Trips Awheel: Where to Go and How to Get There

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Cycle Route No. 17 (1897-98 Series)

Lovely Wissahickon Drive: A Charming Ramble Along the Picturesque Wissahickon

"Lovely Wissahickon Drive" I called it in my heading; it is that – every word of it; and duplicate it if you can.

Added to the Schuylkill River Drive, it makes up a smooth driveway covering in a straight line a stretch of twelve miles, literally overhung for the greater part of its extent with trees that date from unrecorded ages, and bordered by two streams, the wild picturesquness of which reminds one at every turn of the time when Nawadaha found his songs "so wild and wayward," found his legends and traditions

"In the birds' nests of the forests,
In the lodges of the beaver,
In the hoof-prints of the bison,
In the eyrie of the eagle."

The first half of it we traveled in our last trip, the second surpasses it by far.

Its exquisite charms may well be left to speak for themselves; hence I propose to draw attention only to what is less evident along our roadside and more especially to the generally unknown lanes that radiate right and left from the Wissahickon drive.

THE WISSAHICKON.

"Wissahickon" has an Indian smack, has it not? In its present shape the word may be a corruption of either of two Indian compounds, one meaning "yellow water stream," the other "catfish stream;" its connection with the latter is considered the more probable, although the color of the water after every heavy storm goes far to support the former derivation.

Right here, at this high bridge, near the mouth of the creek where we terminated our ramble last Sunday, the old-time mill of the Robesons used to stand; their mansion is now Lowa's High Bridge Mansion Hotel on the right hand corner of Ridge avenue. Andrew Robeson was one of the five commissioners appointed in 1718 to lay out the road fro Philadelphia to Wissahickon Mills, alluded to in our last trip.

On that rocky bluff overhanging the hotel a redoubt was perched by Colonel Von Wurm, who commanded the Hessian Yagers among "the horrendous hills of the Wissahickon" at the time of the Revolution.

A few minutes' riding brings us to Gypsy Lane, around the very first house on our right; it is a steep ascent to School lane, whence Germantown avenue may be reached very pleasantly.

HERMIT'S LANE.

Within less than a mile from Ridge avenue two new bridges for pedestrians and for general traffic respectively now take one across the creek to the Hermit's lane and the Hermit's Glen and Kelpius' Spring.

You have heard of Johann Kelpius, of course; you may have read Whittier's description of the visits to Germantown of

Painful Kelpius, from his hermit's den
By Wissahickon – maddest of good men.

He had landed here in 1604 after a stormy voyage, a diary of which he left us in Latin. It was through these forests that he and his followers, the "Hermits of the Ridge," rambled in cowl and gown; here, scattered about in caves (his own was 12 feet by 9), they awaited, with fasting and prayer, the coming of the "Woman of the Wilderness," the woman "clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and the twelve stars on her forehead." Here, too, Johann Kelpius died in 1704, and his school endured not.

RITTENHOUSE LANE.

Presently the Wissahickon makes a sudden bend to the left and our road bifurcates. The bridge over which we must pass so as to follow its course crosses Paper Mill Creek.

The paper mill commemorated by this creek was erected a short distance up on our right by Samuel Rittenhouse in 1690. It was the first of its kind ever built in this county. A freshet carried it away in 1700, but it was rebuilt, and its successor (which became a cotton mill in the course of time) was still standing a few years ago. Even now remains of it may still be seen on the bank of the stream.

This Rittenhouse lane, on our right before we cross the bridge, is a very ridable avenue to Rittenhouse street, and thence to Germantown avenue or Main street.

SHUR'S LANE.

One mile and a half from the Schuylkill, after we have crossed the elegant granite bridge just erected over the creek, Shur's Lane winds around by Lotus Inn on our left. It is a rough, breackneck ascent into the wilds of Roxborough; picturesque to be sure, but like all these branchings-off from the Wissahickon (save two), unfit for cycling unless in cases of absolute necessity.

Shur's Lane strikes Ridge avenue at No. 4100, almost opposite St. Timothy's Church.

And to think that, once on a time, these were the main, indeed the only, means of intercommunication between Roxborough and Germantown!

KITCHEN'S LANE AND THE MONASTERY.

