

Center City's Centuries-old Clubs and Societies Create, Perform, Preserve, Promote Arts and Sciences

By Bonnie Eisenfeld

Center City's centuries-old clubs and societies boast many "America's firsts" and "America's oldests"—oldest men's singing group, first women's club, oldest amateur opera company, oldest professional theater company, first art club for women. Some lay claim to being the oldest continuously operating club in their category, or one of the oldest. What follows is a tour of historic clubs and societies dedicated to the arts, literature, science, and preservation, with some highlights about each one, organized by areas of Center City—West of Broad, Midtown, and Independence area. For information about membership and public hours, please contact the organizations.

West of Broad Street

The Pennsylvania Horticultural Society, 1827

Established to promote horticulture, the society originally had 80 members and now has 23,500. The first Flower Show, held in 1829, introduced the poinsettia, and has continued annually to the present. PHS has involved thousands of city residents in restoration of public landscapes and neighborhood parks. 100 N. 20th St. #5; 215-988-8800 <http://phsonline.org/>

The Orpheus Club of Philadelphia, 1872

This club is the oldest men's singing group in America. The Euredice Chorus, a choral group for women formed in 1886, sang many concerts with the Orpheus Club. Currently membership consists of 80 singers, and performs three concerts a year at the Kimmel Center. Their repertoire includes classical, jazz, and pop. Members perform upon request for hospitals, retirement centers, schools, and charitable events in the Delaware Valley. 254 S. Van Pelt St.; 610-644-9125 <http://www.orphheusclub.org/>

The Acorn Club, 1889

The first women's club in America, its purpose was to promote art, literature, music, and social enjoyment. Today, members are active in the arts, culture, medicine and non-profit organizations. 1519 Locust St.; 215-735-2040 <http://www.acornclub.org/>

Colonial Dames of America, 1891

This is a national organization that promotes

our country's heritage through historic preservation, patriotic service, and educational projects. The Pennsylvania Headquarters, completed in 1921, hosts numerous programs, events, and private functions. 1630 Latimer St.; 215-735-6737 <http://nscdapa.org/>

Pen & Pencil Club, 1892

A place for writers and editors to socialize, this is the oldest continuously operating press club in America, and the second oldest in the world. It maintains a strict "off the record" policy on its premises. At the time it was founded, Philadelphia had seven morning and six evening newspapers. Pen & Pencil combined the Stylus Club, the Journalist Club, and the Reporters Club. 1522 Latimer St.; 215-731-9909 <http://www.penandpencil.org/>

The Savoy Company, 1901

The oldest amateur opera company in the world dedicated to Gilbert and Sullivan, Savoy has a large volunteer chorus and crew, and has performed on professional stages and with professional orchestras. The company also performs for charitable organizations and has social events for members. P.O. Box 59150, Philadelphia PA 19102-9150; 215-735-7161 <http://www.savoy.org/>

Plays and Players, 1911

Founded as a social club devoted to new theater experiences for and by its membership, Plays and Players is one of the oldest professional theater companies in America. Originally called Little Theatre of Philadelphia, it opened in 1913, and the company bought the building in 1922. In the 1960s, productions were opened to the entire community. At present, the mission of Plays and Players is to support and nurture the work of local artists, as well as to provide rehearsal space, workshops, classes and events



Plays and Players

to members. Other local companies also use the space. 1714 Delancey Pl.; 215-735-0630 <http://www.playsandplayers.org/>

The Print Center, 1915

Originally known as The Print Club, this was one of the first venues in America dedicated to the appreciation of prints. The Annual International Competition is the oldest of its kind in the country. In 1942, The Print Club donated its collection to the Philadelphia Museum of Art. In 1996, the name was changed to The Print Center to indicate its commitment to the community. The Print Center mounts solo and group exhibitions in its galleries, in public locations, and in traveling shows, and provides educational programs to artists and art enthusiasts. The Artists-in-Schools Program brings visual-art education to disadvantaged populations in underserved Philadelphia public schools. Open to the public. 1614 Latimer St.; 215-735-6090 <http://www.printcenter.org/>

Midtown area

The Library Company of Philadelphia, 1731

Founded by Benjamin Franklin, this was the first lending library and oldest cultural institution in the nation. Preserving a collection of rare books, documents, photographs, and art works, the Library Company is a research institution specializing in American history and culture from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries. It served as the Library of Congress from the Revolutionary War until 1800. Before the Civil War, this was the largest public library in America. The Library presents exhibits, lectures, symposia, and other programs, and publishes a semi-annual newsletter and a monthly e-newsletter. Open to the public. 1314 Locust St.; 215-546-3181 <http://www.librarycompany.org/index.htm>

Historical Society of Pennsylvania, 1824

Among the oldest historical societies in America, it houses documents and graphic items spanning over 350 years of American history, including one of the country's largest family-history libraries. Holdings were added from The Balch Institute for

