

Featured Articles

The Evans Arboretum and Today's Ithan Valley Park

By Peter Kingsbery

A walk taken

John Harshberger, a noted Botany expert and professor at the University of Pennsylvania, described a 2-mile walk he had taken in the late 1800s down Roberts Road as “brisk and invigorating.” His destination was a plot of land at the junction with South Ithan Avenue. Once reached, he met the owner, John Ramsey, who gave him a tour of beautiful trees, exotic plants and shrubs not native to Pennsylvania. He also learned about a miller who years before owned this land and established this collection.

Harshberger was intrigued by this property and was to visit, research, and write about it and the miller multiple times over the next 30 years.

The early life of John Evans

John Evans was born in 1790. His family ran a farm and mill on approximately 130 acres. The oldest of 5 children, John learned how to run the family business and at the early death of his parents, shared ownership of it with his brother.

Turning point

John's experiences and values up until this point were largely impacted by his Quaker upbringing and relationship with nature through his efforts in farming and milling. As a young man, he travelled to Troy, New York and worked in a mill, often spending his free time on long walks in the woods.



JOHN EVANS.



EVANS' HOUSE AND GROUNDS IN 1897.

After returning home to his family farm, he assumed responsibility for the farm and mill, eventually buying out his brother's share, married, had children and raised them to work the farm and mill. In the late 1820s, he received a visit from a relative who was picking up his daughter from the nearby Westtown School. John saw Dr. William Darlington's book *Florula Cestrica*, documenting local flora and fauna, which was used as a textbook at the school. This book sparked his interest and influenced his future vocation in collecting and growing specimens. In addition, he was to learn that the varied conditions of his own property including sun, shade, moisture, and aridity offered an ideal setting for a range of specimens and their individual requirements.

Working with Bartram Gardens and Painter Brothers

Evans began to research botany, acquiring and growing tree and floral specimens locally, and reaching out to other collectors in the Philadelphia region. He established a relationship with Colonel Carr, director of Bartram Gardens at that time, and began travelling up and down the east coast of the United States and as far west as Ohio, collecting and sharing seeds and specimens.

John began to gain notoriety and was soon relied upon as a source of knowledge and of plant specimens. He met Minshall and Jacob Painter and

traded specimens to expand each other's collections. The Painter brothers' compilation was later to develop into today's Tyler Arboretum.

Correspondence with Royal Botanic Gardens

Wishing to expand further, one of his friends recommended that Evans contact Sir William Hooker, Director of the Royal Botanic Gardens in Kew, England as well as similar establishments in Europe. It is known and documented that Evans and Hooker corresponded and collaborated over two decades, Evans sending specimens east "across the pond" and receiving specimens back from Hooker. Of particular interest, at this same time William's son, Sir Joseph Hooker, a noted botanist in his own right, travelled to various parts of the world including the Himalayas, and sent back seeds and specimens to his father in Kew.

As an aside, in one of his letters to Hooker dated December 10th, 1854, Evans made note of the devastation of a drought in the Lake Champlain region, and being so burned out, it looked like nature could not restore it "in a thousand years." Further, he indicated he could collect no more than a pocketful of seeds. Later on in this letter, he speaks about a new city being built on the New Jersey coast called Atlantic City that he visited to collect seeds. This appears to be an indication that at least for John, this correspondence was a true sharing of thoughts and reflections, not just a shipping bill.

Death and Legacy

Unfortunately, Evans did not make a catalogue of his arboretum. However, by the time of his death in 1862, the result of Evans' passion and work was regarded by his peers as "in the number of distinct species of trees and shrubbery... the largest in the country."

Evans' farm and mill was run by his son-in-law until it was no longer profitable, as was the fate of so many of the mills in this area. The farm changed hands multiple times over the next few decades until purchased by W. Hinkle Smith in 1906.



MILL DAM IN EVANS' GARDEN.

Smith was a wealthy financier who accumulated his wealth through investments including railroads, the Baldwin Locomotive Works, mineral mines, and the Wright Brothers' airplane business. Smith built a large country mansion, along with formal gardens, calling it "Timberline." In his efforts, he recognized the remnants of Evans' wonderful collection and encouraged the development of this estate to take advantage of it.

During his lifetime, Smith's large staff of landscapers and outdoor maintenance crews maintained a beautiful estate rivaling so many in the area at this time. Following W. Hinkle Smith's death in 1943, his son, Hoxie Harrison Smith, moved out of the main house and witnessed the gradual demise of the grand estate, which fell into disrepair. It is not known whether the money ran out or the son had other interests beyond Timberline. We should note that perhaps as part of a township or regional tree survey, Smith walked the grounds with members of the Delaware County Institute of Science and recorded noted trees and shrubs that still remained. In the comments it was stated that of the 24 rare or unusual species of trees or shrubs identified in Radnor, 14 were located on this property.

Following H. Harrison Smith's own demise in 1966, the land was held in trust, with portions sold off to Radnor Township School District, a local developer, and a swath obtained by PennDOT as part of the Blue Route. The remaining portion of John Evans' Arboretum lies within 14 acres bordered north and south by Clyde Road and Bryn Mawr Avenue, and east and west by South Ithan Avenue and Route 476. This portion was donated to Radnor Township and became Ithan Valley Park.

Recent Efforts

In 2005, a group of interested citizens conducted a tree survey, identifying 22 varieties of trees that were of note or unusual to this area. This survey has become a basis for future work. In 2011, a group formed to become the "Friends of Ithan Valley Park." The group has conducted several park cleanups, including cutting vines, establishing trails, and honoring the legacy of John Evans. For more information, contact friendsofithanvalleypark@gmail.com or visit our website at evansarboretum.wordpress.com

Note: Most of the information gained for this article is from writings by Dr. John W. Harshberger and Dr William Darlington. All images are from "The Botanists of Philadelphia and Their Work," by John W. Harshberger, published in 1899 by T.C. Davis & Sons, Philadelphia.