EVENTING ISSUE

THE CHRONICLE *of the* HORSE

October 4 & 11, 2021

VOLUME 84 | NUMBER 17

Fair Hill: A Horseman's Oasis

William du Pont Jr. altered the trajectory of the more than 5,600 acres of land in the corner of Maryland that now hosts this country's second five-star.

By **Laura Lemon**

The tractor hummed underneath Mary Coldren as she turned on her Walkman and situated her headphones over her ears. With the evening sun coloring the October leaves around her, she shifted the engine into gear and pulled the batwing mower behind her. In the first decade of the Fair Hill International Three-Day Event, Coldren worked numerous jobs, but mowing the galloping lanes was one of her favorites.

"I mowed cross-country tracks; I painted jumps; I weed-eated. I put up galloping lane roping and drove the transport horse ambulance," she said. "And so I was there from the beginning, but I wasn't involved in the organizational end. I was the young labor."

With the music playing in her headphones, she weaved her way through a section of the Cecil County, Maryland, property. She passed the remaining skeleton of the Willis House, a three-story, 19th-century farmhouse built by owner James K. Willis and called the "Old Home" then. Though its contractor died in 1884 of pneumonia, his wife Mary Willis outlived him by 20 years. The house's last occupant died in 1945, and its heir sold it to William du Pont Jr., adding to du Pont's 7,600-acre hunting paradise.

During these meditating mowing moments in the '90s, Coldren always found herself in awe of the land's history, where William du Pont once followed his Foxcatcher Hounds as they bayed at the whiff of a scent. And now, it remains as a 5,656-acre slice of nature halfway between Philadelphia and Baltimore, owned by the state and preserved as a natural resource management area.

"One of my favorite things is to be out there at Fair Hill in the evening when nobody else is around, and the sun's starting to go down, and the deer are running around. It's just such a peaceful piece of land," she said. "And you think about the history of [it]. Sometimes when you're driving past some of the old sheds and paddocks and stuff, you think, 'This is Willie du Pont's hunting preserve.' And then you think about all the years of foxhunting there and all the park users for years and years and years.

"I don't know how you could not feel the history," she added. "His contribution to horses at Fair Hill—I mean Fair Hill wouldn't exist if it hadn't been for Willie du Pont."

For years the Fair Hill International cross-country course ran by the remains of the 1800s Willis House. Hillary Irwin and Bit Of Irish clear the fence at its door during the 2015 CCI3*-L event. *AK DRAGOO PHOTOGRAPHY PHOTO*

THE FORGOTTEN HISTORY

In 2011, a recently retired Emily Kilby enjoyed a stroll on the Fair Hill property with her dogs Kazoo and TooToo. Only living a mile away, Kilby took advantage of the area several days a week, and her walk this December day was nothing outside the ordinary routine. But off the trail, she noticed something behind the dormant winter foliage—foundational remains.

"I must have passed this place 20 times before I finally looked over and saw, 'Why that's a spring house,' " said Kilby, of Elkton, Maryland. "I said to myself, 'But we're out in the middle of the woods.' It was a completely wooded area. And I knew well enough that people didn't build spring houses in the middle of the woods."

Kilby's curiosity took hold.

"I said, 'Well, why is that here?' And my mother happened to have a very old 1858 map of the area," she said. "And I looked at the county, and there were houses all over the place within the park."

She could find little to nothing reported on the pre-du Pont era of Fair Hill, and that forgotten history, she learned, began with the English wanting to lay their claim on this section of the New World. King Charles I awarded Cecil Calvert, Lord Baltimore, a charter in 1632 to establish the Maryland Colony, and in 1683, Lord Baltimore gave Edmond O'Dwyer, a native of Munster, Ireland, and other Irishmen a nearly 7,000-acre land grant, which was named "New Munster."

Twenty-one years later, Lord Baltimore issued another land grant for the 2,104 acres directly west of New Munster. This land then belonged to Charles Carroll who named it The Society. These two land grants, New Munster and The Society, eventually would make up much of the property now known as Fair Hill.

The Willis House was a social center back in its day, with Mary Willis and three daughters pictured here in 1910. *PHOTO COURTESY OF GERALDINE MCKEOWN*

This section of Maryland evolved into a haven for Scots-Irish, Irish and English immigrants who typically arrived by New Castle, Delaware, and took what is now Route 273 straight through Fair Hill on their trek away from the coast. With Big Elk Creek running like a spine through the land and into the Chesapeake Bay, farming and industry blossomed.

"Everybody was a farmer to some degree because they were self-sufficient, but it was a surprisingly industrial area," said Kilby, who has become the historian of the pre-du Pont era at Fair Hill. "On Big Elk Creek, just within the park confines, there were five mills. They were gristmills and sawmills, which served the local community."

But they served beyond the immediate area, too. With pristine conditions for growing wheat, mills popped up all along the creek, making this area an original breadbasket of America. Just downstream was Elkton, Maryland, which during the 18th and 19th centuries served as a deep-water port and the way to Philadelphia.

