

Promoting Chesterbrook Farm in the Early Twentieth-Century

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While Chesterbrook Farm has been the subject of numerous *History Quarterly* articles, there are several items of Chesterbrook Farm memorabilia in the TEHS archives that have received little or no attention. The map titled “Route to Chesterbrook Farm, Berwyn” is especially interesting as an indicator of how the farm’s managers responded to economic and geographic changes by initiating promotional efforts in the mid-twentieth century.¹

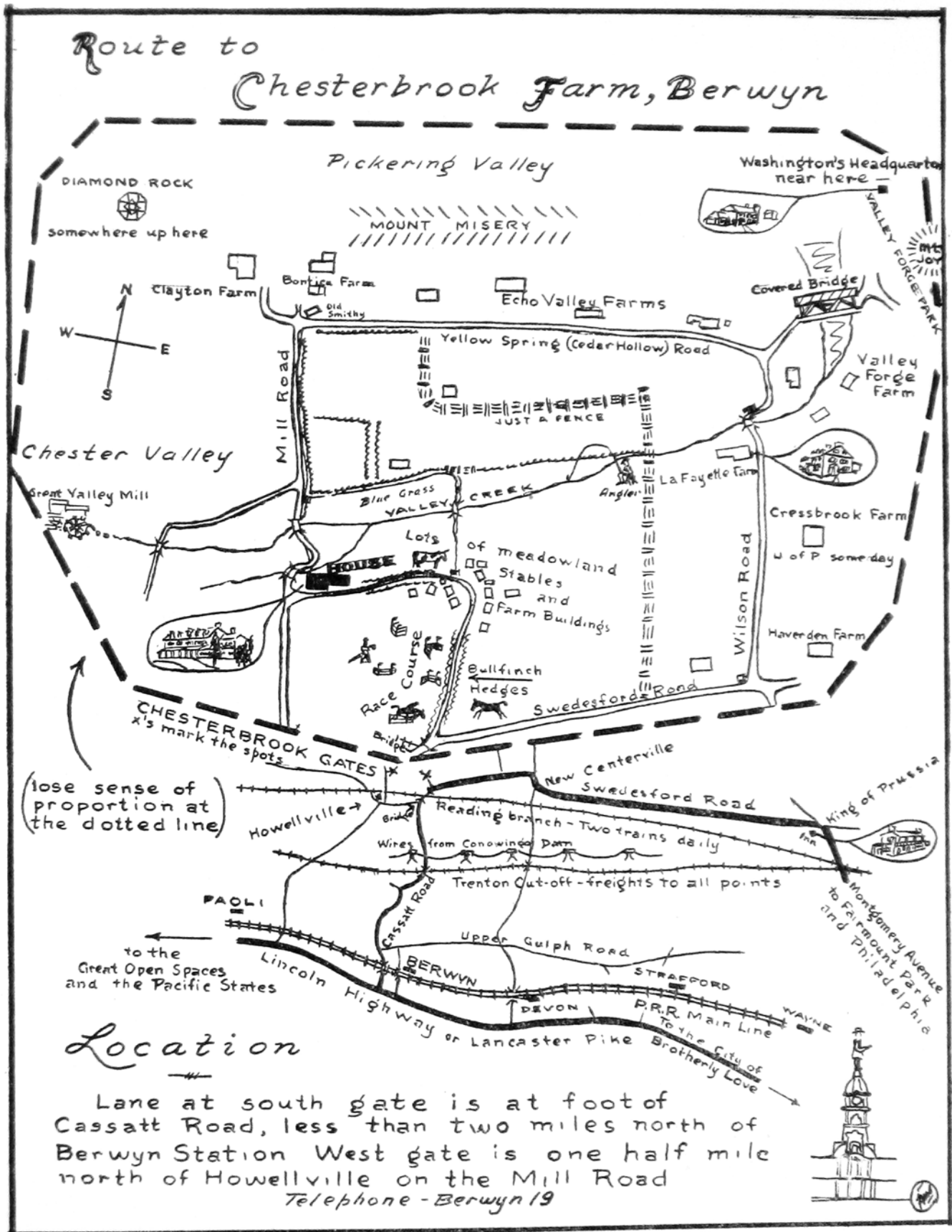
There was no need to promote Chesterbrook Farm’s products during its first era – the period from 1881 to 1906, when it was owned by its founder, the very wealthy Pennsylvania Railroad executive Alexander J. Cassatt. He assembled about 600 acres as a kind of recreational country farm-estate, and then retired from the railroad, devoting himself to the life of a gentleman farmer and horse breeder in Tredyffrin Township. He spared no expense to make it a showplace, raising a variety of crops, cattle, and sheep, but his primary love was horses, both thoroughbreds and hackneys. Owning and operating a farm in the countryside had become a popular hobby for many wealthy men on the eastern seaboard after 1875. In a way they were emulating the English gentry, enjoying both an urban and a country seat. Like all gentleman farmers, Cassatt relied on an experienced farm manager. Richard Colgan came to Chesterbrook Farm early on and continued to manage it long after A. J.’s death.

