



Visionary began Woodlawn Trustees in 1901

Although William Poole Bancroft was born the son of a prosperous Quaker textile manufacturer in 1835, he didn't take his birthright for granted, believing instead that money was a gift from God to be used wisely and well.

With that in mind, he spent his later years and bank account on preserving the natural riches of the lower Brandywine Valley with the idea of enriching the lives of unborn residents.

Believing that nature is essential to a happy life, Bancroft had become increasingly concerned that urban growth would gobble up the wooded hills and farmland north of Wilmington, depriving future generations access to the beauty of the valley.

In 1901, Bancroft created Woodlawn Trustees Inc. to carry out his plan. The not-for-profit real estate company had a three-fold mission: save land along the Brandywine; develop responsibly near main arteries; and provide affordable urban housing.

"For many years, I had been saying that I wished someone would gather up the rough land along the Brandywine above Rockland and hold it for the future Wilmington, a Wilmington of hundreds of

thousands of people ... and I concluded that perhaps I ought to do something toward what I had been wishing others would do," Bancroft said in 1909 at a meeting of West Brandywine Grange.

"My thought is that the hills along the creek, some of the valleys running up from the creek, and a few of the finest view points on the hills should be owned by the city and kept open for the public; and that the land further back from the creek, being largely in one ownership, may be laid out with roads on good grades and leading to the good building sites... Of course I cannot live to see much of this. It may take a hundred years to work out. Perhaps I may be able to so arrange things that it will work out, even if it should be very far in the future."

To preservationists who have worked to save Delaware's natural beauty for future, Bancroft was an enlightened planner.

Lorraine Fleming, a board member of the Delaware Nature Society, said the more

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time passed, the more Bancroft stands out as a true visionary. She said his reputation has even spread beyond Delaware.

“He certainly was ahead of his time,” said Irene du Pont Jr., the du Pont family patriarch whose home, Granogue, is across the Brandywine from Woodlawn land.

Woodlawn has kept a low profile, very quietly selling land at below-market prices for civic uses, such as churches, the Brandywine YMCA and the Jewish Community Center. It also developed housing communities stretching north along Concord Pike starting with Alapocas in 1937. That was followed by Woodbrook in the 1950s, Sharpley in the early 1960s, Edenridge in the mid-1960s and finally Tavistock.

With each housing development, huge chunks of the property were dedicated as open space. It continues to own about 600 affordable housing units in Wilmington.

The 1980s were critical years for the organization when two major tracts along the river became available. Woodlawn was forced to compete with real estate developers, spending \$5 million to purchase the Ramsey Farm above Thompson Bridge and the Jessup and Moore tract of the St. Joe Paper Co. near Rockland. The 45-acre Jessup and Moore site had already been staked out for home sites.

In 2004, Rockford Woodlawn Fund Inc. whose mission is affiliated with Woodlawn

Trustees, was formed to promote preservation and the elimination of urban blight.

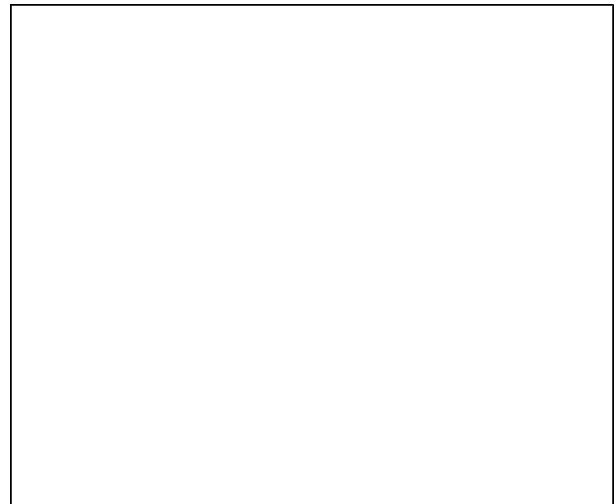
Fleming said the east bank of the Brandywine would probably be sprinkled with houses, offices and other development if it hadn't been for the vision of Bancroft.

“The Brandywine would be a very, very different place without the vision of Woodlawn. There probably would be high-rises,” Fleming said.

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