Trips Awheel: Where to Go and How to Get There
Philadelphia Inquirer August 9, 1897, p. 5
Cycle Route 18 (1897-98 series)

Philadelphia to Reading – A Picturesque Ride

There are two favorite ways to strike Norristown (our first objective point on the road to Reading), but when I am on a “get there quick” expedition, there is but one for me, the Barren Hill and Ridge pike route.

To-day we are in a hurry; indeed the very appearance of this trip awheel in this issue is a last lingering reflection of last week’s hurly-burly; so we shall leave the Conshohocken road for another day and make straight for Barren Hill.

Thanks to your Schuylkill River drive and Wissahickon drive (see Trips Nos. 16 and 17), we get there almost too soon. Did you hear our visitors lavishing their praises on our beauteous park last week?

TO NORRISTOWN.

At the Andorra Nurseries we turn L up the hill; on its summit we wheel R at Lafayette postoffice, and away we go past the cemetery where you may notice a monument erected to the soldiers of White Marsh township who died in the war.

Observe presently a turn L to Spring Mill and one R to Marble Hall and out toward Fort Washington, and at the Harmonville crossing, a mile further, the R road would lead us to Plymouth meeting and the L to Conshohocken.

I trust no sane rider need be warned against coasting on such a rocky road as this; if out of the twenty miles that separate Philadelphia from Norristown, fourteen are the best in the country, you surely may be expected to exercise a little caution and patience over the remaining ones.

Marple’s Hotel on yonder creek was once a well-known landmark under the name of the Seven Stars.

Away we go through the Black Horse and there we are in Norristown.

As we shall pay Norristown another call soon, we follow the main street straight out westward, past the State Asylum and out of the borough.

JEFFERSONVILLE.

A little over two miles out that handsome granite stone Centennial Presbyterian Church of Jeffersonville deserves a passing glance. It was built in the Centennial year of our nation, 1876.

At the hotel bear to the right, the turning L goes to Phoenixville (8 miles).

Don’t you like to see localities named after deserving personages in our national history? You recognize the portrait on the signboard of that inn, of course. You remember the young lawyer who, as far back as 1774, wanted to know if any one reason could be assigned “why 100,000 electors in Great Britain should
give law to 4,000,000 in the States of America,” and who a couple of years later in his little room in the house of Bricklayer Jacob Graff, corner of Seventh and Market streets, wrote out that document known this wide world over as the Declaration of American Independence.

Jeffersonville has got a good name.

A PICTURE FROM EVERY HILLTOP.

Observe this next crossing, almost four miles from Norristown. Two miles L lies Shannonville; the Shannons were Irish settlers who came here in the eighteenth century. A mile and a half R is Fairview, on the Germantown and Perkiomen pike, which has been getting nearer and nearer to us again after giving us the cold sholder at Barren Hill.

Half a mile further quite a climb awaits us up Mount Kirk. Those miniature terraces with which the road surface is intersected every little while break any spurt we may manage to get up; still we must not be selfish and forget the claims of our friend the horse; to him they are of considerable help as he toils up such hills as this with a load. Dear old fellow, it’s bad enough that we cyclists should be charged with having made him a drug in the market.

Take breath at the church up here and look back at the valley you have just left; and on the top of this other rise, just beyond the Eagleville Hotel, do pause and take in the magnificent panorama spread out beneath your eyes. A ride to Reading is a hilly ride, I grant; but is not every one of these heights worth climbing for the sake of the reward we get on its summit, and does not such a country as this deserve that every rider through it should have his head erect, his eyes wide open and his heartstrings responsive to every touch of nature’s hand?

About half a mile ahead lies Lower Providence. At the fork opposite the Baptist church we keep L of course, and down we go for quite a distance to Skippack Creek, then up a steep ascent and down again to Perkiomen bridge.

We cross Sprogel’s Creek (christened after two brothers, John and Lodwich Sprogel, who were invited here from Holland by William Penn). This red clay road is not bad in this weather; be careful when you use it after rain.

POTTSTOWN.

And here we are in Pottstown with its main street in just as poor condition as ever.

Things have not been very bright financially with Pottstown for quite a time, and we ought to take that into consideration; who knows but a change for the better will have taken place by the time we come round here again?