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Ethnic Studies and The Genealogical Society of Pennsylvania. The museum collection was transferred to the Philadelphia History Museum (then known as the Atwater Kent Museum). Open to the public. 1300 Locust St.; 215-732-6200 <https://www.hsp.org/>



The Pennsylvania Historical Society

The Photographic Society of Philadelphia, 1860

Founded as an amateur society, for the purpose of sharing new knowledge and technologies, and to promote improvements in the art of photography, this is the oldest active photographic society in America. The club offers courses, lectures, demonstrations, and exhibitions. In 1868, in conjunction with the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (PAFA), the Society held the world's first salon devoted exclusively to exhibiting pictorial work with the camera. Members have created important documentary, artistic, and scientific works. The Society holds exhibitions and monthly meetings at the Plastic Club (see below). 247 S. Camac St. <http://www.phillyphotosociety.org/>

The Sketch Club, 1860

Founded by six students from PAFA, this is America's oldest continuing club for artists. The club supports and nurtures working visual artists by providing studio space, exhibitions, networking, a meeting place, a forum for ideas, and a vital bridge between creators and supporters of art. Founded as a men's club, it is now open to both men and women, and many prominent artists have been members. Exhibitions are open to the public. 235 S. Camac St.; 215-545-9298 <http://sketchclub.org/>

New Century Trust, 1876

The Trust is the oldest continuously running women's organization in America still in its original site. For the 1876 Centennial Exposition, in Fairmount Park, Trust founder

and women's rights activist Eliza Sproat Turner and other women held tea parties to raise money to build the Women's Pavilion, the first world showcase for women's work and contributions to society. More than 9 million people visited the Exposition. "Visitors to The Women's Pavilion were met by a woman operating a steam engine that operated a printing press that printed the *New Century for Woman*, a newspaper for which Eliza Turner wrote and edited" (from New Century Trust website). Today, the Trust focuses on improving the educational, economic, and social status of women and girls. 1307 Locust St.; 215-735-7593 <http://www.newcenturytrust.org/>

The Mask & Wig Club of the University of Pennsylvania, 1889

The oldest all-male collegiate musical-comedy troupe in America, its members have performed for Penn and audiences nationwide. In the early twentieth century, productions were lavish, with full orchestras and sets in professional theaters, and the Club even had its own train. Since the '60s, Mask & Wig performs comic revues in its historic clubhouse, home to a collection of early Maxfield Parrish artwork and murals. 310 S. Quince St.; 215-586-3729 <http://www.maskandwig.com/>

The Plastic Club, 1897

Founded by female professional illustrators and established painters, it was the first art club for women in America. The name refers to any unfinished work of art and to the changing and tactile sense of painting and sculpture. Now open to both women and men, the club promotes art, shares information among local artists, and encourages members' artistic works and careers. Members collect art supplies for needy children and award two-year memberships to graduating seniors from local art colleges. Exhibitions are open to the public. 247 S. Camac St.; 215-545-9324 <http://plasticclub.org/>

The Franklin Inn Club, 1902

The club was founded by a group of writers as a private men's dining club. In the early 1980s members voted to admit women, making it the first co-ed private club in the city. In addition to writers, current members—called "Innmates"—are also active in the arts, sciences, education, politics, law, and other intellectually stimulating fields. Members gather for discussion of current issues and for regular, relevant presentations by representatives of these fields. Early members wrote and produced plays, masques, musicals

and other theater productions. Recently, this theatrical tradition was revived in connection with the Philadelphia Fringe Festival. 205 S. Camac St.; 215-732-0334 <http://thefranklininn.com/>

Independence area

American Philosophical Society, 1743

Founded by Benjamin Franklin for the promotion of useful knowledge, this scholarly organization is the oldest learned society in America. Early members included our country's founders, doctors, lawyers, clergymen, merchants, artisans and tradesmen. In the eighteenth century, the study of nature was called natural philosophy, hence the Society's name. In the nineteenth century, the Society's interests turned toward American paleontology, geology, astronomy, meteorology, and Indian ethnology. Currently the Society promotes knowledge in the sciences and humanities through research, lectures, professional meetings, publications, library resources, grants and fellowships, prizes, exhibitions, and public education. 105 S. 5th St.; 215-440-3400 <http://www.amphilsoc.org/>

The Athenaeum of Philadelphia, 1814

This member-supported library and museum houses a collection of books, manuscripts, architectural drawings, photographs, and historical objects. The organization provides members, scholars, and the public with historical, literary, and educational activities and events. Its collections attract thousands of readers including students, scholars, architects, designers, curators, and private owners of historic buildings. Open to the public. 219 S. 6th St.; 215-925-2688 <http://www.philaathenaeum.org/>



A number of historic clubs line the 200 block of S. Camac St.