

Trips Awheel: Where to Go and How to Get There

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Cycle Route No. 35 (1897-1898 series)

A Ramble Through Fairmount Park. Various Means of Access. Old-Time Attractions and 1897 Improvements

The completion of the new bridge across the Schuylkill at Strawberry Hill (reported in these columns on Monday) suggests another ramble through our lovely Fairmount Park.

Our Trips Nos. 16 and 17 took us along the eastern bank of the river, and from the mouth of the Wissahickon to Andorra Nurseries.

Let us direct our course this time towards West Fairmount Park.

TWO WAYS TO GET THERE.

If we start, as usual, from our central point at the Public Buildings, our first objective is Spring Garden street, which we follow westward until it is intersected by the reservoir and the river.

Have you ever ridden over the fine new macadam drive now completed from Mantua avenue to the Park gate opposite the Zoo? Yet a little while and the western bank of the river between those two points will be so entirely metamorphosed as to be unrecognizable by those who were familiar with the wilderness that existed there up to this very year.

Go and see it. Cross the bridge. Just beyond it turn R into Thirty-first street, or, to avoid one block of uneven cobblestones, into Thirty-second street and it immediately brings you to beautifully asphalted Mantua avenue. You follow the latter as far as Thirty-fourth street, cross R over the railroad bridge, and the new driveway takes you to the Park gate, exactly one mile from Thirty-first and Spring Garden. Just before you come to the Girard Avenue bridge notice the West River Drive on your R; its black cinders make it at present an undesirable cycleway for us.

To reach the same entrance by way of Girard avenue bridge let us make our way into East Fairmount Park, as we did in Trip 16, pass Washington's monument on R, and the waterworks on L, and at Lincoln's statue bear up Lemon Hill on R.

If, by any chance, you don't feel in the humor for uphill exertion, bear into this straight clay road on R; it would probably be called Thirty-second street if it had a name or a number. In any case, it brings you without any fatigue to a point only a few yards east of the more hilly drive (see both on map); and we turn L over our fine Girard avenue bridge, a one and one-half million dollar substitute for the old wooden bridge of former days, to which we alluded once before.

Its western end is one mile and two tenths from Washington's monument.

PASSING BY THE ZOO.

Have you ever noticed in the Zoological Garden, on our left, the quaint little house occupied by the superintendent? Its peculiar square build, 26 feet every way, would alone attract attention. It is about 113 years old.

The singular dimensions of this residence, on a spot, too, where there must have been no lack of room at the time of its erection, naturally betray the hobby of a bachelor. And sure enough, John Penn, the grandson of the only William, contrived these bachelor quarters for himself by the wooded shore of the Schuylkill, collected therein some 500 or 600 volumes, for he was, or thought he was, a poet, and labelled his sanctum "Solitude." A few years previous the Duke of Wurtemberg, in Germany, had built a country residence that he had named "Solitude," and the fame of which had traveled far and near. This, it is said, suggested the name to John Penn.

If ever you be touring down the valley of the Neckar and the tiny Nesen in Wurtemberg, in Germany, go and see what remains of the original "Solitude," on the top of a high hill, about six miles west of Stuttgart.

INTO WEST FAIRMOUNT PARK.

Were you starting on a long trip, and desirous to spare yourself at first (a very wise thing to do), you might find it easier to reach Belmont avenue by keeping straight along the Belgian pavement of Girard avenue as far as Fortieth street, and there turn R almost opposite the Pennsylvania B. C., bearing L immediately after and straight on in front of Memorial Hall (as indicated on the map).

The route we are going to take is considerably less level, but ever so much more attractive.

We turn R under the Pennsylvania Railroad bridge, and up Lansdowne Drive.

ON THE LANSDOWNE DRIVE.

This elegant driveway is part of the 200-acre estate laid out here by John Penn, "the American" (the only one of William's descendants who was born in this country. The mansion erected on it before the Revolution by his nephew (another John, son of Richard Penn) was accidentally burned down on the Fourth of July, 1854, by some boys who were "celebrating."

One of its temporary occupants had been Joseph Bonaparte, the ex-King of Spain, who sought refuge here in 1816, after his brother's final collapse at Waterloo; and we have it in Washington's diary that once, at least, the great George "drank tea at Lansdowne, the seat of Mr. Penn, the elder."

