

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, May 9, 2016

The DeStafney Farm behind Auburn Heights: Louis DeStafney bought a nearly abandoned farm on the west side of Red Clay Creek in 1923. The total acreage was about 120, with 50 acres or so in Pennsylvania- the remainder in Delaware. Access to the farm was from Meeting House Road, which ran from Marshall's Bridge to the Hockessin Friends Meeting House, about 2¼ miles. The portion of this road from Marshall's Bridge to present-day Auburn, much of it in Pennsylvania, was abandoned in 1930.

Louis had three sons, Joseph, Pete, and Jim. Joe and his wife, Gert, occupied the old farmhouse next to the barn, while Pete and Jim built smaller homes for their families about 1930. I didn't know all the children, but Joe had three sons and one daughter, and Pete had at least one daughter. Joe had dairy cows, his youngest son, Francis ,grew mushrooms in the backyard, and Pete had chickens and delivered fresh eggs throughout the community. Jim died many years before his brothers, and I really never knew him.

Joe DeStafney obtained an informal right-of-way into their farm from Bengé Road near Marshall Brothers (part of National Vulcanized Fibre Co.), but the driveway had to cross the meadow and ford Red Clay Creek. Early cars with high wheels usually handled this ford, but in 1936 or '37 a crude bridge was built above the stream. All was well until the massive flood in July 1938 took out the bridge. The second bridge attempt was much more successful, and the 1938-39 bridge is still in service, although a much sturdier iron truss bridge is planned for the Auburn Valley Trail system. DeStafney needed grazing space for his dairy herd, and he leased unused land from NVF and from the George W. Helme Snuff Company. Most of his fences consisted of barbed wire nailed to trees where that was possible. His cattle could usually be seen in the meadows on both sides of Auburn Heights, in addition to the hillside across Route 82, then part of the Snuff Mill Farm. Occasionally the curious in the herd would cross the ornate footbridge over the mill race near my mother's rock garden and graze on the lawn of Auburn Heights.

About 1970, NVF bought the DeStafney farm except for approximately eight acres around their family houses. With the adjacent Marshall Brothers mill property, this tract was now nearly 200 acres. Then controlled by Victor Posner, the company floated a plan to build 400 houses on the property. Fortunately, this plan didn't get far, as many things were against it. NVF established a dump at one end of the property but continued to let the DeStafneys graze their cattle, although the family had switched from milking cows to beef cattle. Joe DeStafney Jr., who had worked for the DuPont Company during much of his lifetime, continued this operation but with a much smaller herd that he would buy and sell seasonally. NVF allowed him to continue, but this ended soon after the State of Delaware bought the property for the Auburn Heights Preserve in 2002.

The first sections of the Auburn Valley Trail system were dedicated by Governor Markell in 2012. There is a hillside loop around the perimeter of the DeStafney farm just over one mile long, and a shorter trail in the meadow paralleling the mill race along the bed of the old Kennett-to-Brandywine Springs trolley line. These trails were designed by the State Division of Parks and Recreation for hikers, bikers, and steam cars.