

The beauty of the historic Brandywine Valley

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The landmark decision by the Mount Cuba Foundation and Conservation Fund to acquire the 1,100-acre Woodlawn Trustees property for a National Park was a watershed for the historic Brandywine Valley. Coursing through one of the most beautiful landscapes in America, no other river of its size can rival the Brandywine for its unique contributions to history and industry.

The Brandywine rises in the 1,000-foot high Welsh Mountains of Pennsylvania and flows for 30 miles through the scenic Piedmont Plateau before tumbling down to Wilmington. The river provides drinking water to a quarter of a million people in two states, four counties, and 30 municipalities. Attracted to the pastoral countryside and nearby jobs in Wilmington and Philadelphia, 25,000 people have moved here since the turn of the century.

Its watershed is bisected by an arc traced in 1682 by William Penn that is the only circular state boundary in the U.S. Though 90 percent of the catchment is in Pennsylvania, the river is the sole source of drinking water for Wilmington, Delaware's largest city. Delaware separated from Pennsylvania in 1776, but the two states remain joined by a common river. It may be named after the Dutch word for brandy or a colonial mill owner. The Lenape knew it as Wauwaset. In 1638, the Swedes landed at Fort Christina at the mouth of the Fiskiekylen (Fishkill). Thomas Holme, Penn's first Surveyor General, drew a 1687 map with the Brandy Wine that flows into Christian Creek. The Lenape claimed William Penn granted them the land within one mile of the creek and protested that mill dams were blocking shad runs.

On Sept. 11, 1777, Gen. William Howe defeated George Washington along the Brandywine at the largest American Revolution battle. It was fought at Chadd's Ford because the Brandywine "canyon" above Wilmington was impassable to troops.

With a head higher than Niagara Falls, the Brandywine falls 160 feet from Chadds Ford to sea level at Wilmington. Its mills were close to tidewater allowing Wilmington millers to ship "Brandywine Superfine" flour to ocean ports in the Caribbean. In the 1780s, Oliver Evans invented an automatic flour mill that revolutionized the industrial processing of grains. In 1787, Thomas Gilpin built Wilmington's first papermill, eventually became Bancroft Mills, one of the largest textile mills in the world. During the 19th century, the Conestoga wagon (prairie schooner) hauled grain from Lancaster to the Brandywine flour mills.

In 1795, Jacob Broom built the first cotton mill along the creek. When it burnt down, he sold 95 acres in 1802 to Eleuthere Irenee du Pont for \$6,740. The DuPonts searched the Atlantic seaboard and settled on the Brandywine falls to power their gunpowder mills. The Hagley mills grew into the Fortune 500 DuPont Company corporation.

Frederick Law Olmstead, who designed Central Park before the Civil War and helped design Brandywine Park, added to the National Historic Register in 1976. The Victorian landscape movement was popular and in 1886

Olmstead recommended that the Wilmington water commissioners acquire the rolling creek-side terrain as a park to protect the city's water supply. In 1919, Lamot DuPont, President of DuPont Co. purchased land to construct Buck/Doe Run reservoir to protect the Brandywine as Wilmington's primary water source.

On Oct. 25, 1929, just days before the Black Monday stock market crash, Wilmington let contracts to build a two billion gallon reservoir along Old Mill Creek. The city named the reservoir after Col. E.M. Hoopes, city water commissioner who died in 1931. In 1947 Ruth Patrick founded the Limnology Dept. at the Academy of Natural Sciences to study the Brandywine Creek and in 1975 was the first woman on the DuPont Board of Directors.

Artists in the Brandywine school include Howard Pyle and N.C. Wyeth. In 1901, William Bancroft established Woodlawn Trustees to protect the Brandywine Valley for future generations. In 1946, landowners formed the Brandywine Valley Association as the nation's first small watershed organization. In 2010, Natural Lands Trust acquired the 1,263-acre ChesLen Preserve as a Pennsylvania Wild Plant Sanctuary. In 2012 the Nature Conservancy, the world's largest environmental organization, started the urban Brandywine-Wilmington project. Nonprofits now protect 25,800 acres as "Important Bird Areas" with the National Audubon Society.

The Brandywine Creek contributes drinking water, fishing/boating, and forest benefits of \$400 million a year with a net value of \$12.8 billion. Since 1961, the National Park Service has listed two dozen sites in the Brandywine Valley on the National Register of Historic Places. The Conservation Fund has rightly called the historic Brandywine one of "America's founding rivers."

Congratulations to the Mt. Cuba Foundation for preserving the Woodlawn Trustees site as a "transformative opportunity."

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