

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, January 1, 2018

Wawaset Park and John Philip Sousa: Wawaset Park is still a very nice section of Wilmington, developed by the DuPont Company to partially satisfy the demand for housing at the end of and immediately after World War I. On the west side of the city, it covers the area between 7th Street and Pennsylvania Avenue and between Greenhill Avenue and the Bancroft Parkway. This area, which would normally cover about 15 blocks, was laid out with curved streets and tiny rotaries, with well built homes of all sizes on small lots. When built, the area definitely “had character,” and so it does today. The residents of Wawaset Park are very proud to live there.

The famed band leader, John Philip Sousa (1854-1932), also known as the “March King,” probably never knew he visited Wawaset Park, but he did, several times. About 1900 this open area on Wilmington’s west side became a fairground (I think it was called Greenhill Park), with a harness track and several other infrastructures typical of the early 20th century. One of its features was trapshooting, and Sousa was an ardent trapshooter. In the World War I years, what was billed as the Delaware State Fair was held there, and the operators capitalized on Sousa’s popularity to increase business. No doubt he was paid, and his band performed, and he could also pursue his love of trapshooting. This was about the time Alfred I. du Pont of Nemours objected to the shooting at the DuPont Gun Club, one of the finest clubs in the country, which was located in the middle of the present DuPont Experimental Station. In 1915, the DuPont Gun Club was closed, and the Wilmington Trapshooting Association, with duPont’s help, came into being with new shooting grounds at Bellevue, shooting toward the embankment of the Pennsylvania Railroad.

The profitability of the fairground was probably marginal, and the DuPont Company bought the property, and with the help of the well-known architect Edward L. Palmer of Baltimore had homes in Wawaset Park ready for occupancy soon after 1920. As the trees grew to their present mammoth size, the area is even more attractive as a place to live, even though the homes will soon be 100 years old. Of course, many people prefer more modern conveniences.

Sousa wrote 55 marches, the first 35 when he was conductor of the United States Marine Band, known as the “President’s Own.” During this period from 1879 to 1892, he served five U.S. presidents. After he formed his own famous band, he traveled all over the world and received medals from several European monarchs. His most famous march, “The Stars and Stripes Forever,” was written on shipboard in 1897, and he claimed he never changed one note after the melody first came to him. Later it was adopted as the official march of the United States.

In the early 1920s, Ralph and Florence Willis of Penns Grove, New Jersey, invited Sousa to come to their home for lunch during a nearby trapshoot he was attending. They were surprised when he accepted, and apparently he had such a good time that he continued to send Mrs. Willis small presents for years after that. (I think Ralph Willis was a great-great uncle of the actor Bruce Willis, but I have not been able to check this out). My father found Sousa to be more aloof and hard to talk to. He was honored at a shoot at the Lancaster (PA) Gun Club and was presented with a top-grade Hamilton watch. Sousa nodded but did not express enthusiasm for his gift. In his final years, his band was downsized (if it existed at all), but he still was a sought-after band leader who would conduct concerts with local talent. He conducted for President Hoover at the White House in 1930 and in March 1932 had rehearsed with a local band in Reading, Pennsylvania, for a performance there. That night he apparently rested well, but the next morning he died over breakfast in his room at the Abraham Lincoln Hotel in Reading from a massive heart attack.

The Delaware State Fair, which has been a fixture at the Harrington Fairgrounds for nearly 80 years, now encompasses more than 300 acres and lasts about 10 days at the end of July each year. The first mention of a Delaware State Fair was in 1869, when it was held at a fairground in Wilmington. In 1878, it was moved to the Fairview Park Fairgrounds in Dover. It must have been sometime after 1900 that it was moved to Greenhill Park (Wawaset Park). In 1917, it was advertised to be at a fairground in Elsmere. Finally, in 1920, it was moved

to Harrington, where the event lasted four days on a fairground of 30 acres and was promoted as the “Kent-Sussex Fair.” I think it was about 1940 when it became the Delaware State Fair. By that time, in addition to the harness track and the many buildings for the annual fair itself, there were two traps for clay-target shooting, and the Kent County Championship was held at 50 targets in April each year. I shot in this event twice in the late 1940s but could not compete for the championship as I did not live in the county. The championship event was always followed by a delicious home-cooked turkey dinner in the old firehouse.