Trips Awheel: Where to go and how to get there

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Cycle Route 6 (1897-98 Series.)

Philadelphia to Willow Grove, Via Old York Pike

The bicycle meet to be held at Willow Grove on the 29th inst. suggests the present trip along the popular Old York Road – “road” or pike,” as you like; we don’t seem to be all agreed on that point since its modern improvement. As to its first title, “Old,” no one cares to deny it, not so much because it was first ordered to be laid out 'way back in 1693 as because it was the original highway between our city and New York. In the course of time a shorter road Gothamward, via Frankford and Bristol, was “rung in” as new, and this one was “rung out” as old, and as such it has since remained. It was ever thus!

If ever you walked or rode up Fourth street from Market street, and passed by St. George’s Church, with the date 1763 on its memorial tablet, and crossed Vine street, you must have noticed a bifurcation at the angle of which stands a huge flagpole; at its foot, a small fountain, around which street urchins “mostly congregate;” on its top the figure of an Indian used as a weather-vane.

That is the spot where the Old York Road branched off from Fourth street. That bed of most unlovely cobble stones unofficially labeled “York avenue,” on the left of the pole, is the modern representative of the former highway.

Thence it joined the Germantown road at (what is now) Green street, and struck out for itself northward at the intersection of Rising Sun lane with the present Twelfth street, where it now practically begins for us moderners.

We may strike it here from North Broad street, the intervening section of Rising Sun lane being now asphalted; or we may enjoy the asphalt of Broad street as far as it goes at the present date, and then, picking our way across the vacant lots on our right for the distance of one block, reach the pike near the extremity of Hunting Park.

NORTHWARD ON THE PIKE.

How comparatively unknown to the majority of Philadelphians is Hunting Park, here on R! Yet it was dedicated as long ago as 1856. It was originally the Hunting Park Race Course, the first regular race course established in Philadelphia, but was abandoned as such under pressure of the laws against horse-racing.

By the way, I ought to have said, “the first regular modern race-course” for, as you know, our familiar “Race” street has been so designated for 100 years and more, and it did not get its name for nothing. Races used to held once along the site now occupied by the street (it was Sassafras street then), and, at an earlier period, on a rough circular track encircling the then vacant land between Race street and the Schuylkill.
Down we run (though carefully) to Wingohocking Creek. Wingohocking was an Indian chief, who felt so friendly towards James Logan (William Penn’s secretary and right-hand man) that he wished to exchange names with him, after Indian fashion. Logan, who naturally could not assent to the proposal, compromised by bestowing his red friend’s name on the creek that flowed through his property. We must visit Stenton Park, Logan’s country seat, yonder on our left, some day.

Do you observe this fine estate, with the large shade trees and the remarkable colonial mansion, on our right, as we climb up away from the creek?

It was the property of the old-time sugar manufacturer, Lovering, and is now the residence of J. B. Lippincott, the Market street publisher.

This railroad station, Logan, commemorates the historical personage I have just spoken of. What a noble avenue Broad street will be when it is paved throughout to this bridge, a distance of 5 ½ miles from the Public Buildings. Let us hope the naked ugliness of the said bridge will be in some way cloaked over by that time.

Right and left of us Fisher’s lane runs, westward to Logan street (Germantown), eastward to Feltonville and Tacony Creek.

Just a little beyond the station, notice on R by the roadside one of the milestones of other days, “2 m. to R. S.” it says and “4 m. to P.”

At the tollgate, R to Olney, L through Thorp’s lane to Walnut lane and northern Germantown.

Here we are informed that the amount of toll we have to pay is “1 cent per gate for the first three, and 8 cents at the last one,” so as to make up 7 cents for the whole distance; and in a few minutes are at Branchtown (6 ¾ miles).

BRANCHTOWN, MILESTOWN P. O.

You have read of Benjamin Lay, the eccentric character who was the talk of young Philadelphia during the first half of the last century? Not only would he eat no flesh, a true Pythagorean as he was, but he would not even use the wool of sheep in his clothing and never wore any but flax-made garments. It was here, in a cave, close to the New York road at Branchtown, that he elected to reside. To the credit of the man let it remain that he was the first private individual to raise his voice in public and to use his pen against slavery.

This is one of the many localities inflicted with a double name that we meet so often in our trips and three of which we shall come across to-day. The postoffice of Branchtown is Milestown; and should you happen to see the latter misprinted “Milestone” in some of the maps at present on our market, you must not conclude that it is in any way connected with the mileage of the road; it is Miles’ town, the “town” of Griffith “Miles,” who purchased some 250 acres hereabouts when our city was just twelve years old. He was one of a committee appointed to lay out the York road. Some people were inclined to establish a connection between this fact and the passing of the road through his property; how very wicked-minded some people were in the olden times!
Green lane on R before we reach Branchtown Hotel was opened to Crescentville (or Grubbtown as it was then called), a little over 100 years ago.