Half a mile farther, Kitchen's Lane makes a dive toward that covered bridge down there on our right, and thence wends its rocky way up towards Carpenter street and Pelham, past some lonely, untenanted dwelling houses and farms of such appearance that a playright or a novelist would make them, right away, a conspirators' rendezvous. No cycling road, this.

Westward of this forbidding spot is the estate of W. C. Kitchen, after whom the lane was named (no connection with cuisine of any kind); and away on the summit of that hill overlooking the creek is a farm house which was once a well-known monastery. It stood there in 1739; how long it had been in existence prior to that date is not known for a certainty.

The Dunkers, persecuted in Europe, by Protestants and Catholics alike, found a refuge among the rugged beauties of this hill and inhabited that venerable structure. A shady pool just below the covered bridge was their baptizing place or "Baptysterion."

The continuation of Kitchen's Lane on the left of the drive – Roxborough avenue as some call it – leads right up to Terrace street; overlooking Manayunk. It is steep and poor for about half a mile, but level and regularly laid out beyond that distance. It strikes Ridge avenue at No. 4300.

MONASTERY AND CEMETERY AVENUES.

Monastery avenue, the next turning to the left at the Indian Rock Hotel, is but little better, if any, than Kitchen's Lane. It owes its name to the monastery just spoken of, on the east side of the creek; and should you ever be compelled to use it, it will bring you to the Lyceum on Ridge avenue, near No. 4400.

As to Cemetery avenue (should it ever strike your eye on some of our local maps), its existence as an avenue is limited to the length of one square, by the side of Leverington Cemetery on the Ridge. (The Leverings were large land owners thereabouts.) East of that point, this mythical Cemetery avenue is a narrow footpath across uncultivated fields, intercepted by a couple of fences and ending on Monastery Lane, just above the Indian Rock Hotel. It is well worth following afoot as a curiosity and by way of seeing what it is possible to find within the limits of a populous city, nay, within a stone's throw of such a thoroughfare as Ridge avenue.

FANTASTIC FIGURES.

About 100 yards beyond Monastery Lane, on the left of the drive, is probably the most life-like of the several fantastic figures cut out of the rock by the hand of Nature. This one is a remarkably good representation of an Indian, apparently, in ambush, tomahawk in hand and one foot forward. Close examination reveals nothing more than a number of fissures in the rock, but viewed from a distance the figure is striking. It is best seen coming down the stream; watch for it on your way home a quarter of a mile after passing Allen's Lane.

Another faithful outline is that of the Scotchman's head, about a mile lower down the creek near the bridge now in course of rebuilding.

“The bonniest lad that e’er I saw,
Bonnie laddie, Highland laddie;
On his head a bonnet blue,
Bonnie laddie, Highland laddie.”

And there is a lion’s head near the lower bridge, and a man’s face between the two bridges, and “Three Frogs” near Valley Green, and others that require more or less imagination to be seen and must be pointed out to the stranger by the initiated.

ALLEN’S LANE.

Allen’s lane, on your left, is another very primitive roadway to Roxborough, which will probably be known some day as Leverington avenue. On our right, it is an undesirable uphill track to the Wissahickon avenue; from that point on it is macadamized as far as the Pennsylvania Railroad, and beyond this latter it is paved with vitrified bricks to Germantown avenue.

This Allen’s lane, as well as Allentown away in Lehigh county, where he had a large interest in iron furnaces, owes its name to Chief Justice Allen, whose country seat was at the Mt. Airy end of it. His town house was on King street (now Water), south of Market street, and his famous coach (the first of its kind ever seen here), with four black horses and an English coachman, was the talk of the town in his day.

History tells us that he refused to appropriate his salary as Chief Justice from 1751 to 1774 to his own use and gave it entirely away in charities – an example uniformly followed ever since by his successors!

As early as the Revolution the lane was known by the Judge’s name. Historian Watson tells us how in June, 1778, “the enemy came up again (to Mt. Airy) by different routes and joined forces at Allen’s lane, and returned before 9 o’clock in the morning, effecting nothing but the plundering of gardens.”

VARIED SCENES.

Gorgas’ lane climbs up to Ridge avenue amid the scanty ruins of a better past and the unsavory surroundings of an Italo-American renaissance (!). The lower part is somewhat less rough and of easier grade than the preceding lanes; the upper half is rugged and stony.

