

Trips Awheel: Where to Go and How to Get There

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Cycle Route No. 29 (1897-1898 series)

A Zizzag Ramble Through Historic Germantown: Time-Honored Relics at Every Turn

THEN AND NOW.

Dr. James Mease, devoting some pages of his "Picture of Philadelphia" (A. D. 1811) to the outlining of a few "Tours in the Vicinity," speaks as follows:

"The most direct way to Germantown is to pass up Third street, at the extremity of which you meet the turnpike road, and at the distance of six miles from the city reach that healthful village. There are to be had the well-known woolen hosiery, which bear the name of the town, manufactured in the families of the German settlers. Germantown is a summer retreat for a number of citizens, and, except its airy and elevated situation, being on the first ridge after you leave Philadelphia, has little to interest or detain strangers."

Years have rolled by since then; and scenes that were then familiar have now acquired, by age, an element of interest which they seemed to have lacked in the Doctor's eyes, not to speak of their ever-engrossing association with our history.

"Little to interest or detain strangers," indeed! Let us see what "we" can find in a zigzag ramble through Germantown, covering just a few squares of its main thoroughfare. The Belgian blocks of the latter are not as smooth as asphalt; be we surely can put up with it for so short a distance.

We run up North Broad to Cayuga, turn L into it; and at its intersection with Germantown avenue, wheel sharp R toward Wayne Junction bridge.

UP NEGLEE'S HILL.

We scarcely begin our roaming up the main street when, just beyond Wayne Junction bridge, those tiny houses L, Nos. 4518 and 4520, with their pent roofs, their small windows with green shutters and their walls thick enough for those of a fortress, give us an early foretaste of things to come.

The hill whose side we climb is Neglee's Hill, so named after the Neglee family; and on its summit on our left in Loudoun, a mansion erected about the middle of last century by Thomas Armatt and by him denominated Loudoun in memory of his previous home in Loudoun county, Virginia. Many a wounded American was brought here after the battle of Germantown.

The street now bordering the grounds of Loudoun has just been labeled "Louden street." City fathers, what does "Louden" mean Why not ticket it "London" right away, and burn a little more incense on the altar of American Anglomania? What's the sense of using American names in these states, anyhow?

GERMANOPOLIS REDIVIVA.

So you notice the Toland family homestead, that stone residence, No. 4810, on the other side of "Louden" street? It's first floor, considerably below the level of the roadway, tells a tale. It stood right there at the time of the Revolution, and was used by the British. One of their Hessian mercenaries, whose grave has since been identified in Lewisburg, way up in Union county, engraved a portrait of his King, Frederick the Great, on one of the window panes.

That other gray house, No. 4840, beyond the whitewashed fence L, was built where you see it some years after the erection of the Toland house (about 1747). Its stable was used as a hospital during the War of Independence. Those buildings in the field close by were tanneries in the olden times. This is the Wagner house.

Facing it on the opposite side of the street, that house, No. 4825, with the brass knocker, was built by Christopher Ottinger in 1776 -- a lucky year, surely!

POST-CICERONIAN LATIN.

See, on our right, the cemetery wall bordering East Logan street? Close to the corner, notice a piece of a tombstone with the inscription,

MEMEN

DO MORY

by the side of the symbolical crossbones.

The tombstone and the wall were part of John Dedier's house, erected 1773; the inscription, mutilated by the carver's chisel, is intended, of course, for the familiar "Memento Mori" -- Remember (you have) to die.

THE HENRYS, MILLERS, ETC.

Opposite the cemetery, that many windowed, ivy-clad and white-painted residence is that of the Henry family.

Beyond the cemetery, and on the same side of the street, that small gray house belonged to the Millers; the building at the back of it was a bake-house for the troops during the Revolution, according to Townsend Ward (from whom most of the facts I now mention were gleaned).

What is left of that round-top portico at No. 5010, L. is alone sufficient to attract our attention. Edward Royal's house, half of which has been modernized into a store, went back to 1747.

BITS FROM VATERLAND.

