

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, March 20, 2017

How Auburn Heights became a State Park Preserve: I have been asked to describe the thoughts that went into our decision to give Auburn Heights to the State of Delaware prior to the public announcement of the gift in April 2003. Here are my recollections.

If good health and middle age could last forever, this would not have happened. However, as the 21st century approached, it became clear that Ruth and I were really 20th-century people and could not do as much as was once the case. I had already started the Steam Team in 1997, and that was going well, with interest in Stanley cars and live-steam model trains having been spread to those of younger generations. Looking ahead, how could the property with its very special Queen Anne “mansion” and the grounds and other buildings necessary for continuing the activities of the Steam Team be preserved? I knew what it cost to maintain Auburn Heights, even when I could do much of the work “in house,” and I knew we did not have the financial ability to properly endow it into the future. I sought advice from others.

Irene du Pont Jr. was good enough to hear me out. His suggestion was that possibly we should contact either New Castle County or the state to see if either had an interest. Coincidentally, we had a visit from County Executive Tom Gordon and his assistant Sherry Freebury, who said New Castle County really wanted the property and for us to dictate the terms. Something didn't seem just right, however, so we declined their offer to take negotiations further. Our friend Cam Yorkston wanted us to talk with Mark Chura, then of the state's Division of Parks and Recreation, and the first of several discussions was arranged. These discussions took place during the year 2002. We met Charles A. “Chazz” Salkin, then director of the division, as well as several of his top assistants. We liked their collective ideas on how they would maintain the property and manage the various programs that were envisioned.

Toward the end of 2002, another major development occurred in Yorklyn. Victor Posner, owner of the NVF Company, had died and money was needed to settle his estate. Word came to the Yorklyn plant managers from Posner's office in Florida ordering them to sell surrounding real estate that was not required for paper and fibre manufacturing. About 180 acres of unimproved land was offered for sale to the highest bidder, some of it having a common line with Auburn Heights and about 75 acres of it being in Pennsylvania. James E. Jordan Jr., then environmental director for NVF, exerted his influence to keep this pristine land from falling to housing developers, two of whom were bidding in the \$6 million range. While nothing was in writing, the Division of Parks said they would buy the land if they were sure they could have Auburn Heights. I said that if they were successful in the land deal, we would follow through in donating our home, carriage house, and museum building, and the four acres on which they were situated, to the State of Delaware. A \$1 million endowment went with our gift, and the state paid Posner's heirs \$5.4 million for the surrounding land. A final complication was worked out whereby the State of Delaware traded the Pennsylvania portion to the Delaware Nature Society in return for 74 acres directly across Route 82 from Auburn Heights. Very soon, the Nature Society sold the land in Pennsylvania to the Southern Chester County Land Trust.

On April 17, 2003, a ceremony was held in the Marshall Steam Museum announcing the decisions of the previous months. It was attended by state dignitaries, leaders of other non-profits in the area, and many members of the Steam Team. In the agreement, Ruth and I agreed to vacate the property in 2008. The Steam Team immediately took steps to become a 501©(3) corporation to be called the Friends of Auburn Heights Preserve and elected a Board of Directors. Non-profit status was officially received in the spring of 2004, and more formal By-Laws were adopted. In the summer of 2005, Governor Ruth Ann Minner and her party visited, rode the Mountain Wagon, and had dinner on the mansion's front porch.

On November 25, 2008, the title was transferred to the State of Delaware, and Ruth and I moved to Cokesbury Village. The year 2008 was also the last year any paper and fibre machines operated in the Yorklyn mills, and final bankruptcy of NVF was at hand. The early years of the preserve can be covered in a later edition.