William Penn's little brick house, on the bluff on L, is too familiar almost to require mention. Everybody is aware that it was built this very year 201 years ago, on what is now Letitia street, above Second, and was transferred to this place in 1883. Penn gave it to his daughter Letitia, as part of her marriage portion; hence the name of the street and of the house.

Fancy this diminutive abode being used at a tavern, as the sign of "The Woolpack," and for quite a number of years, at that.

A good thing that it was removed here; it would surely have disappeared in the course of time, like so many other interesting down-town mementos of our early days.

SWEET BRIAR HILL.

I see cyclists walking up more or less of that next hill every time I come this way; and it's little they know how I respect their common sense. Do I ride up it myself? I must say I do; but, I trust, I shall never be so demented as not to dismount at any part of it, even though the eyes of all Philadelphia happened to be turned in my direction, if I felt I was overtaxing my strength.

The Children's Playground L acts as a pleasant reminder that Sweet Briar Mansion R was once the home of Samuel Breck, the author of the bill for the establishment of the common school system in Pennsylvania.

Mr. Breck lived here till 1838, when he moved into town, complaining of the ague that the building of the waterworks dam had induced hereabouts, and died only fifteen years before the Centennial.

The house goes further back than Breck's time, however; it was erected by a Philadelphia merchant, a Mr. Ross, 106 years ago.

BY MEMORIAL AND HORTICULTURAL HALLS.

On the summit of Sweet Briar Hill, let us keep to the right, and leaving on L that sharp turn which would bring us to the Concourse in front of Memorial Hall, wind around Sweet Briar Vale, with its popular spring, down there on R.

As we near (the back of) Memorial Hall, just a mile from Lansdowne drive entrance, a particularly fine view of the Schuylkill, at this date uninterrupted by the foliage of intervening trees, presents itself to us.

A few yards farther, notice the restoration to something like its former state, of the ravine that lay here in its primitive beauty before the Centennial Exhibition. The bridge that carried so many thousands across from this point to Horticultural Hall has been removed, but the four sets of pillars that ornamented each of its corners are still there, holding to your gaze the suggestive date 1876, as a memento of "the glories that were."

BELMONT AVENUE.

When we strike Belmont avenue we have ridden 1 ½ miles from Lansdowne drive entrance, strange as it may seem, the distance between the two points by way of Fortieth and Girard avenue is just the same, the connecting driveways being mostly straight lines.

We turn R into Belmont avenue and a few whirls of our wheels bring us to the cross-road at the foot of Belmont Hill.

Instead of going straight up the hill, as we have done before, let us take either turn, R or L; both routes can be made to converge above Belmont Mansion (see map).

(1) AROUND GEORGE'S HILL.

Did you know that the Guard House here on R was the Ohio State building at our Exposition in 1876? Turn L around it; the asphaltum pavement you ride over for a while is a relic of that time, too; further on our L as we ride up is the British building, and nearer to us, higher up, is that erected by Rhode Island on our World's Fair grounds.

What think you of the view from the pavilion on the summit of this George's Hill, 210 feet above high tide?

Don't misname it "St. George's Hill," as some people do. Jesse George and his sister, Rebecca, were large-hearted enough to present these lovely 83 acres to the city for a public park in 1865. Their respected name should be guarded from the blunders of Anglomaniacs.

From this point you might run down to Fifty-second street, or to the Catholic Total Abstinence Fountain, which also dates from our Exhibition; let us turn right around the pavilion; the huge forty million gallon reservoir we have been wending around is the chief water supply of West Philadelphia.

Half a mile from the pavilion, let me draw your attention to a brand new driveway which now appears for the first time in print on the present map and is shown there, for greater prominence, by a dotted line. Wynnefield avenue is now laid out from near the foot of Belmont Hill on our R to Old Lancaster road (not pike) on L, and supplies, even now in its unfinished state, a welcome cross-cut to horsemen. Doubtless it will be largely used by us next season.

Belmont Hill is three-tenths of a mile farther; we cross it, and Belmont Mansion is on our R.

(2) AROUND BELMONT HILL.