This brass plate on the barber's shop, No. 5109, with the inscription, "C. Kinzel, Cupping and Leeching," has a ticklishly antique look about it at this fin-de-siecle period of ours. It is quite in keeping with the place itself; for the latter sheltered the family of Thones Kunder back as far as 1683. It was there, and in that year, that the Friends held their very first meeting on our shores.

Manheim street, with the General Wayne Hotel at the corner, crosses our path here. I wonder how many such houses throughout this country have honored themselves by perpetuating the name of "Mad Anthony."

Manheim street itself owes its appellation to a very different source, Jacques M. Roset, an old-time resident, who came here in 1793, christened it thus "in honor of the beauty of the ladies of Manheim in Germany." Those frivolous Frenchmen! Goethe contented himself with speaking of the town as "Das freundliche, reinliche Mannheim" (pleasant, coquettish Mannheim).

WHERE STUART WORKED.

Opposite St. Stephens' Church, on our left, notice that square stone building, and farther way from the street a wide-porched mansion partly hidden from view by venerable shade trees. The stately abode apparently declines to bow to the new house numeration imported here a couple of years ago, and still preserves its old number, 4622. Here was the studio of Gilbert Stuart, Benjamin West's pupil, who painted George Washington's portrait in 1793.

SAUER AND WISTER.

On the site of that ivy-mantled house behind the iron wire fence, No. 5251, stood the home of Christopher Sauer, the father of German typography in this country. German booklets printed in English characters had appeared before this time, and both Bradford and Franklin had ventured to make a sparing use of German type; but our local German literature really begins with Christopher Sauer, the Germantown printer, typefounder and inkmaker, who, by the way, brought out, in 1743, the first Bible printed in any European language on this side.

Next to this, R, opposite Queen street, stands the house built by John Wister, in 1744. He and his brother, Casper, came from Hillspach, in Germany, and soon Anglicized their name Wuester to Wister; but a funny thing happened when Casper took the oath of allegiance in 1721; the clerk of the court put down his name as Wistar, and both he and his descendants stuck to the spelling; which accounts for the present Wisters and the Wistars of Germantown.

It was in the Wister homestead that the British General Agnew died of his wound at the battle of Germantown.

MISCELLANEOUS.

Queen street was originally known as Indian Queen lane, as it led to the inn of that name, which stood right there at the southwest corner of the street.

At No. 5275 (next door to the Wissahickon Wheelman's old club house), Siefken's provision store occupies the building of the original Germantown Bank, whose cashier, John F. Watson, better known to the reading public as our local annalist, lived and did most of his literary work there.

At 5400, Coulter street crosses us. John Coulter was an East India merchant, who earned considerable property right here, or as Townsend Ward puts it "from School House lane, to beyond Indian Queen lane."

And here is Mill street, which forever reminds Germantowners of the proud fact that here stood the first grist mill ever erected in this city. It was built in 1683 by an Englishman, Richard Townsend, who had come over with William Penn the year before.

The Morris mansion, No. 5442, right opposite Mill street, was built about 1772-75 by David Deshler. "As honest as David Deshler" was a popular saying of the day, which reflects credit on the old emigrant from Heildelberg. That old-fashioned door-knob must have been handled many a time by Washington during his residence here at the time of the fever epidemic of 1793.

General Howe occupied this mansion too; it was here he received a visit from the future King William IV, who was then a midshipman in the British Navy.

MARKET SQUARE.

Market square and its monument deserved more than a passing glance.

In the house now occupied by Patton's wall paper store, next to the National Bank. Governor Mifflin and Secretary Dallas transacted the business of our Commonwealth in 1793, when the dreaded fever drove out the city all those who could move out.

Weeping willows and other remarkably fine trees grace what is now Vernor Park L.; but no vestige is left of the buttonwood trees that marked so long the site of the Buttonwood Tavern, itself the successor of the Roebuck Tavern of 1740. Yonder hip-roofed mansion was erected by one of the Wisters in 1805.

Price street, on our right, has no connection with the commercial transactions of this town. It was laid through the land of Eli K. Price.

Here, opposite Rittenhouse street (formerly Poor House lane), stood the first toll-gate of the Germantown and Perkiomen turnpike.

THE FORMER "GREEN TREE."

