

The Copes of Awbury

The Copes were a wealthy Quaker family who, unlike many other prominent Quakers, do not have their names on Philadelphia's streets, schools and other institutions – they are relatively unknown. Even their perpetual gift to the City – Awbury Arboretum – does not bear their name. It bears the name of the small village of Avebury in England, their ancestral home.

The patriarch, Thomas P. Cope, arrived in Philadelphia in 1786 virtually penniless and made his vast fortune in shipping. By sheer luck, his very first ships were among the few able to return to America after the U.S. declared war on England in 1812. The cargo he was able to sell made him one of the richest men in the city. Cope later expanded his shipping line into a packet line, (from the French “paquebot” for a boat that carried high value goods and passengers) that sailed from Philadelphia to Liverpool, England. Thomas soon turned the business over to his two sons - Henry and Alfred. Henry's two sons, Thomas P. Cope II and Francis R. Cope, later took over the business from their father. The Cope ships sailed for 70 years, with the first, the Lancaster, departing in 1811 and the last, the Tonawanda, departing in 1881. By then, the shipping line was no longer able to compete with modern steamships and Philadelphia's seaport was diminishing in importance to New York's.

Like many wealthy Quakers, the Copes were involved in a wide range of civic and philanthropic endeavors. The men held elected positions, served on many public organization committees and boards, and were instrumental in the founding of Haverford College. Both the men and women worked as abolitionists- their Quaker meeting was the first the first in the country to denounce slavery- and worked on such diverse activities as establishing a school for freed slaves on St Helena Island, SC (after getting the okay from President Lincoln to do so) and creating programs for immigrant women.

Perhaps the Copes' most lasting, and least heralded, work of public benefit was Fairmount Park. Thomas Cope was instrumental in the building of the Philadelphia waterworks, which he saw as a way to provide safe drinking water and eliminate the yellow fever epidemic that plagued Philadelphia and other cities. He convinced the City to purchase land near the Schuylkill River to keep it from development and protect it from pollution—a few years later this land became one of the first pieces of land in the park. The Copes later made additional gifts of money to expand the park.

The first Cope family member to buy land in what was then known as “the German Township” was Henry's daughter Mary Cope and her husband John Smith Haines, from the prominent Quaker family that owned Wyck House on Germantown Avenue. In the 1800s many wealthy families left Center City in the summer to escape the heat, crowds, and disease. In 1852, Henry began to buy land adjacent to his daughter's property, ultimately buying 42 acres. The property was later expanded across Washington Lane where the Awbury Agricultural Village is now. By the 1920's there were 24 houses, not to mention additional structures such as stables, all within easy walking- some might say, “shouting” distance of each other. Today, all but the Arboretum headquarters are privately owned.

The property and money was given to the city in 1916 by three of Thomas P Cope's granddaughters—Caroline, Annette and Clementine. The Arboretum was established in 1984. Today, although there are thousands of Cope and Haines descendants, only one lives at Awbury.

Although Quakers at that time did not sing, paint, or make music, there was plenty of entertainment to be had. In the winter there was sledding and skating and in the summer there were picnics and happy evenings eating ice cream. The hordes of children never wanted for companions as they played in the open fields, gathered wildflowers, and explored the Wissahickon. Pictures of the Cope family are available on the website.



AWBURY ARBORETUM

Walking Tour and Brief History of the Copes of Awbury



1. The Francis R. Cope House:

Francis, the patriarch's first grandson, built his own home after his family outgrew his father's house. It was built in 1861, the same year as the Civil War started, and U.S. troops drilled on the grounds of Awbury. Today the house is owned by the arboretum and used as its administrative offices. While substantial to today's eye, the house reflects the Quaker aesthetic of simplicity, yet the quality of materials used, for example the finely dressed, ashler cut, native Wissahickon schist, reflects the Copes' prosperity. In addition to the house's vertical emphasis, steeply pitched roofs and floor-to-ceiling pointed arch windows that can be walked through, the large, wrap-around porch is one of the most distinctive aspects of the house. At the time the house was built, there was no city skyline to obstruct the view of the Delaware River, and the family often recognized their own ships as they made the two day trip up the Delaware.