A few yards further, on L, by the side of the hotel, is Mill street; it would take you northward to the Limekiln pike or southward to Germantown.

GODFREY VS. HADLEY.

The name given by the sponsors of our future city plan to the very next street above Branchtown Hotel commemorates an old-time worthy of whom this city might well be proud, although he did not happen to strike the fancy of Benjamin Franklin. Benjamin described Thomas Godfrey as a self-taught mathematician, great in his way, “but,” he adds, “like most great mathematicians I have every met with, he expected universal precision in everything said, or was for ever denying or distinguishing upon trifles to the disturbance of all conversation.”

This notwithstanding, this same Thomas Godfrey invented the world-known mariner’s quadrant right here in Philadelphia in 1730, and the pity of it is that it is generally known by the name of Hadley, an Englishmen, who has no claim to its discovery.

Godfrey, who was a painter and glazier by trade, was engaged on some repairs at Logan’s place at Stenton, when a piece of glass on the ground attracted his attention, and suggested to him the idea of the quadrant. With the pecuniary assistance of his employer he worked up this idea and when the quadrant was evolved, he sent it to be tested at sea by a friend of his, who was going to Jamaica. This friend was unwise enough to show it to an English homebound captain, who, in his turn, communicated the invention to a Londoner named Hadley, and you readily guess, of course, how it came to pass that the discovery of the Philadelphian Thomas Godfrey is now known to half the world as Hadley’s quadrant.

Inexperienced riders and others, beware of the trolley track crossing as you run down the hill from Branchtown Hotel; one ounce of caution if often worth a ton of security.

Beyond the next hilltop, Oak Lane (7 ½ m.) lies on our R; Hall W. Mercer named it so, tradition says, in remembrance of a primeval oak on his farm, for which “he had a great veneration.”

And at the next tollgate, Haines street on L supplies a connecting link with Limekiln pike and a means of access to Central Germantown as far as Green street.

INTO MONTGOMERY COUNTY.

Eight miles from start we cross the city line, where the City Line Hotel, for a long while defunct, is now revived as an ice cream parlor.

Watch for the next road L beyond the city line; the very first house north of it, on L, embowered among a profusion of aged trees, was once the home of Letitia Mott, whose long life of philanthropy closed about seventeen years ago.

And here on our right is Melrose.
“Oh, the monks of Melrose, they made good kail
On Fridays when they fasted:
Oh, they never wanted beef or ale
As long as and their neighbors’ lasted.”

So said an English ballad of long ago. Grand old Melrose Abbey. Go out of your way, if necessary, to see it, whenever your rambles take you to the banks of the Tweed in bonnie Scotland. I wish I had a thousand voices to proclaim the beauties of America to those Americans who seem to think there is nothing worth gazing upon west of the Atlantic; but Gothic architecture several centuries old, I must acknowledge, we do not possess here. How on earth could we?

And yonder, on R, too, is Ashbourne. They called it Bounty Town once upon a time; thrifty soldiers, home from the war, had started the town with the bounties they had saved up.

Yes, Montgomery county generally, and this Cheltenham township in particular, is decidedly hilly; so is the district around Cheltenham, Eng., whence came Toby Leach, who settled right here as early as 1682, when Philadelphia was founded.

And here comes Ogontz (9 1/2 m) – an unmistakably Indian name; it means “little pickerel,” I believe, and was given to the locality by Jay Cooke (the once noted banker and railroad magnate) in memory of an Indian chief, the friend of his boyhood, who was thus designated.

Previous to Cooke’s time the place has always been known as Shoemaker’s Mill, or Shoemakertown, as it had been settled by two brothers, George and Isaac Shoemaker (Schuhmacher) who had come over from Cresheim, in Germany, in 1685.

This, by the way, is the place where young Robert Collyer, whose reputation as a preacher and a lecturer was subsequently to fill the two hemispheres, worked as a hammer maker and tried is ‘prentice hand at Methodist preaching. Many a time and oft he tramped the distance we have just ridden between Shoemakertown and the Letitia Mott house, and the Quakeress, it is said, played a considerable part in his conversion to Unitarianism.

Ogontz district, with its galaxy of princely estates and its beautiful roads, deserves that we should pay it a separate visit on some other occasion, and give it a separate description in these columns.