There, next to the new M. E. Church in course of construction, at the corner of Main and High streets, the house now occupied by Dr. Alexis D. Smith, was once the Green Tree Hotel. The original building was erected in 1743 by a relative of Francis D. Pastorius. Indeed, Charles M. Pastorius, a carpenter and builder, lived in the place as late as 1832; hence it is often referred to as the Pastorius House. Washington and Lafayette both stayed here.

We necessarily pass unnoticed a number of places that the patriotic student would not forgive us for neglecting, were we bent on any other errand than a ramble awheel. Indeed, every second house on the main street of Germantown has its history and occupied a niche in our own annals.

We pass Tulpehocken street L and come to Washington lane (formerly Abingdon lane, it being the highway from Roxborough to Abingdon).

Do you see the old Concord schoolhouse R? It was begun in 1775. It was from behind its walls that General Agnew (mentioned above) was shot.

THE JOHNSON AND CHEWS.

At the corner of Johnson street, L. stood, not so long ago, what was claimed to be the first stone house erected in Philadelphia – the Johnson house, built in 1696. Modern improvements caused it to be pulled down; the greater the pity!

The extensive grounds on which John Johnson built his mansion in 1765-66 are there a little farther to the left. Dirck Jansen, the ancestor of the American family, was one of the original thirteen let holders of ye German Towne.

And facing it R is the well-known Chew house.

“Immortal Chew first set our Quakers right;

He made it plain they might resist and fight,”

said the popular ballad of our ancestors, who little knew at the time how intimately Chew’s name would become linked with a most important episode in our Revolutionary struggle.

We must come back here some day and travel over the various stages of the battle of Germantown.

ON THE TURN.

For the present we bid good-by to the main street and its Belgian blocks, and we turn R into Upsal avenue, between the Second Baptist Church R and the Bilimayer house L. It was in the latter that the American officers debated whether to push on into the town or to summon the British garrison in the Chew house to surrender before proceeding further. It was by the side of the house that Washington is said to have stood to issue his instructions during the battle.

At the end of one block up wheel R into Morten treet. These smooth roadways feel good after Main street.

Watch for the Lutheran Church R and turn L opposite it down, Walnut lane and its smooth brick pavement.

That station, L, at the end of it is Walnut Lane Station; the mud road crossing us at right angles is the unfinished end of Chew street.

Let us turn, R, into it, cross Chelten avenue and spin along again over the asphalt or macadam.

A CLUSTER OF “HOMES.”

The splendid loction of this Chew street has attracted the attention of the founders of not a few “homes,” not to speak of princely residential estates. As we cross Mill street observe, R, the fine Jewish Foster Home and Orphan Asylum, and next door to it the Home for the Aged of the Little Sisters of the Poor L; on the same street is St. Joseph’s Children’s Asylum, while that fence L beyond T. B. Merrick’s residence is the inclosure of a colored home. Of such institutions, too, may Germantown be proud.

At the end of Chew street turn, R, not too sharp (into Penn street), but on the other side of the Presbyterian Church into Wister street, which is the continuation of Stenton avenue on our left.

This wooded domain L is the old property of the Wisters, of whom we have already spoken.

A little practice in hill climbing will be afforded to you by this stiff rise, past Wister Station, and after it you may feel like turning homeward.

FISHER'S HOLLOW.

Before we leave Germantown for today (we have lifted but a corner of the curtain of her interesting stage) let us have a look at one of her most picturesque bits of wilderness.

At the Third Baptist Church, here on Wister street, we turn L into Wakefield street L, again at the end of it into Fisher's lane, and down, down to Fisher's Hollow. This rough riding will be all over in a minute or two. Don't you think this primitive landscape was worth coming to see?

Thomas Fisher was driven out of the city by the fever of 1793, and his wife being a daughter of William (son of James) Logan, he built his home here near Stenton, and the place obtained his name.

He was a ship-owner, like his father, who, by the way, ran a line of packet ships between this city and London long before the Revolution.

We bear R, beyond the sewer bridge, and half a mile brings us to Logan Station, whence the easy ride home is familiar to readers of our preceding trips.

A.E.