

White Clay Creek State Park and Preserve

White Clay Creek State Park and Preserve, located approximately 1.5 miles north of Newark, Delaware in the highly varied topography of the Piedmont Uplands, spans White Clay Creek and runs along the Delaware/Pennsylvania state line.¹ The park includes such notable features as a Bi-State preserve, the Judge Morris Estate, miles of hiking and mountain biking trails, a stage for artistic performances, a golf course, and a “Wild and Scenic River.” Its history is intertwined with the early farmers and millers of northern Delaware, the duPont family, and a prominent U.S. District Court Judge.

Pre-History of the Park Area

For almost 12,000 years, Native American groups inhabited the area of the White Clay Creek Valley. With settlements perched on higher ground in the floodplain, they used the area to hunt and fish and gather food, medicines, dyes, and fibers. Smaller groups used the uplands above White Clay Creek to fashion projectile points and other tools from outcrops of quartz. Some evidence of squash, bean, and corn agriculture also exists prior to European contact.²

Early European Settlers

The first European settlements in the area occurred sometime after 1683, when William Penn created two grants of land on the “north” side of White Clay Creek. The larger of these grants was called “Hop-Yard” and the other was named “Hope.”³ European farmers moved into the area and cleared much of the oak and hickory forests that covered the floodplain. New Castle County farmsteads established prior to 1730 tended to be situated close to rivers and streams and were oriented towards the water source.⁴ Wheat and corn was planted and cattle grazed in the newly-made meadows. The floodplain offered fertile soil for planting.

As the population of the area increased, so did the need for more arable land, leading to newer houses and barns being built into the side of slopes deemed to be too steep for planting. Local stone (fieldstone) was quarried for use in the buildings.⁵ A mill was established on the property sometime before 1798. It was eventually torn down and then re-assembled by subsequent property owners. The second mill was in service beginning in 1840 until it ceased operations sometime after 1881.⁶ There is also evidence of a small 19th-century free black settlement on the grounds.⁷

By 1730, one local resident, a Quaker immigrant named John Chambers, acquired much of the land included today in the preserve. His descendants continued to take an active role in the social and economic life of the White Clay Creek Valley following his death. Almost 200 years later, Mary Chambers Folwell re-acquired a large portion of the original Chambers tract.^{viii} She and her husband, Donald, ran a model dairy farm, which was used in conjunction with the Soil Conservation Service in 1939 to develop modern cultivation practices on the farm.^{ix}

Overall, the area was predominantly rural and remained almost unchanged through the first half of the 20th century. Following the conclusion of the Civil War, a railroad was constructed in the area. The Avondale, Newark, and Delaware City Railroad (known locally as the Pomeroy Railroad or the Pomeroy and Newark Railroad) conducted passenger service. It closed on September 29, 1928 mainly because it was losing money.^x The line, which followed the path of White Clay Creek, had little impact on the White Clay Creek Valley.^{xi} Beginning around 1900, a wooden apple cider mill was built within the confines of the present-day park.^{xii} George Schaen operated the mill from the 1940s to the 1960s. Local Newark residents brought apples to be pressed into cider at the Schaen Cider Mill. The original mill, which was at one time powered by a Ford Model-A gasoline engine, burned to the ground on May 23, 1972.^{xiii} Eight farmsteads remained on the property when the state acquired the land. Today, hedgerows found in the park mark some of the original property lines dating back to the mid-18th century.^{xiv}

Becoming a State Park

The first purchase of land for the park in 1968 totaled 24 acres.^{xv} Today, the park has grown to about 3,600 acres.^{xvi} Much of the land acquisition for the park has occurred since the early 1990s, reflective of an overall trend in the state park system.^{xvii} A large portion of the park's acreage has come from former duPont family lands.^{xviii}

Throughout the course of its existence, the park has not always been named after the creek that runs through it. The donation of 100 acres from the DuPont Company to the newly-opened park came with the stipulation that the park be named in honor of the former president and Honorary Chairman of the Board of the DuPont Company, Walter S. Carpenter.^{xix} In 1989, Bill Hopkins, former Director of the Division of Parks and Recreation, felt the name should be changed back to White Clay Creek State Park because none of the other parks are named after individuals, "they [were] named after the resource there that kind of describes that state park."^{xx} Eventually the park's name was changed back to White Clay Creek State Park and Preserve. The Carpenter Recreation Area was named for the former DuPont president.^{xxi}

The Preserve

The industrial growth of the post-World War II era in New Castle County was important to the region because it led to an increased need for water resources, and increased development of suburban communities.^{xxii} E. I. DuPont de Nemours and Company, in an attempt to solve the water problem, began to acquire land both in Delaware and Pennsylvania along White Clay Creek in order to build a reservoir. The planned reservoir was to have as many as 1,000 acres of surface area.^{xxiii} The Folwells ceased operation of the then-reorganized Chambers ancestral farm in the face of the proposed reservoir, selling 200 acres to the DuPont Company and the rest to the general public as divided housing lots.^{xxiv} Although a study commissioned by the New Castle County Levy Court in the mid-1960s asserted that a reservoir would eventually be needed. The plan angered many of the local residents.