"Big Elk Creek is about 20 miles long, and there was a mill about every mile or half a mile," Kilby said. "So that waterpower was central to the economy. But the thing that I became amazed about is that not only was flour and other grains ground for local consumption, but they shipped them to the Caribbean, to England. So, there was a lot of international trade based here."

Wool and cotton were shipped to textile mills to be spun and weaved before being exported. In addition, ironworks found popularity in the area.

The community grew throughout the age of waterpower, with the agriculture census showing each household owning at least one horse, one cow and a few pigs. The more prosperous the household, the more horses owned.

But when Robert E. Lee and Ulysses S. Grant met at Appomattox Courthouse in 1865 to end the almost four-year Civil War, the community makeup in Fair Hill started its own shift. Though the Mason-Dixon line ran through the area with stones marking the demarcation, no notable battles occurred. But coinciding with the surrender came the boom of the railroad. Waterpower and canals lost their status as preferred modes of transport, and so the Fair Hill area became an agricultural economy.

Slowly, the population declined as more people moved toward cities.

"All of a sudden, everybody started looking around and saying, 'Hey, there's a big world out there,' " said Kilby. "And then World War I changed things markedly—and then the Depression. So that was like every 10 years [something pushed people away from Fair Hill]."

That desire to move away coincided with a du Pont hoping to move in.

A banker, a sportsman and an innovator, William du Pont Jr. changed the trajectory of Cecil County, Maryland, when he purchased the Fair Hill property to fulfill his dreams of creating the ultimate steeplechase and hunting playground. *PHOTO COURTESY OF THE FAIR HILL FOUNDATION*

A MAN WITH A VISION

In April of 1927, Gilbert Cann leased his 62-acre farm to Mr. William du Pont Jr.'s Foxcatcher Hounds. By January and February of the next calendar year, the Delaware banker had upgraded and purchased six parcels of land.

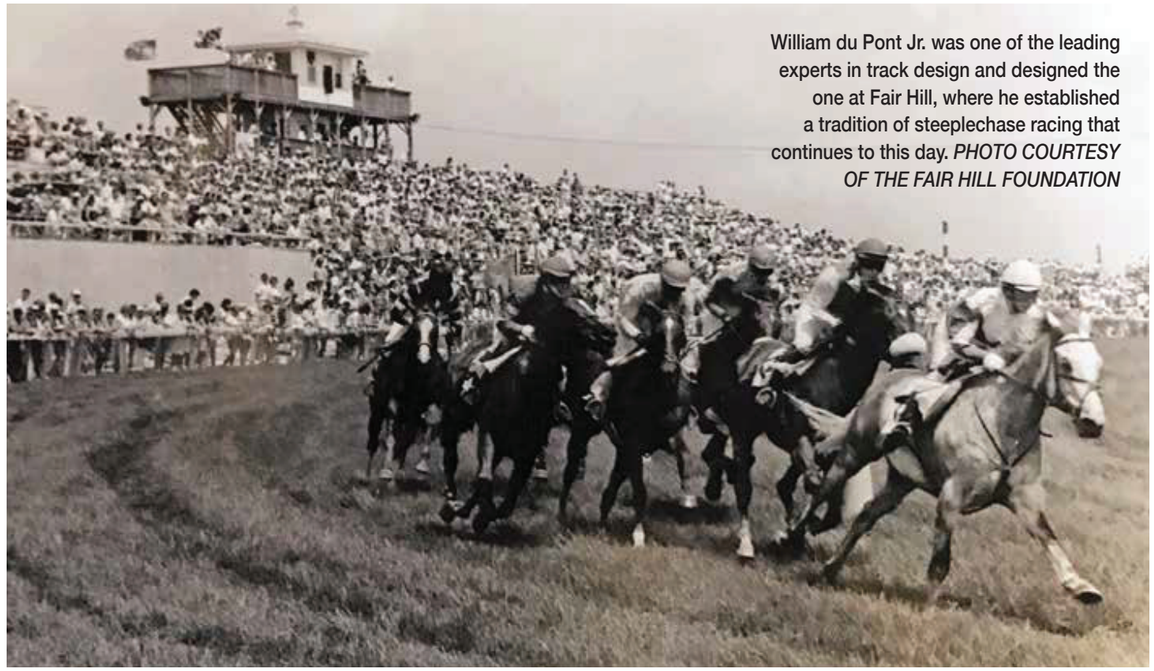
Great grandson of chemist and gunpowder manufacturer Éleuthère Irénée du Pont, William was born into one of the most distinguished families of the 19th and 20th centuries. With his older sister Marion du Pont Scott, he grew up at President James Madison's Montpelier in Orange County, Virginia. In the heart of Virginia's hunt country—and with their father's affinity for Percherons—the two developed a devotion to horses.

"You get that feeling they followed their father's example of, he's managing cattle—pedigreed cattle—and sheep and horses," said Dorothy Ours, author of the books "Man O' War" and "Battleship: A Daring Heiress, A Teenage Jockey, And America's Horse." "He bought them Shetland ponies when they were little to get started, and then it progressed from there."

