

How to Celebrate a Day Off: Nineteenth Century Working People (Part 2): What was the “draw” of a picnic grove like Mount Cuba to a working family who could afford a Sunday vacation a few times each summer? We have to believe its appeal was mostly to city people who wanted to enjoy a picnic lunch along a cool and quiet stream. At this location, there were two water-powered mills being fed from a single mill race and its dam about ¼ mile upstream. Major dams on Red Clay Creek had been built about one mile apart, so the backed-up water behind these dams had created several ponds up to six feet deep. Together with the attractive small meadow alongside the creek, suitable for amusement buildings, and the steep hillsides of the “only mountain in Delaware” just across the creek, Mount Cuba got high marks as a location for a small amusement park.

On August 22, 1874, the Friends of Hockessin, comprised mostly of members of Hockessin Friends Meeting, past and present, rented the “Grove” from the Wilmington & Western Railroad, which then had two years’ experience in operating trains both directions from Mount Cuba. Emma Worrell, the longtime librarian at Wilmington Friends School who had grown up when her parents attended Hockessin Meeting, was asked to write a poem commemorating the occasion, which she did in grand style. A Wilmington printer did a nice job of completing the piece, and it’s easy to see how chuckles would emerge from the crowd as families’ names of an earlier generation were read by the author. For example, Joshua T. Heald, president of Wilmington’s Board of Trade and also president and chief promoter of the new railroad, was mentioned as he was born on what is now Benge Road in Auburn (Yorklyn), along with John Jackson of Hockessin, chief engineer of the building of the railroad. Mitchells, Sharplesses, Chandlers, the Marshalls of Marshall’s Bridge, and many others, were honored or memorialized.

In October that year, an even-more-festive occasion took place at Mount Cuba. Bayard Taylor (1825-1878), Kennett Square’s most prominent citizen of the 19th century, was home briefly from his assignment as Ambassador to Germany, and the “home folks” wanted to honor him on his 50th birthday (actually, it was a few months before his birthday). By this time, about four trains were running daily between Landenberg and Wilmington, a distance of 20 miles, and about 10 passenger and freight stations had been erected at a rapid pace. Still believing in the drawing power of the Picnic Grove for special excursions, a few buildings had sprung up at Mount Cuba, including a small chapel, a “dance hall,” and an open theater with a stage, etc. Arrangements were made, mostly by the “home folks” at Kennett Square, to use this new facility, bringing many of its attendees by train from Hockessin, Yorklyn, or Wilmington, with the remainder arriving by horse-and-buggy. The remarks of the special speakers, including those of the famous author himself, were recorded and printed for distribution. Our best account comes from the Wilmington, Kennett Square, and West Chester newspapers of the time.

Bayard Taylor was one of the “Longfellow School” of poets and short-story writers that dominated the middle to the 19th century. If you were to pick 10 from this “school,” such as Emerson, Thoreau, Whittier, Whitman, Bryant, and Hawthorne, Taylor might not be among them, but he was certainly in the top 20. He traveled more than any of them and wrote of his travels to faraway places. For example, just before he was at Mount Cuba in October 1874, he had taken the train to Aberdeen in Scotland and then went to Iceland for a few weeks before returning via the same route. Sadly, it turned out that his 1874-75 trip back home was his last. Married to a woman of German descent, he died in Berlin in 1878. The funeral procession from Taylor’s unfinished home at Cedarcroft, north of Kennett Square, to Longwood Cemetery for the burial was the longest Kennett had experienced: when the hearse arrived at Longwood, the last buggies had not yet left Cedarcroft. Local people liked Taylor’s writings because of his novel *The Story of Kennett* (1866) and a long poem entitled “Lars” about Lenni-Lenape Indians in the Hockessin area.

The Wilmington & Western Railroad and its successors continued and expanded the Mount Cuba Picnic Grove until the mid-1890s. With the growth of Brandywine Springs, also served by the Wilmington & Western (by

that time, it was the Landenberg Branch of the B&O), the smaller and more distant Mount Cuba Grove was abandoned. It's unclear whether the original railroads owned the grove, but when the revived Wilmington & Western wanted to use the land alongside the track in the same way, it was privately owned by J. Emerson Eastburn, who owned the nearby farms, homes, and mills. The story of how the present Mount Cuba Picnic Grove has served the revived Wilmington & Western since 1966 will be covered in part 3, to be shared next week.