The seed which eventually blossomed into the Polish Heritage Society of Philadelphia was planted during the Polish American Historical Association Convention, which was held at the Robert Morris Hotel in December of 1964. The organizer and host of the convention was the Rt. Rev. Msgr. Peter Klekotka. For several months meetings were held at the homes of members throughout the Delaware Valley to discuss the formation of a new Polish society. In August 1965 at the home of Mietek and Frances Chwalinski it was unanimously agreed that the name of the new organization would be the “Polish Heritage Society of Philadelphia.”

Since its founding, the Polish Heritage Society of Philadelphia has sought to give prominence to our shared cultural heritage and endow Polish traditions with new life in this community. Through its stimulating programs, the society enhances members’ understanding and enjoyment of Polish history and the culture and values of our forefathers. The Society provides leadership and a forum for social and cultural expression within the Polish American community of the Greater Delaware Valley. Society members take an active role in awakening recognition for the many achievements of Poles and Americans of Polish descent.

Due to the graciousness of the Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth, the Society was granted the privilege of using Holy Family College (now University) facilities for its meetings. The opportunity of gathering together in academic surroundings proved an ideal climate in which the society grew and flourished. Our debt is great, indeed, to those good nuns but especially to Sister Florence Tumasz, Ph.D. who proved to be completely in tune with the Society’s aims in her contributions to Polish culture. Sister Florence had honored the Society by accepting the Society’s honorary membership. On Sept. 30, 1990, the Society placed a bronze plaque in the Campus Center of Holy Family University. The dedication ceremony was followed by a reception.

In the early 1970s during the late Joseph S. Wnukowski’s Presidency, the Society began sponsoring the Chopin Piano Concerts, which the Philadelphia community anticipates annually in February or March. Pianists who have appeared at the Society’s Annual Chopin Concerts include Marian Filar, Maciej Szymanski, Andrzej Wasowski, Camille Budarz, Nina Sapiejewska, Leszek Bartkiewicz and Jerzy Stryjniak, to name but a few. The Society also credits Mr. Wnukowski with the inauguration of the Adam Styka Memorial Art Competition and Exhibition. The Society continues to sponsor the Styka Competition in August/September at the National Shrine of Our Lady of Czestochowa, Doylestown, PA, in cooperation with the Pauline Fathers of the Shrine and the American Council for Polish Culture (ACPC).

In 1976, in celebration of the Nation’s Bicentennial, the Society’s members, Joseph Wnukowski, Joseph Zazyczny and Stanley Kreft, formed the Polish American Bicentennial Committee of Philadelphia, which sponsored “A Night with Polish Composers” at Philadelphia’s prestigious Academy of Music. The Bicentennial Orchestra, under the direction of Andrzej Jurkiewicz, Pianist, Pawel Checinski, presented the works of Ludomir Rozycki, Artur Malawski, Mieczyslaw Karlowicz and Karol Szymanowski. Moreover, during the Bicentennial celebrations, the people of Poland presented to the people of the United States a monument to Tadeusz Kosciuszko, which is situated at the entrance to the Four Seasons Hotel, on Benjamin Franklin Parkway, facing the Torun Triangle, and the Kopernik Monument. The Polish Heritage Society of Philadelphia was instrumental in the commissioning and placing of the Kopernik Monument adjacent to the Cathedral of Sts. Peter and Paul and organized the dedication of the Kopernik monument with the Mayor of Torun, Philadelphia’s sister city, in attendance. At the same time, the Society also hosted the cadets of the “Dar Pomorza” sailing ship during its historic docking at Penn’s Landing both in 1976 and again in 1979.

In the early 1980s, then President, Joseph L. Zazyczny continued the Society's efforts to have an impact on the citizens of the Greater Delaware Valley. Tadeusz
Kosciuszko’s residence at Third and Pine Streets is now a historic site, thanks to the efforts of Society members: philanthropist, Edward Piszek and historian, Edward Pinkowski. It is administered by Independence National Park. In cooperation with the National Park Service, the Polish Heritage Society’s “Friends of Kosciuszko” for many years volunteered as visitor guides at the Kosciuszko House, providing information in both Polish and English.

The Society presented a Polish Poster Exhibit from the Frank Fox collection at the Port of History Museum on Penn’s Landing (1984), sponsored a Polish Film Festival and lecture series in cooperation with the Free Library of Philadelphia and was an active participant in the Witold Plonski, “Not for Poles Only” project. The Society frequently hosted groups from Poland such as Mazowsze, and Rorantysci.

Important to the Society is the nurturing of our Polish American youth and following this belief the Society has sponsored poetry recitals in the Polish language given by the students of Nazareth Academy High School, who study Polish as part of their high school curriculum. The Society has also given financial support to the Adam Mickiewicz Polish School at the Associated Polish Home in Philadelphia, as well as support to the ACPC Youth Leadership Conference in Washington, D.C.

In 1984, the Society elected its first female President, Debbie Majka, the current ACPC President! The highlights of Mrs. Majka’s first four years were the inauguration of the Society’s Annual Polonaise Charity Ball at the Academy of Music. The guiding force behind the Polonaise Ball was its Chairperson, Mrs. Martha Zazyczny. From the proceeds of the First Polonaise Ball, the Society contributed $6,000 to Nazareth Hospital and from the Second, $4,000 to Deborah Hospital. Deborah Hospital was engaged in helping needy children from Poland, by performing much needed heart surgery, free-of-charge. The Polonaise Ball, which currently benefits the Polish Heritage Society’s Scholarship Fund, replaced the traditional Biesiada celebration.

The Polish Heritage Society also reactivated its Scholarship Award program and annually makes scholarship awards to students of Polish descent, or students enrolled in Polish Studies programs at U.S. Universities. The original funds for the Scholarship Fund came from the generosity of Lottie Wojeck and Wanda Kulpinska Dezwol. The Society also contributed $10,000 toward the realization of the American Center of Polish Culture, Washington, D.C., in addition to many individual donations made by members and raffles.

During Mr. Szyszko’s Presidency, the Society hosted ACPC’s Annual Convention at the Hershey Hotel (1989), in downtown Philadelphia. The Society members also began participating in Philadelphia’s Annual Pulaski Day Parade, sponsored by the Polish American Congress, Eastern PA District.

Members of the Society participate in their Annual Mass and Brunch on the first Sunday of May (Trzeci Maj) at the National Shrine of Our Lady of Czestochowa, Doylestown, PA. Following Mass, scholarships are awarded and new Officers and Directors are installed.

Despite the fact that the Society’s active membership is not large, its contributions, the sponsoring of cultural, historical and educational events in Philadelphia is unprecedented and augurs well for the entire Polish American Community in the Delaware Valley.

The Polish Heritage Society of Philadelphia has been an active and loyal affiliate of the American Council for Polish Culture and has supplied four Presidents to ACPC: the late John Wojciechowicz, the late Joseph S. Wnukowski, Joseph L. Zazyczny and Deborah M. Majka.

( written for ACPC Convention in 2005)

Past Presidents of the Polish Heritage Society of Philadelphia:

Joe Zazyczny
Joseph Kalinowski
John Wojciechowicz
Debbie Majka
Donna Danielewska
Marie Hejnosz

Joseph Wnukowski
Frank Ganiszewski
Stanley Kreft
Edward Szyszko
Irene Musman
Teresa N. Wojcik

At the Pulaski Parade 2003 (front row, wearing sashes, from left): Frank Przybylski, Eleanor Lerke, Marie Hejnosz, Irene Musman, Peter Obst