

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, June 25, 2012

First Section, Auburn Heights Preserve Trail: This past week, paving was taking place on the first section of the planned six-mile trail, this section a one-mile hillside loop around the former DeStafney farm, purchased by the State of Delaware from NVF at the end of 2002. This initial section, with access from Benge Road below Auburn Heights, is intended for use by hikers, cyclists, and antique car operators and is expected to open this summer. The high point is at an elevation of about 340 feet, with the trail climbing from Red Clay Creek at an elevation of about 185 feet at this location.

The second section to be opened within a year will cross the meadow between Benge Road and Yorklyn Road, with a new bridge crossing the creek (near the old trolley bridge) behind the Marshall Brothers Paper Mill. Hopefully, the third section will parallel the Wilmington & Western Railroad track from Yorklyn to Hockessin. The fourth section will move southeast from Yorklyn Road and the railroad up Gun Club Hill, and the fifth and final section will descend the hill on the east side, to cross Red Clay Creek, Route 82, and the railroad on a high bridge to terminate on Oversee Farm, owned by the state and administered as part of the Auburn Heights Preserve. Naturally, this ambitious plan will take major funding and will require several years to complete.

Lewis DeStafney bought a hillside farm in Mill Creek Hundred near Yorklyn of approximately 125 acres, about 1923. The entrance was from a public road running from the Hockessin Friends Meeting House to Marshall's Bridge in Pennsylvania, a distance of just over two miles. The Marshalls for whom the bridge was named attended Hockessin Friends Meeting because of this road, and that's where my grandparents, Israel and Lizzie (Mitchell), met. When this road behind the DeStafney farm was closed about 1930, Joseph DeStafney, Lewis's son, obtained permission from the Marshall Brothers Paper Company to enter from Benge Road, fording the creek below an old 18th-century dam. In 1937, DeStafney built a low bridge at this ford that washed away in the flood of 1938. His replacement, built much higher above the water, is still used today. It is across this bridge that the new trail is accessed, but the bridge is scheduled for improvement or replacement.

Joe DeStafney occupied the old farmhouse and used the barn for his dairy cattle. His brothers Pete and Jim built new homes near the old house. Later, Joe's son Francis grew mushrooms in a small "house" behind the other buildings. Joe used much of Marshall Brothers, National Fibre, and Helme Snuff Company farmland for grazing his cattle. Most of his fences were barbed wire strung between trees, where this was possible. Sometimes cattle would cross the bridge over the mill race and tramp through my mother's rock garden, before being found on the lawn of Auburn Heights. About 1970, the DeStafney family sold most of the farm to NVF, keeping about eight acres around their homes and outbuildings. NVF, which already owned adjacent land, hoped to develop 400 home sites, but fortunately that plan fell through before it got very far. About 50 acres of the farm, much of it wooded, was in Pennsylvania, and that portion is owned by the Land Conservancy for Southern Chester County. There are great views from the west side of the "DeStafney" property when traveling the new trail.