Environmental and conservation groups rushed to protect the ecosystem of the White Clay Creek Valley.^{xxv} The community's reaction persuaded the DuPont Company to establish the White Clay Creek Preserve, spanning both states.^{xxvi} In 1984, the deed to 1,700 acres of land was given to Delaware and Pennsylvania to be jointly managed.^{xxvii} Along with the creation of the preserve came the Bi-State Advisory Council, with six members from Delaware and six from Pennsylvania. The council initially made numerous decisions regarding the management of the preserve, meeting on a monthly basis. Today, their role has diminished and the group holds only one annual meeting.^{xxviii}

This Bi-State Preserve provided a conduit for at least one park employee. Gary Focht, park superintendent at Killens Pond State Park, served as a ranger on the Pennsylvania side of the preserve before becoming Assistant Park Superintendent of White Clay Creek State Park across the state line in Delaware.^{xxix}

Judge Morris Estate

During the keynote address at a celebration honoring the purchase of the 504-acre estate of the late U.S. District Court Judge Hugh Morris, Charles "Chazz" Salkin, Director of the Division of Parks and Recreation stated, "This may be the state's most significant acquisition."^{xxx} The property was bequeathed to the University of Delaware in Morris' will. The property didn't fit into the university's long-term plans. At one point they even proposed the demolition of several buildings on the estate to the Historic Review Board of New Castle County. The Board repeatedly recommended that the university find a new purpose for the house, which had been vacant for years and had fallen into disrepair.

Over the years, the university had considered a variety of uses for the property, which included moving the Agriculture School there, building new residences halls, and constructing a fraternity and sorority row.^{xxxi} It appeared both in 1987 and 1997 that the property, which represents some of the last remaining undeveloped farmland along the Kirkwood Highway, would be sold to developers. After years of indecision regarding the estate, and at the urging of state officials and local residents, the university chose to sell the property to the state of Delaware for \$12.5 million.^{xxxii} State Senator Thomas Sharp of Wilmington had been working since 1987 to preserve the property. The funds for the purchase came from the state's Open Space Program.^{xxxiii}

The keystone of the property is the main estate house. William Johnston, a descendant of Swedish settlers, built much of the house between 1754 and 1781. The Division renovated and restored the house to its 1939 appearance, complete with period furnishings.^{xxxiv} After years of neglect, the cost of renovations in the first year alone exceeded \$400,000, for both exterior and interior work, including a new roof.^{xxxv} Judge Morris had modeled his own extensive renovation of the house in the 1930s after the Colonial Revival movement popularized by Colonial Williamsburg, Virginia. In preparing for the renovation, the Division was fortunate enough to have available extensive documentation that survived from that era.^{xxxvi}

Two other houses came into the state's hands along with the estate house. One remains vacant, while the second is maintained as a residence for one of the park's two rangers.^{xxxvii} The park also leases approximately 120 acres to a local farmer in order to generate additional revenue to supplement the park's annual budget.^{xxxviii}

The state achieved several significant milestones in the preservation of open space with the purchase of the Judge Morris Estate. When combined with Middle Run Natural Area and the rest of White Clay Creek State Park, the property created a "contiguous protected area of more than 3,700 acres, the largest such block in New Castle County."^{xxxix} When added to adjacent parks in Maryland and Pennsylvania, it creates a 10,000-acre greenway.^{xl}

