

## Tom Marshall's Weekly News, November 12, 2012

**T. Coleman du Pont and the DuPont Highway:** In a broad sense, this is a follow-up to the *Weekly News* articles on the Delaware Railroad that opened commerce to lower Delaware and the surrounding peninsula (October 1 and 8, 2012). By the time of World War I, with automobiles starting to dominate a larger portion of our population's lives, there was a great demand for improved highways on which to drive these early cars. My father drove a Stanley to Rehoboth in 1912, but it was a real adventure over many unpaved and sandy roads. Rail service was good, both passenger and freight, but times were changing with new traveler demands.

T. Coleman du Pont (1863–1930) was one of three du Pont cousins who rescued the company of the same name and established it firmly under family control for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (the other two were Pierre S. (Longwood Gardens) and Alfred I. (Nemours Foundation). Coleman came back to Delaware just after 1900 after managing one of the company's plants in Kentucky. He became president of the DuPont Company at that time and served until 1915.

Soon after his retirement from active management of the DuPont Company, he offered the State of Delaware the gift of a paved highway, 18 feet wide, from one end of the state to the other. Plans were drawn and the route laid out from Claymont in the north to Selbyville in the south, about 110 miles (it is not clear whether the Philadelphia Pike north of Wilmington was already paved). With the close of World War I in 1918, work began in earnest, with Coleman du Pont supervising its every detail and convincing reluctant landowners that the highway would enhance, not diminish, the value of their properties. He owned a huge Pierce Arrow 66, in which he traveled up and down the state as construction took place.

The original route roughly paralleled the railroad, but it was often a few miles to the east, opening up new communities and serving others long bypassed by rail. Following South Market Street out of Wilmington, it passed Minquadales and Farnhurst, bypassing New Castle, and when it got to where the old National Road went off to the southwest toward Baltimore, a new name was applied to this junction called "State Road." It crossed the C & D Canal on a drawbridge at St. Georges and passed through Odessa (formerly Cantwell's Bridge) and Blackbird, entering Kent County at Smyrna, just east of the railroad town of Clayton. Passing to the east of Cheswold, it entered Dover and followed State Street through the center of town. From Dover south, the DuPont Highway served cities and towns some miles east of the railroad, and when it ended at the Maryland line, it was over 20 miles to the east. Magnolia, Frederica, Milford, Ellendale, Georgetown (county seat of Sussex County), Millsboro, Dagsboro, Frankford, and Selbyville rounded out the communities served by the new highway. The surface was concrete and 18 feet wide, plus gravel shoulders. The many new fences at appropriate places were planted with roses, which were spectacular in early summer (before the multi-flora rose debacle).

When major highways were designated by U.S. route numbers, Route 13 was assigned to the DuPont Highway north of Dover, but this route followed a later highway paralleling the railroad, and the DuPont Highway became U.S. Route 113 south of the State Capital. About 1927, highway traffic to the coastal resorts of Lewes and Rehoboth had a new concrete road of similar width veering off at Milford. Prior to that, coastal traffic from the north had to go south to Georgetown, and then east to the coast unless it wanted to navigate the tedious and sandy road from Milford to Nassau. The first couple of years my parents rented at Rehoboth in the mid-1920s, they traveled via Georgetown.

In the early 1930s, it was determined that the DuPont Highway should be a dual highway from Wilmington to the State Capital, a distance of 45 miles. Starting from the north, we watched it progress as a second road was built alongside the original. This was one of the very first dual highways in America. For a seemingly long time, it was dual to the south edge of Smyrna, and the last 10 miles seemed to progress very slowly. Several towns had been bypassed by this time, however, including Smyrna, Dover, Frederica, and Milford. Georgetown's bypass came later, and with the building of Delaware Route 1 to the beach areas, new limited-access bypasses were built farther from most of these communities.