Trips Awheel: Where to Go and How to Get There

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Cycle Route No. 4 (1897-1898 series)

Philadelphia, Darby and Chester, A Pleasant 15-Mile Spin

N.B. – For brevity sake, R is used in these Trips Awheel for “right” or “on the rights.” L for “left” or “on the left,” and X for “crossing” or “crossroads.”

“After him came spurring hard
A gentleman, almost forspent with speed
He ask’d the way to Chester.”

Shakespeare’s Henry IV, I. I.

The way to Chester, sir? That’s easy. You first get on to the Darby road, formerly the “King’s Highway,” likewise the “Greett Southern Post Road;” it does not run due south by any means, as any cyclist can tell who has had the good fortune to use it with a N. E. wind in his back, but it once was the great highway to the South generally; hence its name.

Of late years they have been trying very hard to have it known as “Woodland avenue” as far as the city limits; I guess it will be some time before it ceases to be the “Darby road” with us.

And by the way, when it came to the question of re-christening the poor old thing might not its municipal sponsors have spelled its name correctly anyhow?

Andrew Hamilton’s place, right there in the present cemetery, has been called “Woodlands” for nearly two hundred years. It does look “kind o’ funny” to call “Woodland” avenue a thoroughfare that was cut through the “Woodlands” property and actually leads to the familiar “Woodlands” Cemetery. They say we are too Quakerish in Philadelphia to have any sense of humor; fiddlesticks!

One thing that was never denied us, it is gratifying to know, is the patriotism of our forefathers; in witness whereof, read the following. It’s part of a letter written home by a Hessian officer “at Philadelphia on the Neck,” under date of January 18, 1778.

“One of the few good consequences of this war is that more forests will be destroyed and the air will become purer. A man from this city by the name of Hamilton, along lost 150 acres of woodlands, which was cut down for the hospital, and he had sufficient patriotism to remark recently in company that it was good for the country.”

OUT OF TOWN.

The most direct way to reach this wrongly labeled “Woodland” avenue from our usual starting point, the Public Buildings, is out Chestnut or Walnut as far as Thirty-third on the former, and Thirty-fourth on the latter.
There we follow the avenue, past the University, and on to the cemetery where the asphalt ceases at present, and where uptowners find it most convenient to strike this road via Spring Garden and Thirty-ninth streets.

At the bifurcation, bear to the left; the right branch is the Baltimore pike, and that other offshoot R at the fountain, a little further, is Chester avenue; we keep along the cemetery grounds, down the hill.

I once picked up a newspaper article dated 1865, the writer of which said that the land right here on the west side of “that rough, uncared-for highway, the Darby road,” had been, within his own memory, “covered by the primitive forest and an undergrowth of native shrubbery and plants, in many places impervious to human footsteps.

The said highway leaves much to be desired yet; but you should have known it before the present Belgian blocks were laid!

The wretched condition of the road on each side of the trolley track up to Sixtieth street station, and beyond it, is a reminder of the past. Avoid it by using the trolley track itself from the point where it begins to be paved with vitrified bricks. With a little care you may do so, safely.

Notice, L the buildings and grounds of the Episcopalian Divinity School; and further on, at the intersection of Fifty-fourth street, observe the sign directing you to Bartram’s Garden.

The plank roads of long ago are unknown to many riders of the present generation and will soon become obsolete with us. Have a look at this remnant of one with which our modern electric car track is flanked as far as Mt. Moriah lane.

The cemetery of that name is down there, a short distance on our right.

And now the full width of the roadway is bricked; and it is plain sailing through Paschalville or Paschal, past the old Quakerish-looking Episcopalian Church of this section on L. St. Vincent’s Home for Little Infants on R, past Station U of the Philadelphia postal district (for you know, we are in the city, still) and on to the Blue Bell Inn, on Cobb’s Creek, which latter is the city limit in this direction, 6 miles from the Public Buildings.

On the left, facing the inn, note the Bell road to Tinicum: we shall travel it some day.

THE BLUE BELL.

An old-timer is this Blue Bell Inn. Robert Morton, who kept a (now highly interesting) diary during the Revolution, wrote down under the date of November 18, 1777: “This ev’g Lord Cornwallis with 2300 men, marched over the Bridge at the middle ferry, with intentions as is supposed to attack the Fort at Red Bank. The next morning on their march tow’ds Darby they surprised the American Piquet, who retreated to the house called the Blue Bell and fired from the windows and killed 2 Grenadiers; some of the Grenadiers rushed in to the House, bayonetted five, and the others would have shared the same fate had not the officers interfered.”