The Creek Gets Federal Protection

Once described by Senator Joseph Biden as "kind of Delaware's Grand Canyon," White Clay Creek provides a home for a myriad of animal and plant life including 38 rare animal species such as Bald Eagles, endangered Bog Turtles, and rare Cerulean Warblers.^{xli} The creek provides over 45 million gallons of water per day for New Castle County.^{xlii} Over the years, a number of conservation groups ranging from the Sierra Club to the Delaware Chapter of Trout Unlimited have worked to preserve the creek and its surrounding lands.^{xliii} Though preservation efforts began as early as the 1960s, the formal process to protect the White Clay Creek watershed started in the 1980s. Discussions began in 1984 concerning the possible designation of the watershed.^{xliv} President George H. W. Bush enacted the White Clay Creek Study in 1991, paving the way for the future designation of the watershed. Due to turnover at the National Park Service and the numerous negotiations between state and local governments, a full nine years passed before White Clay Creek gained federal protection.^{xlv}

Congress designated White Clay Creek as a "Wild and Scenic River" on October 24, 2000. The designation, implemented by President Bill Clinton, gave the federal government the authority to review all projects involving federal aid or permits within the 191 miles of the creek and its larger tributaries. One hundred-seven square miles of the surrounding region that drains into the creek is also protected. As part of the designation, a bi-state commission was created to work with the U.S. Department of Interior to manage the protected area.^{xlvi} This led to National Park Service's approval on work ranging from sewer system repairs by the city of Newark to Delaware State Parks' construction of a bridge over the creek.^{xlvii} The designation did not require the federal government to purchase any land, but instead relied on the extensive cooperation of state and local officials.^{xlviii} The protection is achieved through a partnership between twelve Pennsylvania municipalities, the city of Newark, New Castle and Chester Counties, the states of Delaware and Pennsylvania, and the Delaware River Basin Commission.

The designation represents the first time that an entire watershed has been protected, not just a segment of a waterway. Covering 69,000 acres, the watershed includes areas in White Clay Creek State Park around the Carpenter Recreation Area and the Judge Morris Estate, as well as the newly-acquired Deerfield property. The designation also covers Middle Run Natural Area, the Pennsylvania White Clay Creek Preserve and private lands on both banks of the creek.^{xlix}

Deerfield

Beginning in early 2005, local conservation groups along with state legislators argued for the preservation of the Deerfield Golf & Tennis Club property, which bordered White Clay Creek State Park.¹ Bracebridge Corporation, a subsidiary of MBNA, the owner of the property wanted to sell the land for the possible use as housing developments.^{li} After a contract for the property with Jeffrey E. Lang fell through in March 2005, a Newark developer, the state of Delaware and MBNA entered into talks to preserve the property.^{lii} Purchased by the state in September 2005 for \$13.5 million, the 145-acre Deerfield Golf & Tennis Club is located just north of Newark, Delaware.^{liii} Designed by William Gordon, the 18-hole golf course built in 1957 and renovated in the 1990s by MBNA, measures 6,000 yards from the blue tees. The property also features a driving range, four all-weather tennis courts and two paddleball courts. The 29,000 square-foot clubhouse includes a pro shop, administrative offices, catering facilities, a restaurant and two commercial kitchens as well as rooms for meetings and special events that can accommodate up to 300 people each. An additional split-level building, the Cart Barn, features offices, locker rooms, and showers along with golf-cart rental and storage.^{liv}

Another asset on the property is the historic Rankin House or Yellow Hall, built on land originally purchased by Joseph Rankin in 1731. Rankin purportedly established the first mill on this section of White Clay Creek.^{lv} The 3,000 square-foot residence has been restored for use as a guesthouse with four bedrooms, each with a private bath, as well as a full kitchen and lounging spaces.^{lvi}

The purchase of the Deerfield property created a new challenge for the Division. Park employees at White Clay, along with Judy Jeffers of Bellevue State Park were obliged to take over the remaining events held at Deerfield from September to December 2005. The Division worked with caterers and other event staff to ensure that the weddings and parties booked prior to the state takeover would run smoothly. The Division consulted with previous MBNA employees to help as the Division worked to keep the golf course and clubhouse in shape for its planned opening to the public.^{lvii}

The park also staged a deer hunt in January 2006 on the newly-acquired land that brought in about 60 deer in the course of two days.^{lviii} The Division then contracted Forewinds Hospitality, an outside operator to run the golf course. The company has agreed to invest \$1 million in capital improvements in the facility as well as a portion of its gross revenues for continued course maintenance and improvements.^{lix} These initial changes will “transform [the current clubhouse] into more of a...country club clubhouse look, as opposed to a corporate look.”^{lx} For the first time in its history, the course will be open to the public.^{lxi}