If at the foot of Belmont Hill, we turn R and bear immediately L, a winding avenue leads us up its eastern flank and its steepness may give us an additional opportunity to enjoy afoot the charming panorama on our right. It is indeed little wonder that old William Peters called this eminence "Belmont" ("beautiful hill") when in 1742 he built his mansion; no wonder that the French general and author, Francois de Chastellux, described the latter as "a tasty little box in the most charming spot Nature could embellish!" Is not the whole landscape exquisite?

Belmont Mansion, by the route we have followed, is 2 ¼ m. from Lansdowne drive bridge.

We climb a little higher still and soon reach Mount Prospect drive on R; but how different from its former self!

A "BICYCLE SIDE-WAY."

For ½ a mile (at the present date) this fine driveway is flanked on either side by a commodious brick-paved "Bicycle Side-Way." Apropos of that "bicycle side-way" is not a bad word; it's the first time I have ever seen it on a signboard or elsewhere; may "sideways" increase and multiply!

WOODSIDE PARK AND STRAWBERRY HILL.

Just beyond its present termination on L, is Woodside Park, the latest of our suburban pleasure grounds; the cycling patronage extended to it during its short existence this season was very large, but what will it be next year, with the new means of access just supplied to it.

Do you see, a short distance ahead, a turn R down hill, which, a sign-post at present tells us, is the "drive to the River Road?" it is in reality the modernized Ford Road of other days, when they did ford across the Schuylkill, down there; but, now, it leads you to the new, just completed, Strawberry Hill bridge, and a beautiful new road takes you thence up to the Dauphin street entrance; the distance from the corner of Thirty-third and Diamond to this place (Woodside Park) being practically two miles.

TO CHAMOUNIX (MT. PROSPECT).

And now having enjoyed the most up-to-date kind of highways, would you care to be suddenly transported to surroundings that will bring you back in spirit to the days when the primeval forest spread its glory over the land?

Let us keep straight ahead along this loose, sandy road, or its narrow "sideway."

The original name of this tract of land was Metopton, and belonged to a Swedish pioneer, Swan Lom, who had obtained a grant of 400 acres right here. Its present official designation is Mt. Prospect, though the popular voice seems to give preference to "Chamounix," or "Chamouni," the name of that yellow-painted house erected at the end of the avenue, one mile from the Ford road, by one of our merchants, George Plumstead, in 1802.

TO FALLS BRIDGE.

And now follow this rugged track meandering this side of Chamouni Mansion, first L, then R, then L again; and the better to look at those tall forest trees dismount and walk to the bottom of the ravine. How is this for primitive wilderness, save for the modern stone bridge that was erected here recently and the fin de siècle trolley cars that run under it?

Right here beware! If, beyond the bridge, you turn L tempted by the improved look of the road, you will go back to Woodside Park (exactly $\frac{1}{2}$ a mile from here); if, on the contrary, you wish to reach Falls bridge, walk up this short steep rise, straight up from the bridge, turn R into Falls road, and walk down riverward; those two-tenths of a mile are at present well-nigh untravelable for man or beast. Once at the bridge, you know where you are, if you have read our Trip 16.

TO CITY LINE BRIDGE.

Before you actually strike Falls bridge, however, another new drive presents itself to you, the name and course of which appear in print, for the first time also, in to-day's Inquirer Cycle Map.

Neill Drive, a broad clay road, now meanders pleasantly from this point around a portion of Roberts' Hollow on to the City Line, just above the bridge. That low stone wall by the roadside reminds me of the miles of granite walls that accompany the traveler in his rambles through "the ould counthry." Arrah, more power to Neill Drive for that pleasant reminder!

The distance from bridge to bridge is exactly one mile.

HOMEWARD BOUND.

lic Buildings, along the straight course of our Trip No. 16.

Should you care to vary it, remember that Fairmount Park has in its every nook and corner a mine of historic lore ever ready for whoever will but take the trouble of glancing at it.

If you wish to bring home a few more mementos of your ride to-day bear L at foot of Strawberry Hill; its daily patronized fountain and the new bridge near it make it an unmistakable landmark on your way.

WOODFORD AND STRAWBERRY MANSIONS.

Climbing this hill is easy nowadays; still, don't do it if you "don't feel like it," and for your dear sweet sake put your pride in your pocket, no matter who may have the vulgar impertinence of commenting on your walking.

On its summit Woodford and Strawberry Mansion, on your L, are worthy of notice. Both of these were built in the early years of last century, and harbored as their guests many of the makers of our city.