2. English Picturesque Landscape:

The porch of the Francis R. Cope house is an excellent place to view Awbury's English picturesqe design. When the Copes purchased the land, it was completely open with a few surrounding farms and no large trees. Thomas P. Cope II, Francis' brother, was interested in horticulture; as a boy he wrote letters from school asking for flowers to plant and suggesting that the Cope heritage might be "extremely influential in the development of horticulture and landscape gardening in the United States." He and noted landscape architect William Saunders were largely responsible for the Awbury design. English Picturesqe Landscape design is characterized by an appearance that seems natural, untouched by human hands, but is actually a human artifact. This style was associated with the Romantic movement and was a reaction to formalism. The created landscape includes: vistas that trick the eye into thinking they go on forever; isolated picturesque specimen trees (e.g., shagbark hickory); large irregular copses of mature forest trees (e.g., white ash, tulip poplar, paper birch, buckeye); understory trees (flowering dogwood), shrubs (witchhazel) and flowers (e. g., trout lilies and snowdrops); rolling meadows, and other mature stands of woody plants (e.g., clove currant, bottlebrush buckeye, yew). This designed landscape, in addition to the historic houses on or near it, is officially recognized as both a National and Philadelphia Historic District.

3. The Heath Garden:

Walking to your right along the porch, you come to the back of the house, and along the ramp entrance is a small shaded heath garden. Recently renovated with garden club funds, this garden includes native plants (mountain laurel, bayberry, blue-berries, and native rhododendron) that the Copes would have seen on visits to the Pine Barrens and the Poconos.

4. Haines Field:

Leaving the house behind and walking northeast through a pleasant picnic area you'll pass various species of hollies, tulip trees, magnolias, fringe tree, orange-leaf hydrangea, spirea and dwarf fothergilla, and more, until you come upon the roughly 5 acre Haines Field. This area was planted with specimen and common trees including native beech trees, sassafras, various oaks, Chinese chestnut, Osage orange, toothache trees, and flowering maples.

5. Streams, Ponds and Wetlands:

Those interested in a longer walk may wish to explore Awbury's water features. Following Cope Lane and passing the "Secret Garden" on your right, it's easy to imagine the communal living aspect of the Cope families. Coming to the end of Cope Lane, you'll follow the Beech Hollow Trail to the ponds and wetlands. During this walk you may hear a variety of bird calls, and indeed, one of the Cope's granddaughter's stated purpose when she made her donation was that the areas should be "a refuge for migratory birds." Today, the arboretum serves as a bird sanctuary in a densely settled urban area, and over 121 species have been seen including: golden eagles, falcons, hawks, cormorants, a variety of woodpeckers and flycatchers, vultures, 25 different types of wood warblers, and, of course swallows, many different wrens, mockingbirds, ducks, and geese. With the SEPTA Train Station ahead of you, bear right on a wood chip path to the artificial ponds and bog designed and installed by city planner Arthur Cowell. There is also an intermittent stream with stone bridges, modeled on megalithic structures in Avebury, from the Cope period. This watercourse is the only portion of the Wingohocking Creek that is not diverted into storm sewers. The stream is fed by seeps and water from a spring house across Washington Lane. This entire area sequesters water and reduces storm water stress on city sewers. The ponds and wetlands area is the richest in bird and animal life in the Arboretum. You can see fish and turtles, hear redwinged blackbirds and frogs, and watch dragonflies catch mosquitoes.

6. The Meadows:

Continue to walk along the wetland, with the Works Progress Administration stone wall to your left until you turn right and into 8.5 acres of open meadowlands. When the Copes purchased Awbury, the Paramore Family Farm, located in a portion of the meadowlands, was one of the hundreds that were still in operation in the Philadelphia area at the time. The Paramores raised vegetables, fruits, hays, chickens, cattle and horses, and Cope family memoirs fondly remember childhood trips to the farm and hay rides by Mr. Paramore. The meadowlands consists of two different meadows: the area near the upper end of the wetlands where you enter is a native warm-season grass and wildflower meadow planted in the 2000s; the area closest to the train station and lower pond is a European cool-season grass meadow. Meadows perform important ecological functions—not only do the tall grasses and flowers provide a safe home for native birds, butterflies, and other beneficial pollinators but they also absorb much of the water that falls on the field, preventing further stress to the city's storm sewers. Like much of the Awbury landscape, these meadows appear to be a natural area, but are managed by Awbury to support local plants and wildlife, primarily through intentional mowing. The remnants of an asphalt path will take you through the meadows and past several beautiful trees.

7. McNabtown:

Once you reach Station Road, turn left and take the road back toward the Cope House. As you walk, note a row of Honey Locusts. These were planted as a screen to separate Cope property from a neighborhood of small, sub-standard two-story houses typical of working class Germantown. When the Copes developed the property, these houses were demolished. Today this level, two-acre section is used as grounds for community events.