In 1906 the farm passed to A. J.’s son Edward Cassatt, who ran the farm exactly as his father has done, including raising prize bulls and dairy cows. These animals won many competitions, and promotional advertisements about them were produced. Richard Colgan continued as farm manager, with Cassatt maintaining a keen daily interest in all decisions, even when away from the township. Chesterbrook Farm thrived in this, its second era. Edward died in 1922 at the age of 53, having owned Chesterbrook Farm for seventeen years.

Upon Edward Cassatt’s death the farm was inherited by his wife Eleanor. She remarried two years later, a marriage which would last just three years. As the widow of Dr. J. Packard Laird she ran the farm for four decades - its third and final era.² In 1931 Peter J. Boland became her farm manager, and throughout the 1930s and 40s marketing and promotional efforts were undertaken to keep the farm profitable. With its large acreage the property naturally occupied an important place in Tredyffrin Township life. But during Eleanor’s tenure the farm slowly deteriorated as a result of new economic conditions, and very likely a less than progressive approach to farm management. The horses, sheep, and dairy herd were sold off. Needing to support just Eleanor and an increasingly smaller number of resident employees, profit margins could remain low. The farm was also profoundly affected after 1940 by the construction of two major highways, Route 202 and the Pennsylvania Turnpike, which cut the property into sections. These problems probably sparked promotional efforts to attract local buyers of farm products and boost income. One of these marketing pieces, the Chesterbrook Farm map, reveals some fascinating clues about why and when it was made.

The map was probably drawn between 1926 and the mid-1930s, as an inexpensive flyer meant to direct visitors to the farm.³ Thus it postdates both A. J. and Edward Cassatt’s tenures. By the mid-1920s, the farm’s products, primarily milk and butter, but also chickens, eggs and some produce, were marketed more to local Tredyffrin-Easttown and Main Line buyers than to Philadelphia markets, as had been the case for its first forty years. The new customers of the 1920s were now the growing population of year-round suburban residents of the Main Line, or the local purveyors of farm products. These consumers, or their cooks, might arrive by car, or even treat the drive as an outing. (A. J. Cassatt had in fact encouraged casual visitors to Chesterbrook Farm, but not out of any need to sell eggs.)

A close examination of the map reveals a dense network of hand-lettered inscriptions and tiny sketches, which are simultaneously charming and confusing. The map measures 7½ by 5 inches and is printed on cheap paper, making it easy to distribute widely. Many copies survive in the Tredyffrin Easttown Historical Society Archives, attesting to its purpose as a marketing piece. Unfortunately, nothing is known about how it was distributed. The map can be dated to the period after 1926 by looking at one of the inscriptions. At the middle right the words “Cressbrook Farm / U of P someday” prove that the map was created after 1926 when the neighboring Cressbrook Farm was donated to the University of Pennsylvania.⁴



"Route to Chesterbrook Farm" map. Courtesy of Tredyffrin Easttown Historical Society Archive

The colloquial tone of many of the small inscriptions suggests an attempt to speak to customers who might not know their way to the farm. For example: the very title of the map “Route to Chesterbrook Farm, Berwyn” and the “Location” note at the bottom reading “Lane at south gate is at foot of Cassatt Road, less than two miles north of Berwyn Station” read like helpful language meant to facilitate finding the farm.