Of a different nature is the little episode narrated by Townsend Ward as having occurred here at the same epoch.
One day when Washington was in the parlor of this hostelry, he overheard one of the kitchen girls saying she would “love to kiss him.”

In a trice he had flung the door open and wanted to know which of the maidens had expressed the wish. None of them dared to plead guilty. “Then I’ll kiss all of you,” said the great George; and, true to his word as usual, he carried out his statement on the spot. One of the girls was still alive in 1855, says Townsend Ward, and was wont to relate the incident with no little pride.

In those days the inn was kept by the Paschal family, after whom the village of Paschalville was named; and long before that, a mill had been erected here where the creek crosses the road, by Governor Printz, in the early days of the Swedish settlements in these parts. In Penn’s time the mill fell into the hands of a certain William Cobb, and the creek gradually assumed his name.

The traffic along this road must have been of some importance even then, for as early as 1732 the Assembly ordered a bridge to be constructed here; and in 1734 the Governor was asked to explain why it was not built yet, although several persons had been drowned while endeavoring to cross the creek. The Governor’s explanation was that the Commissioners of Philadelphia and those of Chester county had been unable to come to an agreement in the matter; he would see to it, however, without delay.

DARBY BOROUGH.

Here we leave Philadelphia city and county: we cross into Delaware county, and about a mile brings us past Darby Station down to another stream, Darby Creek, or, as Gabriel Thomas described it 200 years ago, “the famous Derby River which comes from the Cumbry by Derby town wherein are several fulling-mills, corn-mills, etc.”

Here our road bifurcates at the Buttonwood Hotel; the R turn goes to Lansdowne on the Baltimore pike (we shall refer to it at some later date); we take the left between the ancient inn and Paxon’s modern restaurant.

There has been a tavern on the site of the Buttonwood ever since George Wood moved the hearts of the justices in his favor by setting forth in his petition for a license that he had “laboured for some years under almost continued indisposition of Body and thereby rendered incapable of taking the necessary care of his plantation,” and that he had a large family to maintain, etc. This was in 1739. George Wood’s plea reads quaint by the light of modern days.

A FINE ROAD.

The time is not very far gone when it was a hard task to drive up this hill with a light load; don’t grumble at it now for being steep; the surface is so smooth. And, in any case, if it demands too great an effort on your part to pedal it up, have sense enough to not attempt it.

We pay six cents at this toll gate for our franchise all the way to Chester and we go on our way rejoicing; it feels so good having he whole expanse of a good road right, left and in front of us.

From Sharon Hill we glide to Glenolden, past its handsome little public hall, past Warwick on our L. and on to Norwood.

Did you ever read Henry Ward Beecher’s novel “Norwood?” It had been recently published when this place was started in 1872, and its name was bestowed on the new locality.
Next to the comfort of a suburban residence in such sections as these, what do you think of the pleasure of cycling through them?

ANOTHER WHITE HORSE.

And here is another White Horse Inn, ten miles from start. The inscription over that snow-white steed, “Established in 1770,” does not tell the whole truth.

Exactly third-five years earlier than that a petition had been presented on behalf of the hostelry and had been indorsed by the court, “allowed for beer and syder only.”

The road itself had been laid out long before that time; and it were a boon for travelers of every kind nowadays if a certain regulation made for its benefit on November 12, 1678 had been generally adopted throughout the country.

Said regulation provided “That every p’son should within the space of two months, as far as his land Reaches, make good and passable wayes from neighbour to neighbor, with bridges where it needs. To the end that neighbours on occasions may meet together. Those neglecting, to forfit 23 guilders.”

MOORE’S, RIDLEY, LEIPERVILLE

Down we run to another tollgate. This in Moore’s. Notice the turn L to Essington and the defunct Lazzaretto; we shall use it ere long.

From the summit of the next rise we get a lovely view of the Delaware; we are now in Ridley. John Simcock, an old-time land-owner hereabouts came from Cheshire, England, and gave the place the name of his native village, Ridley.

Here in Ridley Park there stood once a well-known landmark. “Salutations Inn” it was called, and many a shinkicking contest did the old Swedes hold there for cider the man who first cried “Stop! Enough!” having to stand drinks all around.

Don’t misname this next place, 12 ¾ m. It is not “Leperville,” nor is it in any way associated with the Lazzaretto or quarantine station, once located yonder on the river. It commemorates Thomas Leiper, of Strathaven, in Lanarkshire Scotland, who came to this country in 1764. He is credited with being the first man in Pennsylvania who openly advocated a rupture with England, and he set about raising a fund for that purpose at a time when others scarcely ventured to whisper their discontent.