To-day we rush down (carefully) past East Church road on R. (it goes to Oxford Church) to the old Ogontz mill, past West Church road on L (it goes to St. Thomas Church on the Spring House pike), and now we climb that long Ogontz hill, the terror of so many wayfarers awheel.

On a conspicuous board at the top of the hill may be read the warning: “Bicyclers are cautioned against coasting down this grade. DANGEROUS!” Comment is needless.

A short distance beyond this, almost opposite the old-time 8-mile stone from Philadelphia, see that ivy-mantled gateway on L? Yonder costly mansion on the well-kept grounds, within that inclusure, is Mr. John Wanamaker’s. We shall come here again, another time, as I said.

Another tollhouse. That road R goes to Huntingdon Valley; straight before us is Jenkintown (11 m.).
It used to be Jenkins Town, and was so entered on Scull’s map in 1758; and I saw “William Jenkins” mentioned in the list of residents appointed to supervise the erection of a meeting house at this place as early as 1692. Its population is now well on the way toward the two-thousand mark.

At the corner on L, opposite Cottman House, notice the road to Weldon and the Limekiln pike; and now, down we run past Noble Station. John Noble settled not very many miles from here, on the bank of the Delaware, as far back as 1675, and if you keep your eyes open you will see that his descendants are still hereabouts. By the way, did you ever remark that unusually straight stretch of railroad running northeast from this place to Rydal?

Rydal used to be Benezet, and not a name to be ashamed of, either. Few men in our history displayed more active philanthropy that old Anthony Benezet, the Huguenot-Quaker, who settled in Philadelphia in 1731 and bestowed such tender care on the American prisoners who lingered in our city dungeons during its occupation by the British Army during the Revolution.

And up we climb to where Mary Moore kept a shibbeen in 1787. Some folks tried to change Mooretown to Shepherd’s and then they altered Shepherd’s to Abington Postoffice and now “it’s a toss” between the first and the last names. It’s 12 m. from our starting point.

And, talking of old times, do you see the date 1714 on the Abington Presbyterian Church on our left?

This road, crossing our own here, is Susquehanna street. Penn’s surveyor, Holme, intended it to run in a direct line from the Delaware near Torresdale (where there was some likelihood of Philadelphia being laid out) right on to the Susquehanna.

And the hills are still with us. Time was when the section we are now making for was known as Hill township; the irony of fate willed it, however, that this had no reference to is numerous heights, but to Philip Hill, a large landholder here, often named in our records for 1696-1702. Moreland township was its right name, and is still.

MORELAND TOWNSHIP.

It was named Moreland by William Penn himself, in honor of Nicholas More, a London physician, who came over in the good ship Geoffrey soon after the arrival of the Welcome, in the fall of 1682. Dr. More, finding that his occupation, instead of being “gone,” like Hamlet’s, had not come yet, went in for what is nowadays termed “politics,” and became speaker of the Assembly, Chief Justice, or “Prior Justice,” of the Provincial Court, etc. His indictment under ten specific charges by the assembly in 1685 led the young community into an imbroglio which was happily terminated by his death two years later. What could a medical man do, anyway, in a new settlement, where (William Penn said in one of his letters) there were “no diseases but some agues, and no work for the doctors save the setting of bones?” Gabriel Thomas, too, writing in 1689, says “There are many curious and excellent herbs, roots and drugs of great virtue, which make the Indians, by a right application of them, as able doctors and surgeons as any in Europe.” Why, even clergymen were thought to be sufficiently well versed in all branches of knowledge to cope with any of the pathological emergencies of every-day life; and you may have read about a well-known divine in those days who received word while in the pulpit that a certain negro
woman was suddenly seized with a fever; the learned man paused in his sermon just long enough to 
write on the flyleaf of his hymn book “Let the wench be bled freely and wait until I come,” and quietly 
gone on with his pastoral work.

During this digression of mine we have passed by tiny Rubican Station; you can just see it from the pike 
on L; and a short 1/2 mile farther a conspicuous board shows us on L a direct cut to the Willow Grove 
bicycle track; this is the upper end of the Welsh road. On R it goes down to Holmesburg on the 
Delaware. Take it if you be so minded, cross the railroad, and an easy half-mile of coasting will land you 
at the track.

If you are bound for the village, keep straight on, and, 14 m. from start you may observe a number of 
willow trees. In 1792 Reading Howell saw a man planting a quantity of them here, and he christened 
the place “Willow Grove.” It had been knows as “Round Meadow Run” for almost a century before 
that.

A.E.