The south gate was the main entrance, and while it is long gone, this map gives a clear picture of its location. The Cassatt Road mentioned in the inscription terminated at Swedesford Road, but slightly east of where today’s Cassatt Road ends. The surviving portion of “Old Cassatt Road” cuts off to the right from Cassatt Road about a quarter mile before eastbound Swedesford Road. The map shows the gates north of where today’s Old Cassatt Road ends, and immediately north of the Chester Valley RR tracks: two “Xs mark the spots.” Users of the new Chester Valley Trail, which has been built along the CVRR track bed, will thus pass very close to the site of the main entrance of Chesterbrook Farm.

The lower part of the map presents a complex web of lines indicating the tracks of the Reading branch of the Chester Valley Railroad (“two trains daily”), the Trenton cut off, and the Main Line of the Pennsylvania Railroad with both the Devon and Berwyn stations marked. From either station the farm was just a short ride away. In this same area, between the Reading branch and Trenton cut-off, a scalloped line marks the “wires from the Conowingo Dam.” Constructed in 1927, these high electric transmission lines were both a marvel and a kind of modern technological terror to the local residents. Also of interest in this section is the notation: “New Centerville,” the name once used to identify the collection of properties and businesses at what is now the intersection of Routes 202 and 252.

Other inscriptions on the map read like inviting promotional descriptions or humorous comments. These include, at the lower left: “to the Great Open Spaces and the Pacific States;” and at the lower right: “To the City of Brotherly Love;” and at the center: “Lots of Meadowland.” Also suggestive of a “tourism” approach is the inclusion of tiny line drawings of local historical buildings, regardless of their exact locations: the King of Prussia Inn, the Covered Bridge, Washington’s Headquarters, the Chester Valley Mill, the main Chesterbrook Farm house, a miniature Philadelphia City Hall surmounted by a huge William Penn, and at the center, a tiny fisherman – “Angler” - casting his line into Valley Creek. At the upper left a small octagon marks the Diamond Rock School. Its caveat “somewhere up here” is a reminder that this is really a sketch, not a map, and is nowhere to scale, a fact the map’s creator indicates at the center left, noting “lose sense of proportion at the dotted line” (an understatement to say the least).

The map seems to be signed with initials, within a small circle in the extreme lower right corner, but they are illegible. While the author of the Chesterbrook Farm map may remain unknown, the likely candidates are the farm manager Peter Boland, or conceivably Eleanor herself (she was an amateur painter), or her secretary Helen Boland. Whoever drew the map unwittingly left posterity a charming record of an attempt at marketing the retail side of the business. A few other promotional items survive in the TEHS archives including advertisements for the farm’s Guernsey cows, milk bottle caps, box labels for “Live Chicks From Chesterbrook Farm,” and a Christmas card.⁵ One wonders how many other Chesterbrook Farm promotional materials existed at one time, and are now lost to history.

Footnotes

- 1 The most important *History Quarterly* articles about Chesterbrook Farm are noted at the end of my article “The Three Cassatts,” *Tredyffrin Easttown History Quarterly*, Vol. 49, No. 3, September 2012, p. 70. Others may be located via the search function of the TEHS website located at <http://www.tehistory.org/search.html>.
- 2 When Eleanor died, the farm was inherited by a Cassatt descendent from out of state. He had no interest in it and in 1967 sold it to a developer. Its subsequent history is another story.
- 3 The map which accompanies this article has been published before, in an article about Alexander Murdoch and his son, the shepherds who tended Chesterbrook’s flock. However, the map is not discussed in any way. See the *Tredyffrin Easttown History Club Quarterly*, Vol. 34, No. 2, April 1996, pp. 47-52.
- 4 For the story of Cressbrook Farm see the *Tredyffrin Easttown History Quarterly*, Vol. 48, No. 3, September 2011, pp. 73-9.
- 5 A Chesterbrook Farm milk bottle also survives, in the Duportail House collection.