

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, April 8, 2013

The Story of Kennett: Bayard Taylor (1825–1878), a member of one of the area's oldest families, was a well-known poet, author, and world traveler of the mid-19th century. If the 10 most important writers of the "Longfellow School" (Emerson, Bryant, Whittier, Thoreau, Hawthorne, etc.) were listed, Taylor might not be among them, but if 20 such were listed, he would definitely be included. There is no question that he was Kennett Square's most outstanding citizen of the century in which he lived.

Taylor traveled much of the world, being familiar with all the European countries. On one of his last trips home from Europe in 1874, when his mansion called "Cedarcroft," just north of Kennett, was nearing completion, he had a yearn to visit Iceland (how many Americans had been there in those times?), so he made his way to Scotland and took a steamer from Aberdeen. After his Iceland visit, he returned via the same route and finally got home. In October 1874, just before his 50th birthday, he was honored at a festive occasion at the new picnic grove of the Wilmington & Western Railroad on the Red Clay Creek at Mount Cuba. President Rutherford B. Hayes appointed Bayard Taylor as Ambassador to Bismarck's newly Federated Germany in 1877, which position he held at the time of his death in Berlin. He is buried in Longwood Cemetery.

Taylor's novels and poems often had local surroundings. His long poem "Lars" mentioned the Hockessin Friends Meeting House. For local people, however, his most famous writing was the novel "The Story of Kennett," which was first published in 1866. While not a factual story, it was intertwined with actual history, and its characters were local people except for the hero Gilbert Potter, who was completely fictitious. Some of the names of those portrayed were changed; some were actual. The story was set in the year 1796, although the culprit, a highwayman named "Sandy Flash," whose real name was James Fitzpatrick, was hanged at Chester in 1778.

Rewritten as a play, the "Story of Kennett" was enacted around the community many times. My first recollection was in 1933, when the American Legion in Kennett Square staged it at Longwood's Open Air Theatre. In that production, Knowles "Bus" Bowen portrayed Gilbert Potter, Mary D. "Miss Mame" Lang was Betsy Lavender, Alice Lang (Miss Mame's sister-in-law) was Mary Potter, Scott McMurtrie was Sandy Flash, and Muriel Swift was Deb Smith. I forget the names of the others in the cast. The play was enacted again by the Legion in 1940 and 1955, as part of three-day celebrations of the Borough of Kennett Square.

My father always had an interest in the "Story of Kennett." With his new 1915 Stanley Model 720, he visited and photographed many of the scenes described in the story, including New Garden Cross Roads (none of the roads there were paved in 1915), the Spade and Trowel Tavern at Toughkenamon, the Anvil Tavern near Longwood Gardens, the Old Kennett Friends Meeting House, the Gilbert Potter house at Clifton Mills (I never understood this, since Potter was a fictitious character), and the Barton Barn on South Walnut Street in Kennett, with the hood of his Stanley showing in the foreground. From these photos and more taken of the 1933 Pageant, he had colored glass slides made and, with a large projector, gave "Story of Kennett" presentations to small audiences in the late 1930s. He tried again on his 70th birthday on the lawn at Auburn Heights in 1955, but many in his audience fell asleep before it was over.