Two other notable property acquisitions have increased the number of buildings maintained and used by the park. The 110-acre Kranz property, located south of the Carpenter Recreation area on Route 896 was formerly a family-owned Christmas tree farm. The park hopes to be able to begin programming on the property within the next few years.^{lxii} The second piece of real estate consists of 11 acres acquired from the Krapf family, owners of a Wilmington construction firm. Situated on the land are two prominent buildings, a main house and a cottage. These are now used for seasonal park employee housing. The main house is also a home base for the state parks trail crew, who maintain trails throughout the state.^{lxiii}

Park Trails

One of White Clay Creek State Park's most heavily-utilized assets is its extensive trail system. The Logger's Trail highlights the history of lumbering in the area; the Twin Valley Trail goes by the Arc Corner Monument, marking one end of the curved boundary between Pennsylvania and Delaware; and the Possum Hill Trail marks the point used for the beginning of the Mason-Dixon Line.^{lxiv} Today, White Clay Creek State Park's numerous trails and varied landscape play host to local cross-country competitions. The Newark High School Yellowjackets train and host their home meets in the park. The University of Delaware's cross-country team also uses the park for seasonal meets.^{lxv}

Before the state acquired the Judge Morris property, many local residents unofficially used the area for hiking and mountain biking. Once the area became part of White Clay Creek State Park, trail crews revamped the "spaghetti maze" of deer paths and unofficial mountain biking trails. The crews created sustainable trails, which were easier to follow and cut down on erosion. These retooled trails followed the contour lines of the park's geography. Mountain bikers follow the trails through the David English area, the Judge Morris Estate and into Middle Run Natural Area.^{lxvi}

Mountain biking has emerged as a hugely popular activity within the park. In the early 1990s, owners of a local bicycle shop approached park officials about the possibility of hosting a mountain bike race in the park. The shop owners donated some bicycles to the park for the rangers to use on patrol as an incentive to host the race. Park officials agreed and allowed the race to be held on trails that had been previously closed off to the public due to damage from heavy mountain bike use. Between 75 and 100 people of varying skill levels came to compete in the race. The following year, in the wake of visitor complaints, the race was moved to a smaller section of the Carpenter Recreation Area. Though the racing in the park only lasted two years, its impact is still felt today.

According to McFadden, "the explosion in mountain bike use ... really came about as a result of us purchasing the Judge Morris property." With the increase in the number of mountain bikers, the park began receiving more complaints. User conflicts arose on the primarily narrow single-track trails of the park between pedestrians and mountain bikers who often travel in groups of six to eight people. Today, the park offers over 35 miles of trails, three-quarters of which are shared-use trails, available to everyone except visitors on horseback.^{lxvii}

Prominent Features and Programs

The park's nature center is housed in one of the early farmhouses of the area and is constructed of locally-quarried stone.^{lxviii} The unique design of the house, allowed it to be built into the side of a steep bank. It serves as a rare example of a building of this type in Delaware.^{lxix} It was named the "Chambers-Folwell Visitor Center" in honor of the Chambers family and for Mary Chambers Folwell's part in preserving the history of the White Clay Creek Valley.^{lxx} The nature center provides interpretive exhibits to help visitors orient themselves to the environs of the park and serves as a home to the park's naturalist.

The park is filled with a variety of plant and animal species. Raccoon, fox, turkey, mink, otter, muskrat, squirrel and most prominently, deer have populated the park since at least pre-historic times.^{lxxi} The National Audubon Society and the American Bird Conservancy designated the park as a nationally-important bird area due to its location as a habitat for several species of warblers.^{lxxii}

The park even boasts a legendary predator that has been spotted but never photographed. In 1998, rangers posted a cougar warning at the park after one had been spotted by two visitors, and the discovery of a deer carcass that showed signs that it had "been a big cat's dinner."^{lxxiii} Park officials consulted other states to find out how to best protect the general public from predatory animals in the parks.^{lxxiv}

Throughout the summer, White Clay Creek State Park plays host to a weekly concert series at the Walter Carpenter Recreation area. The park's performance stage was built in several phases. Under the leadership of Jack Goins, who was in charge of the Recreation section at the time, five parks featured concert series. After the construction of a band shell at Bellevue State Park, plans were made for one at White Clay Creek. Originally, Glenn Smoot had a small wooden riser built for bands to perform on. When Jim O'Neill took over as Section Manager of CARS he placed a request for a permanent stage.

