

# The Hidden Gem Behind Cranford's Popular Rubber Ducky Race

By Natalie Fidlow @nfidlow



Be on the lookout for the rubber ducky sales!

In October, The Hanson Park Conservancy will be hosting its 11th Annual Rubber Ducky Race. To the delight of many kids (and adults!) approximately 1,500 numbered rubber duckies will be released into the Rahway River at Sperry Park. The duckies will float down the waterfall vying to be the first duck to cross the finish line.

This is where the rubber meets the...river. Who will be the lucky duck to shout, "Winner winner ducky dinner?" For a preview of the race in action, feel free to pull up the 2018 race on television. It was featured on an episode of *Cake Boss*: "The biggest rubber ducky cake you'll ever see!" Buddy Valastro made a cake for the event and even attended with his family.

The Rubber Ducky race supports one of Cranford's hidden gems: Hanson Park. The park is located front and center at 38 Springfield Avenue, across the river from the Cranford Canoe

Club. What makes it unique from the other 11 parks in Cranford is that it is maintained by a not-for-profit.

## *How did Hanson Park Conservancy come to be?*

Ellen McHenry, President of the Hanson Park Conservancy (HPC) and a member since 2010, gave us a tour through the grounds to discuss the park's origins.

She explained, "It all began with Dr. Hanson. A beloved physician in town, he and his wife were owners of the home and the 3 acres it sits upon. In 1980, he gifted

his property to the township and continued living there with his wife until 1990.

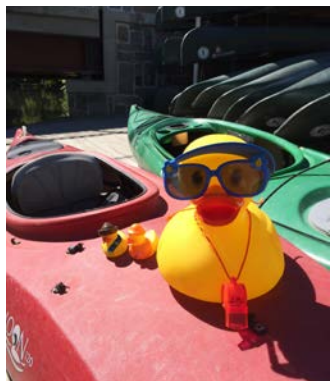
The Hanson House then became home to the Cranford Historical Society. Nature took over the surrounding grounds; however, in the early 2000's the mayor approached citizens to form a taskforce. Their goal was to improve the park area and make it a town destination. They raised \$50,000 in donations from a town-mailing and had the seed capital to form a not-for-profit called the Hanson Park Conservancy in 2004.

## *What will you find at Hanson Park?*

It's a pleasant escape into the natural environment of Cranford. There's a large, beautiful tree-lined park space that is used for events (i.e., the Halloween Pumpkin Carve-out), kids' story time, and outdoor yoga on Saturday mornings and weekday evenings.

Gravel trails lined with native plants, trees and flowers welcome pedestrians to come in off of Springfield Avenue and enjoy a respite of nature. As McHenry was touring the grounds, a mother guided her toddler down the path. The little one was surveying the rocks under his feet.

McHenry admired the park as we walked. "Preservation of the environment and sustainability are very important to us here at the Hanson Park Conservancy." She pointed to the bee house above the girl scouts herb garden, a butterfly garden, a rock path for water to run off



into the river, and plants that will naturally protect the path at the Rahway river's edge.

We came upon the outdoor amphitheater that provides a nice space for private and public events. Plus, there are 5 new artisan wood benches along the path, replacing those destroyed during Hurricane Ida.

"The park is open to everyone, and free to be used, at no cost, for most not-for-profits. They can contact me for that. It's available for a small fee for individuals and other events, and those can be scheduled through the Department of Parks and Recreation," McHenry explained.

### ***Is there more to the Hanson Park Conservancy?***

Hanson Park Conservancy (HPC) is a strong demonstration of the community coming together to preserve and grow a unique and special place. Besides McHenry, there are 20 trustee volunteers who sustain the park through fundraising, membership, grants, and goodwill.

And whether you believe in karma or the Golden Rule, that idea is very much at play here.

When Covid hit and HPC lost their corporate volunteering partner, Novartis, the group rallied, applying for grants to create their own Volunteer Day. When Hurricane Ida hit, the Jaycees came out with trucks to clean up, and appreciative citizens came forward with donations honoring loved ones allowing the purchase of 5 natural artisan benches to replace those destroyed.

And then there's Richard Brown, who happened to be at Hanson Park the morning we toured. He and his wife, Jan Lilien, loved Hanson Park. Jan passed away last May and Richard wanted to commemorate her



life and honor their love of the park. What started as a tree donation, became over 173 donations to honor Jan, the former director of the YWCA and an advocate for social justice issues. The outpouring of support was enough to cover 2 new benches and begin funding Educational Programs. The educational programs are free and available to the public. Registration for the next event "Growing great garlic" on Tuesday, September 20 is open.

Richard is not stopping there. He and HPC are now actively fundraising for improvements to the park's triangular garden. McHenry calls it the "triangle" and excitedly pulls out the plans from the landscape architect. She explained that "the triangle will have native plants blooming through the seasons. A 12-foot wind sculpture will be the centerpiece, and highly visible from the road."

There's a labor of love here by McHenry, Brown, the trustees and so many community members and organizations helping to make Hanson Park a destination of natural beauty and of environmental and sustainable learning.

See for yourself. Take a stroll through the park, bring your mat to an outdoor yoga class, attend the "Growing Garlic" program, or plop down at the table with your laptop and enjoy the free wifi. And, you definitely do not want to miss the Rubber Ducky Race held in October!

To learn more about events, membership, or donating, visit the HPC website at [hansonparkconservancy.com](http://hansonparkconservancy.com). You can also follow them on Facebook @hansonparkconservancy, Instagram @hansonparkcranford and Twitter @hansonparkcon



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