This used to be known as Potts Grove, after John Potts, the miller and iron manufacturer, who laid it out in 1732. John was born in Germantown in 1710, and died in 1768, a “gentleman of unblemished honor and integrity, known, beloved and lamented,” said the Pennsylvania Gazette of that period.

Opposite the handsome fountain erected by the M. E. Richards Post, 593 G.A.R., we are 40 ½ m. from start.
INTO BERKS COUNTY.

If the main street of this borough is poor, its continuation over Manatawney Creek, towards Stowe Postoffice, is positively wretched; fortunately this desert of fine, black dust and clinkers is not much more than half a mile long.

This little station just inside the Berks county line is Bramcote, with a hotel of the same name. What on earth brought “Bramcote” here? It is the good old Saxon name of a Nottinghamshire parish in England, “Bram-cote,” the “hut among the broom.”

And now a stretch of level road – a “rare bird” with us to-day – takes us to Douglassville (47 m.)

This was once Warrensburg, the name being changed in honor of an influential resident whose grandchildren still live here. This, too, reminds one of the old country. Little did the proud Douglas, of Scotch history, ever dream that an age would come when it would be said:

“The Duke of Norfolk deals in salt
The Douglas in red herrings.
And guerdon’d sword and titled land
Are’ pow’rless to the notes of hand
Of Rothschild and the Barings.”

At the bifurcation near the hotel, after we cross the railroad track, we turn L; the right fork goes to Reading also, in a circuitous way, by Yellow House; the residents do not speak well of it, and I confess I have never traveled it.

MORE LANDSCAPE.

On a hillock, half a mile beyond the hotel, notice a pretty view of a bend in the Schuylkill; quite close to the road.’

A mile farther, take care you keep R at this bifurcation with a red brick school house in the angle. This is Monocacy School. The village itself is down this road L, on the river bank.

Who will say that, some day, this place won’t be known as “Noxy?” You wonder how? Why, at the present date, the name is spelled Monocacy, but it is pronounced by the natives practically “M’nok’sy,” and what is easier than the change from M’nok’sy to Noksy and the simplification of the latter to Noxy?

Our local nomenclature abounds with such puzzling, yet not unnatural transformations.

Even as it is “Monocacy” is but a bungling corruption of the Indian “Menagassi” or “Menakessi,” the crooked stream.”

That hill ahead of us does look steep, does it not? If you be a novice try a little ankle-action, and see what different it will make in your climbing.

I fear you may think me monotonous, but what say you of the landscape around you right here? That hill R is Monocacy Hill, that other eminence beyond Baumstown is Kinsey Mountain, a couple of miles further still is old Guldin Hill, and that other far away, surmounted by what looks like some German castle overlooking the Rhine, is Neversink Mountain.
“When you have seen one green field you have seen all green fields,” said Old Dr. Johnson. What rubbish! The pompous doctor had no soul, anyhow; and he knew nothing of this country at that.

Past various branchings L, to Monocacy and R to Yellow House, we run down to Monocacy Creek. Yonder smoky town L on river side is Birdsboro. This next climb is probably the worst on our whole route; however, it is only another illustration of the proverbial “darkest hour immediately before dawn,” for the seven or eight miles that separate us from Reading are comparatively easy, though not level, of course.

As we come down through Baumstown, the watery-red shade of the Red Lion on that tavern sign reminds me that the water from the pump close to it is the coldest I know of for miles along this road. You might take the hint.

A couple of miles beyond the said Pale-red Lion, observe a turning R to Jacksonwald (2 m.) near a mill on a small creek which we cross on “Antietam Bridge” (erected by the turnpike company in 1877, says the inscription on the stone).

Exeter Station is one mile away L.

Nearer and nearer we get to the cluster of hills that has so long barred out horizon; here we are at the Black Bear. On our right is Mt. Penn, on our left Neversink.

At the last toll-house we are informed that the five cents demanded of us are not intended for the short stretch between this and the city, but for the distance we traveled since the last six cents we paid down.

Presently we ride into Perkiomen avenue, and at its junction with Penn street we are 59 miles from home.

A.E.