All this land was once known as Swansonia, the property of the Swanson family, after whom Swanson street below Christian, was named. The Swansons, like Swan Lom mentioned above, were among the Swedes who landed on our shores long before William Penn came near the place. "Swanson" is, of course, the English adaptation of their real name 'Swensen," itself an extension of the original patronymic, "Sven."

EDGELEY.

Let us retrace our course to where we turned L to come here on top of Strawberry Hill, and wheel R around a tongue of land labeled "Edgeley."

You may have seen it designated "Edgerlie," "Edgley," "Edgelie," "Edgely," perhaps. This beautiful uncertainty may not be altogether unconnected with the fact that its first white owner could not have written the name at all, to save his neck.

The Edgeley estate, which once included Woodford as well as Ormiston and Mount Pleasant (which we are coming to presently), was granted to a blacksmith, William, Orian, who was among the first who ventured to settle on the banks of the Schuylkill. Chroniclers will have it that this worthy W. O.'s acquaintance with the letters of the alphabet was just sufficient to enable him to scrawl the initials of his own name, and not in the orthodox fashion either, for somehow his W always managed to stand on its head, and he never succeeded in penning a better signature than M. O. This did not prevent him from "getting there," in a worldly sense; but "Edgeley" seems to have suffered from a kind of phonetic blight ever since.

DR. P. S. PHYSICK'S COUNTRY HOME.

This house, marked No. 10. on our right, was once the country residence of Dr. Philip Syng Physick, the father of American surgery.

Dr. Physick was not always in a position to own such a country home as this was in its better days. We have his own statement for it that for three years after his return from Europe, a full-fledged Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons of London, an M.D. of Edinburgh, etc., he walked the streets of Philadelphia without making as much by his practice "as would put soles on his shoes." Let this be said, by the way of encouraging others.

His town residence was the "Physick House," or "Hill House," on Fourth and Union streets, originally built by Henry Hill, a well-known wine merchant, as well as a patriotic citizen, a member of our Committee of Safety in 1776, etc. Did you ever come across the old-time lines:

"Now stir the fire and bring the wine;
'Twas bottled Anno ninety-nine,
And bought of Henry Hill.
Pour out a bumper, here's a toast;
To those on earth we love the most
And those who love us still!"

ORMISTON, ROCKLAND.

At the police hut on the north side of the East Park reservoir we turn R again, and a little more than half a mile brings us to Ormiston. It's unaltered colonial aspect is striking.

Prothonotary Edward Burd, who purchased the place in 1793, bestowed upon it the name of the Haliburton homestead in Scotland (viz. Ormiston) in honor of his wife, nee Jane Haliburton.

Take next turn to the right again, past Rockland, another typical relic of times ago (see its roomy porch at the back overlooking the Schuylkill) and in a few minutes we reach the most pretentious of our landmarks today, Mount Pleasant, at one time the property of the traitor Benedict Arnold, best known to cyclists as The Dairy.

MOUNT PLEASANT.

It was purchased by the city in 1868, previous to which it had been a beer garden called Washington's Retreat.

The mansion, however, was erected as far back as 1761 by Sea Captain John McPherson, a scion of the McPhersons of Clunie in Scotland, who christened his new residence "Clunie." The name does not seem to have been very generally adopted, for I once found in a newspaper of the year 1766 an advertisement of his own in which he described himself as 'John McPherson, of Mt. Pleasant."

It appears he was then in quest of "A Gardiner," who was to be "well recommended for his Honesty, Sobriety, and Industry," and "a Single Man, of proper Resolution, Discretion and Humanity, to command several other Servants under him."

The student of our local history would find many a name of note among the successive owners or occupiers of old Mt. Pleasant since it left the hands of John McPherson. Don Juan de Merailles, Spanish Ambassador to the British Colonies in America; Baron de Steuben, Washington's trusty Inspector-General, who compiled right here the book of "Regulations," that became the manual of the Continental Army; Colonel Richard Hampton, Chief Justice Edward Shippen, General Jonathan Williams and others.

From Mt. Pleasant you can make your way back to starting point by way of Columbia avenue and Broad, or Dairy Hill and East River Drive; but, say, friend, before we part, don't you think Fairmount Park is about as good at any other park you have seen, eh? Now, honest.

A.E.