Gorgas’ lane recalls two brothers, John and Joseph Gorgas, who came to German Town in 1747 and 1752 respectively and purchased a tract of land here.

Of Crease’s lane and Shawmount avenue the less said for cycling purposes the better.

Their continuation through that bridge on our right is styled Livezey’s lane; it falls into Allen’s lane a short distance up the hill.

On the left of the bridge on the east bank of the creek, among a profusion of buttonwood, oak, hemlock, mulberry and maple trees, are the fast disappearing remnants of the old-time “Livezey’s Mill” and a still utilized portion of the Livezey mansion.

Thomas Livezey's will bears date of 1695; there must have been few settlers up here before him.

"Near Wissahickon's mossy banks,
where purling fountains glide
Beneath the Spruce's shady boughs and
Laurel blooming pride,"

as one of the Livezeys put it, almost a century later, in 1765.

Do you see that creek joining the Wissahickon on our right, half a mile farther? It is the Cresheim, so called after Crisheim, Krisheim, Kriesheim or (as now spelled) Kriegsheim in Germany, the native place of a number of the first settlers in Germantown. The deep pool at its mouth is the famed "Devil's Pool," the scene of an engagement during the battle of Germantown.

Another half mile ahead is Valley Green, with its noted stone bridge. Have you ever photographed the remarkably perfect oval made by its arch and the reflection of it in the crystal of the water beneath?

The road that passes over that bridge is Springfield avenue, the smoothest of the telford roads, a veritable royal avenue to the Wissahickon Inn and thence to Chestnut Hill.

The next turning on our right, Hartwell lane, is steep, loose and rocky – practically uncyclable.

The unprepossessing appearance of the lower extremity of Wise's Mill road, on our left, speaks but too plainly for the remaining portion of it; and the same applies to Township Line road.

Just at the foot of the latter, do you notice a small stone house occupied by a park guard? It was once the business office of the Megargee Mill, which stood right opposite, alongside the creek. No trace of the building itself now remains.

A MODEST GIVER.

And who does not know the fountain erected here by Joseph Cook in 1854, the first of its kind ever seen in Philadelphia? "Esto Perpetua," says the legend; so be the memory of the modest founder whose name will be looked for in vain on the marble that enshrines his gift.

THE LAST OF THE INDIANS.

Another bridge on the right leads to Rex's lane. Abraham Rex kept a well-known store on Chestnut Hill in the Revolutionary times, and Watson credits him with introducing clover seed into this country. Here is a pointer for some of your farmer friends.

High up on that bluff, do you see the famed "Indian Rock"? It is a rude figure of Tedyuscung, the last of the Lenni Lenape or Delaware Indians to leave this section on the way toward the setting sun

“To the regions of the home-wind,
To the land of the hereafter.”

This same Tedyuscung is associated with the legend of the neighboring “Lovers’ Leap,” too.

His daughter loved a young Indian who had not found favor in his eyes. Despite their being threatened with death should they keep up their courtship against Tedyuscung’s pleasure, the two lovers were discovered one day sitting together on a rock up there; and, rather than face the inevitable penalty, they clasped arms and leaped down into the creek, almost 500 feet beneath them.

Rex’s lane is not so bad as some of its neighbors; but this faint praise must be taken for what it is worth.

The beauty of this spot has attracted the attention of our level-headed Century Wheelmen, and, right here, at Thomas’ Mill road, they have secured a delightful home for their Country Club.

THE CITY LINE.

Presently, when our cyclometers register a little over thirteen miles from the Public Building, our unique drive comes to an end at the City Line. This spot is being very generally designated among us as Andorra, another foreign name to add to our nomenclature. In Arabic, “Andorra” means “thick with trees” – not a bad name for a nursery, surely.

Of the several roads that present themselves to us here, one goes to Barren Hill and thence to Conshohocken or to Norristown; another falls into the Germantown and Perkiomen pike or brings us to the Broad Axe and Plymouth turnpike or to Cold Point; and the continuation of the City Line on our right (dubbed also Wissahickon road or avenue) strikes the Chestnut Hill pike at Flourtown; but we need not look for a roundabout way homeward; such a ride as we have just had may well be gone over again.

N.B. – Our route coupons are not abandoned; but they did not seem needed for this trip or the preceding one.

A.E.