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Back to the Past: A column highlighting the natural history of the Watershed

The Valley of the Brandywine: A stream in Durham with a History Connected Therewith

By C. Laubach, June 21, 1883

The specialist can never believe that his subject is narrow; to him it widens and widens until he is lost in wonder and amazement at the immensity of a matter that is by common consent looked at by the mass of mankind as of little moment. When the theologians tell astronomers that their subject is an old one, the astronomers may without fear of successful contradiction say: "So is ours with this difference, however, that ours is older." On the other hand if astronomers tell us that their department covers the universe the historians may say: "History does."

I have perceived, in studying history how many incidental questions come up in other departments of physical science. I must know something of chemistry, of geology and mineralogy, of botany, natural philosophy, mathematics, etc. History in itself constitutes a vast and complex study.

But (on to sic) our subject, "The Valley of the Brandywine". This valley is located partly in Durham, Bucks County, PA. It extends into the neighboring county of Northampton, in a northwesterly direction. Its length is upwards of 2 miles and breadth from one-half mile to a mile. It is extremely fertile and is dotted with substantial farms and farmhouses. It is drained by a small brooklet from which the valley derives its name.

Standing on the divide where the waters flow, some into the Brandywine which empties into Durham creek, and the other into Fry's Run which empties into the Delaware, we see stretched out and before us one of the most magnificent landscapes imaginable. In the distance we see the narrows or "Pennsylvania Palisades" decked with their summer foliage of green, looming majestically in the distance, skirted as it were, by the Highlands of New Jersey on the east, and lowermost spur of the South Mountains on the west.

On either side of us, are the anticlinal elevations of the second spur, and before us lies the beautiful valley of the Brandywine. In this valley are situated several fine and important deposits of glacial drift.

These deposits are in places from 4 to 15 or more feet in the thickness, and being lodged on elevated plateaus of limestone, form considerable elevations or hills throughout the valley.

The stream derives its appellation from the fact that in early times, when the country was new, a large and commodious distillery was established on its course which supplied all the country for miles with the genuine article. In these early days the appellation for apple jack was "Brandywein", and became anglicized into Brandywine. Later when a new road leading from the valley was opened to the Delaware River, it became necessary to build a bridge across the stream. The bridge was to be of stone throughout. The masons, thinking that the more apple whiskey they consumed the lighter their task would seem, applied themselves so diligently to the task of emptying the contents of the Demijohn "to where it would do the most good", that the bridge as well as the stream are known in the locality to this date by that title.

The distillery was known for miles for its choice productions. In those early days, during the revolution and after, up to the year 1818, the native or seedlings apple trees were annually loaded with luscious fruit.

In fact if those stories of old people may be believed--and we do most firmly believe them--the apples were or had a more luscious or mellow texture. After the date mentioned above, the distillery was abandoned and was utilized by George Stem, a son of the proprietor, who turned it into a machine and blacksmith shop. Mr. Stem was an inventor and mechanic of great abilities. He was constantly planning machinery; he planned and erected in 1827 the first lever (Sic) horse power used in this section and several of the primitive wheels connected with the first machine are still in existence. Before this, the grain was thrashed, the rye with flails and the wheat and oats by trampling of animals, on a solid floor. In this way two men could thresh 200 sheaves of rye in 12 hours; and, of wheat, with the aid of four horses, it could average about 300 sheaves. Farmers, nowadays, with the lightning threshers are unable to appreciate the hardships of the pioneer farmer. At the immediate source of the Brandywine is a fine grove of native persimmons (*Diospyros virginiana*), whose ovate, oblong leaves and pale yellow flowers add greatly to the beauty of the surroundings. The trees in the fall of the year when covered with fruit are a pleasant sight, and many a mouth is puckered while attempting to partake of this astringent fruit. This beautiful valley was once the home of primitive man; many implements that were possessed by this primitive people have been found and placed in the museum of the writer of this sketch. In a future article we will describe their habitat and mode of life as well as give the location of their most important camping grounds, etc., etc.

At the confluence of the Brandywine with Durham creek is located the birthplace of General Daniel Morgan, the distinguished Revolutionary officer.

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