The first plan for the stage was developed by White Clay Park Superintendent Nick McFadden. Students from a local school were to construct the stage according to plans drawn up by Technical Services, though this idea never came to fruition. Mark Chura, of the Planning, Preservation and Development Section of the Division of Parks and Recreation, then proposed a public hearing to discuss the building of a stage. Local residents concerns ranged from possible disruption of the park's wildlife to not having a voice in the choice of musical acts. O'Neill and Chura continued their efforts despite the initial public response and negotiated with Representative Jim Neil to secure funding in the budget to build a permanent stage at the park. However, the whole project took much longer than initially planned.^{lxxv}

Deer hunting in the park has also been a controversial issue. In 1980, area citizens sent a petition with over 710 signatures to Governor duPont asking him "to abolish all hunting in the area known as Walter S. Carpenter, Jr. State Park," and to make "the killing of deer, doe and fawn, as well as all other forms of wildlife...unlawful in the park area."^{lxxvi} Because White Clay Creek allows deer hunting on its property, the current park superintendent, Nicholas McFadden, has retained his enforcement powers while other superintendents have relinquished theirs.^{lxxvii}

Over the years, the park has played host to a number of local events, from bike races to community gatherings and picnics. In July 1974, the Greater Newark Chamber of Commerce held a Heritage Fair at White Clay Creek State Park, “to bring together the people of Delaware of varied and proud heritage to celebrate the simple pleasures of a by-gone era.” The festival highlighted the Renaissance period and featured jousting, archery and fencing competitions as well as crafts, period food, and live performances.^{lxxviii}

During the 1980s, the park operated an equestrian concession at the park. The park offered boarding for horses, trail rides, and riding lessons. Over the years, the trail rides began to have a negative impact on the condition of the park’s trails, and the park lacked adequate grazing pastureland to accommodate the number of horses. These problems were compounded by a rise in insurance liability rates for equestrian concessions. By the early 1990s, the unprofitable operation ceased and the boarding stalls were converted into the park’s maintenance building, as the needs of the park had outgrown the existing structure.^{lxxix}

The Judge Morris Estate hosts a variety of programs including group tours highlighting the history of the house and the Morris family, murder mystery dinners, and tea parties.^{lxxx} The variety of tasks required to maintain the buildings and facilities at the park have forced the current superintendent, Nick McFadden to wear several different hats in the course of performing his duties. As he stated, “I’m like a landlord...farmer, park superintendent, golf course superintendent ...it depends on the day of the week.”^{lxxxi}

McFadden has been the park’s superintendent for over 20 years. Looking back on his tenure, he remarked that “the thing that has kept me here, other than I like the park, is that...the expansion of the area whether it’s because of the programs or the land that we’ve acquired, it’s just kept me interested.”^{lxxxii} From mountain bikers to bird watchers, hikers to disc golf players, children to senior citizens, visitors come to White Clay Creek State Park to take advantage of a myriad of facilities for recreation. Today, the park continues to serve as a vital protected area of scenic and recreational open space in northern Delaware.

¹ Wise, Cara L. *Cultural Resources Management Plan for White Clay Creek Preserve in Delaware*, Document No. 40-06/88/02/03, Dover: Delaware Division of Parks and Recreation, October 1986, pg 4.

² “Man’s Past at White Clay Creek Preserve” Pamphlet, Document No. 40-06/88/02/04, Delaware Division of Parks and Recreation, n.d., Parks Historian files, CARS Building, Dover, Delaware.

³ Wise, Cara L. *Cultural Resources Management Plan for White Clay Creek Preserve in Delaware*, Document No. 40-06/88/02/03, Dover: Delaware Division of Parks and Recreation, October 1986, pg 19, 24.

⁴ Wise, Cara L. *Cultural Resources Management Plan for White Clay Creek Preserve in Delaware*, Document No. 40-06/88/02/03, Dover: Delaware Division of Parks and Recreation, October 1986, pg 19.

⁵ “Man’s Past at White Clay Creek Preserve” Pamphlet, Document No. 40-06/88/02/04, Delaware Division of Parks and Recreation, n.d., Parks Historian files, CARS Building, Dover, Delaware.

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- ^{xvii} "Nick McFadden Oral History Interview" conducted by Tim Miller and Andrew Bozanic, 23 February 2006, 10.
- ^{xviii} "Nick McFadden Oral History Interview" conducted by Tim Miller and Andrew Bozanic, 23 February 2006, 13-14.
- ^{xix} Welcome Packet, Division of Parks and Recreation, n.d., p. 11.
- ^{xx} "Bill Hopkins Oral History Interview" conducted by Jim O'Neill, 30 November 1989, 13.
- ^{xxi} <http://www.destateparks.com/know/division/DSPhistory90s.htm>
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