Do you take any interest in old-time newspapers when they turn up in your way? Here is a tid-bit from the United States Gazette of August 20, 1828:

“The late Thomas Leiper, Esq., of this city, contemplated, in 1790, a canal along his estate in Delaware county, in order to complete an easy communication between his quarries on Crum Creek and the Delaware. His views were not perfectly comprehended by the Legislature at that time, and he found himself foiled in his attempt. In 1807 he caused a railroad – the first in this country – to be constructed from his quarries to Ridley Creek.”

We run down under the bridge at Crum Lynne station and we presently reach tollgate No. 1, where we give up our ticket. We cyclists are thankful for small mercies in general, and we do not fail to appreciate
any little friendly leniency on the part of turnpike companies in particular. On this pike, all you have to do on receiving your ticket is pin it conspicuously on your coat and to display it at every gate you pass by—a decided improvement on the continual dismounting necessitated by the punching of your ticket under other regimes.

TWO WAYS INTO THE CITY.

All this section on the left down to the river is Eddystone, and now, as we approach Ridley Creek, two means of access to Chester city present themselves to us. What say you to our traveling both? We’ll make sure to see one of Chester’s most notable institutions, the Pennsylvania Military College, on our way in, and we shall take the more southerly road on the return route. Afterwards you will be able to select for yourself.

So, we cross the creek (a poor piece of roadway), turn sharp R beyond it over those Belgian blocks, and L across the railroad tracks into Fourteenth street.

A splendid location is that of the Pennsylvania Military College, that imposing building on our right, with accommodation for the boarding and training of 150 cadets. No amateur cadets, either, are the pupils of this establishments, fur during the late war, when General Lee’s army invaded our Commonwealth, they were out with their battery in active service for two months.

Fourteenth street comes to an end at Potter street, which we may follow on the right, some day, to go to Media along the Providence road.

Turn L into Potter street for one square R into Thirteenth street (poor riding at this date) and L at the end of it into Providence road for one square also. There at the B. and O. station, the smooth brick pavement of Madison street will take you to Sixth street and a couple of squares of the latter (on the right) will bring you to the Pennsylvania Railroad station at Market street (14 ½ miles).

OLD CHESTER.

Of course, you are aware that Chester is the oldest city in Pennsylvania. The Swedish village of Upland stood here when the first batch of Penn’s people reached our shores; and right glad they were of its existence, for the Upper Delaware was frozen over and they had to stay here for the whole of the winter of 1681-82 before they could proceed to what is now Philadelphia.

Let us walk down Market street toward the Delaware.

At the corner of Fifth is Cambridge House—don’t forget your coupon.

A few houses below Fifth street, on the right, is the old Chester Court House, now bearing the inscription “City Hall Offices.” It was erected in 1724, but ceased to be used as a court house when Delaware county was separated from Chester in 1789, and the county seat moved to Media.

General Lafayette was entertained here at the time of his second visit to this country in 1824. I wonder did he trot out that favorite joke of his in Chester as well as up country. You have heard it, of course. He naturally met numbers of his old companions at arms and had a peculiar habit of asking each of them whether he had got married since the war. If the answer was affirmative, “happy fellow!” the General would say. If, on the contrary, the reply was negative, “lucky dog!” he would chuckle.
Right opposite the old court house is the Washington House, erected there in 1747 as the “Pennsylvania Arms,” but subsequently renamed after the most honored guest that had ever crossed its threshold. The title deed of the land is dated 1686.

Further down the style of the Lincoln Hotel at the corner of Second street must strike you as old-fashioned, too. It used to be the Blue Ball Inn; some slight alterations have been made in the internal arrangement, and that middle window on Second street takes the place of the original door; but it is the same old building that was raised here a century ago by Francis Richardson. He was a man who dreamed of a commercial rivalry between Chester and Philadelphia which never materialized.

The Steamboat Hotel on our left, at the corner of Front street, was built by him about 1770 for a private residence.

And this brings us to the wharf, where you may take the steamer home, if you so desire.

Should you prefer wheeling home again, go out Third street, L onto Morton street, R into Ninth and out Ninth to the handsome M. E. Church at Eddystone; turn L beyond bridge, and in a few moments you are back on the pike again. The distance is about the same as by the other route, and I fear there is little to choose between them for comfort at the present date.

A. E.