigh is unique among our preserves in so many ways," said Morrison. "We envision a place where the public will be able to enjoy the quiet and beauty of the Stoneleigh grounds and be motivated to learn about the joys and benefits of gardens that emphasize the use of native plants."

The gardens at Stoneleigh were, of course, created to be the setting for a home. The Tudor Revival mansion will serve as a unique venue for lectures and other public events and as offices and archives for the Organ Historical Society (OHS), an international non-profit organization dedicated to celebrating, studying, and preserving pipe organ history. The Haas family has long had an affinity for the music of many types.

"In many ways the word 'preservation' provides the great operative link between OHS and Natural Lands Trust," said Jim Weaver, CEO of OHS. "The invitation to establish our acclaimed library and archives at Stoneleigh is especially rewarding."

Said Phillip Rosenzweig, commissioner with Lower Merion Township. "I am deeply grateful for the generosity, vision, and legacy of John and Chara Haas and of the entire Haas family. Their acts have forever preserved the grandeur and beauty of Stoneleigh for generations to follow, and their commitment to open space, environmental stewardship, and responsible land management serve as a lesson to us all."

John and Chara Haas placed Stoneleigh under a conservation easement with Natural Lands Trust in 1996. That easement was recently transferred to Lower Merion Conservancy. Under an easement, property remains in private ownership, but is protected from future development in perpetuity.

Photo courtesy of Hagley Museum and Library

"Lower Merion Conservancy is honored to take on the responsibility of holding the easement for this amazing property," said Maurine McGeehan, Lower Merion Conservancy executive director. "We very much look forward to working with Natural Lands Trust, and we are extremely thankful to the Hass family for bestowing this wonderful gift on the community."

In 2002, John and Chara Haas wrote: "The preservation and development of the gardens, grounds, and house have been an ongoing project of love for us. We feel privileged to have been entrusted with the conservation of this historic and beautiful property. As its stewards, we have made its safekeeping one of our priorities."

Said Natural Lands Trust Board Chairman Jack Terrill, "Natural Lands Trust is honored to be the next steward of Stoneleigh and we are grateful to the Haas family for their generosity, vision, and commitment to Stoneleigh's future."

ABOUT:

Natural Lands (https://natlands.org/)

Natural Lands Trust is the region's oldest and largest land conservation organization and is dedicated to protecting the forests, fields, streams, and wetlands that are essential to the sustainability of life in eastern Pennsylvania and southern New Jersey. Since its founding in 1953, Natural Lands Trust has preserved more than 100,000 acres, including 43 nature preserves totaling more than 22,000 acres. Today, some 2.5 million people live within five miles of land under the organization's protection.

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‹ inquirer: haas estate in villanova to be preserved as public garden (https://natlands.org/news/inquirer-haas-estate-in-villanova-to-be-preserved-as-public-garden/)

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