



# A Vision of Liberty is Realized

## Liberty Lands, Pennsylvania

Upon founding and designing Philadelphia in 1680, William Penn specified that 10,000 acres of land north and west of the town be set aside for “Liberty Lands.” More than 320 years later, using an EPA Targeted Brownfields Assessment (TBA) grant, the community of Northern Liberties followed Penn’s vision and created Liberty Lands Park on a site with a history of contamination.

Northern Liberties, a residential community in North Philadelphia, thrived both as a blue collar neighborhood and an industrial center in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Breweries, factories, and leather tanneries provided gainful employment for the residents of Philadelphia and the promise of a new life for many immigrants. In the mid-20th century, industry in the area began to decline. The sites of once-thriving businesses became filled with weeds and were abandoned. A former tannery, which closed in 1962, was left with real and perceived contamination and considered a serious health threat to the neighborhood. In 1987, EPA’s Superfund Removal Program removed 1,000 drums and chemical containers from the building and site. Three years later, EPA returned to clean up polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) that were leaking into adjacent streets from discarded electrical transformers on the site.

Following these cleanup activities, plans were made by developers to remodel the existing building into loft style housing. When the project fell through due to financial problems, the property was donated to the Northern Liberties Neighbors Association (NLNA), which planned to build senior housing for neighborhood residents. However, damage within the existing structure caused the City of Philadelphia to demolish the building, placing the \$500,000 cost of demolition as a lien on the property. The NLNA’s plans were put on hold and the site was left vacant for more than a year. After much deliberation, the NLNA decided to implement a short term plan and turn the site into a park.

EPA Region 3 provided a \$15,000 TBA to perform assessments, which indicated that the property was clear of contamination and suitable for greenspace redevelopment. TBAs are provided through EPA’s Brownfields Program and are intended to finance site characterization services for brownfields with redevelopment potential. These

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*The completed Liberty Lands playground in Winter.*

## JUST THE FACTS:

- A former tannery in the Northern Liberties neighborhood of North Philadelphia was the site of an EPA-led cleanup effort in the late 1980s.
- With local developers interested in the property, EPA Targeted Brownfields Assessment funds were used to confirm that the site was still safe and suitable for redevelopment into recreational greenspace.
- The new Liberty Lands park is now a place of pride and appreciation for local residents—a place where people can “just eat lunch and watch the greenery.”
- In 2002, this project was used as an example of innovative brownfields redevelopment in a PBS program titled, “What’s Up in the Environment.”

*The community used innovative and environmentally sustainable approaches in redevelopment; biosolids, solid materials generated from waste water treatment, were used as fertilizer and topsoil. Today, Liberty Lands Park includes a community garden, a playground, picnic benches, a Native American herb garden, a butterfly garden, more than 100 trees, and a screen for showing outdoor movies.*

assessments give cities, municipalities, states, and potential developers an idea of the contamination present and how much cleanup will be necessary.

After assessments were completed, the NLNA turned its attention to removing the liens, estimates for which had reached nearly \$750,000. First District Councilman Frank DiCicco was instrumental in convincing the city to absolve the costs of demolition and other debts attached to the land. The NLNA and DiCicco celebrated the success of this effort by holding a lien burning at the park, which was attended by hundreds of local residents. The site's transformation into a park created pride and appreciation within the neighborhood, and the NLNA ultimately decided to keep the park as the site's permanent use.

In 1997, after receiving \$69,000 from a Philadelphia Urban Resources Partnership (PURP) grant, the NLNA was able to move forward with its greenspace development plan. The PURP grant required that the local community provide a match to the grant in either community volunteer hours or financing, and the NLNA more than doubled this requirement. Philadelphia Green, part of the Pennsylvania Horticulture Society, made the project part of its Keystone Gardens program from which the NLNA leveraged \$8,000 for various projects and countless hours of in-kind support, tools, and materials. Later, the NLNA received \$35,000 in a second PURP grant that was used for drainage cleanup in the park. To date, the community has contributed approximately \$200,000 in volunteer hours and \$100,000 of funding in small donations for the park.



*The new park.*

The community used innovative and environmentally sustainable approaches to redevelopment. Biosolids, solid materials generated from waste water treatment, were used as fertilizer and topsoil. The community used both the funding from the PURP grants and funds generated by the community to provide amenities for the park that include a community garden, picnic benches, a Native American herb garden, a playground, a butterfly garden, a composting area, stone retaining walls, more than 100 trees, and a screen for showing outdoor movies. Northern Liberties Neighbors Association Member Janet Finegar remarked, "A lot of people just eat lunch and watch the greenery. It is the only park in our neighborhood, the only place to just go and sit."

Liberty Lands Park is a tribute to the success of EPA's regional TBA programs. In 2002, the project was used as an example of innovative brownfields redevelopment in a PBS program titled, "What's Up in the Environment." Targeted Brownfields Assessments have and continue to be great tools for communities to use in the efforts to return their brownfields to productive use.

## **CONTACTS:**

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Visit the EPA Brownfields Web site at:  
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