On Jan. 20, 1928, their father died. At the time, William and his then-wife Jean Liseter Austin lived at Liseter Hall estate in Newtown Square, Pennsylvania, where William established a racing stable under the name Foxcatcher Farm. But with his father's passing, William also inherited the Bellevue Hall estate in Wilmington, Delaware, and he took over as president of Delaware Trust Company at almost 32 years old.

So when William purchased those initial six parcels in Maryland, he didn't buy them with the hopes of establishing another residence. Instead he had two visions: to design a counterpart to England's Grand National at Aintree and to create the ultimate foxhunting paradise. In 1928, he started bringing those visions to life by building kennels and a steeplechase course.

William had established his Foxcatcher Hounds as a 16-year-old in Montpelier, but with Fair Hill being so close to his work in Wilmington, he moved his hounds to the property. When the stock market crashed in 1929, sending the country into the Great Depression, William



William du Pont Jr. was one of the leading experts in track design and designed the one at Fair Hill, where he established a tradition of steeplechase racing that continues to this day. *PHOTO COURTESY OF THE FAIR HILL FOUNDATION*

had the ability to expand his holdings. While buying the land, he allowed farmers to continue working it and living in their homes. Eventually he amassed almost 8,000 acres, spilling into Pennsylvania.

"It seemed like hardly any of the long-established familes wanted their farms anymore," Kilby said. "So, it was a buyer's market for sure. Little by little, he bought approximately 100 individual properties to make up Fair Hill."

CREATING HIS HAVEN

In a 1966 issue of Wilmington's Evening Journal, Red Smith described William du Pont as, "A thin-shanked millionaire who rides like a border raider, works like a longshore man …. There are marked discrepancies between the popular conception of a zillionaire's existence and the routine at Bellevue Hall."

Always seen in a tweed suit—the story goes he liked the fabric so much he bought a whole roll of the raw material while in England—William was notorious for his "unflagging energy" outside of work. In addition to being a breeder and owner of Thoroughbreds, he was a problem solver, and he brought his ideas to Fair Hill.

He built bridges and tunnels above and below roads with fencing, so that the hounds and the hunt never had to physically cross potential traffic. And in the decades that followed, he put in a "super fence" along the edges of public roads and around the perimeter of certain tracts of land. The chain-link fence that stood approximately 7' high, with a 2' deep concrete footer. This prevented white-tail deer from jumping into his property and distracting his hounds, while also inhibiting the foxes from escaping the area.

"Mr. du Pont has exceeded anything ever done in any hunting country as to both cost and originality," the Baltimore Sun wrote in article "The Pampered Foxcatcher Hounds Have Their Own Private Bridge." "Some time ago, he had constructed over the motor highway leading from Fair Hill towards Newark, Delaware, a half dozen steel and concrete bridges spaced at strategical intervals over a distance of several miles. These bridges span the roadway at a height of ten feet or more and are joined by

Since its inception in 1989, the Fair Hill International has become a staple on the fall eventing calendar. *LINDSAY BERRETH PHOTO*

tight woven wire fences on both sides. When a hunted fox makes his point in this direction he must of necessity cross at a bridge. The concrete floors of these overpasses are covered with turf to prevent horses from slipping when in a gallop."

All this created an isolated and controlled piece of land. And with so much property, William alternated his hunting tracts—calling them the Monday, Wednesday and Saturday Countries.

"You never had to worry about roads," said Louisa Emerick, who hunted on the land starting in the early '60s. "You never had to worry about people coming out and shouting at you or whatever. It was all fenced. There were lots of jumps. They were all pretty big. The hounds were really good. They were an American hound, but they were pretty fast. We usually hunted in a small pack. And the master of foxhounds, basically you stayed in that group. We had some wonderful views, and the foxes were very comfortable about running because they learned the game."

Simultaneously, William gained stature as an authority for racetrack designs, and Fair Hill's was one of approximately 25 throughout the world with his signature. He even wrote handbooks on the matter, but he omitted his name and forwent copyright.

"How did Mr. du Pont become one of the leading, if not by this time, the leading expert in racing courses?" the Wilmington Morning News stated in 1959 in the article "'Genius' Behind Delaware Park: William Du Pont's Policies Inspiration To Trackdom." "It all started when he noted how often riders were left in the lurch when their horses failed to clear the jumps. And instead of just beefing about it all, Mr. du Pont decided to do something about it. The result is the famous and universally accepted style jump, so well designed that riders shied away from courses that didn't have the du Pont brush."

At his Maryland track, he molded his specimen and then left the turf alone for seven years as it settled. Both William and Scott looked to Aintree with such reverence and desire—especially after U.S. horse Billy Barton finished second in 1928. With no U.S. winner on record in England, William set out to give American horses a leg up with his Foxcatcher National Cup, which debuted on Aug. 25, 1934.

Twelve of his 19 brush fences towered at 5'10", but unlike Aintree during that era, William built the tip of the fences with more flexibility to prevent catastrophic falls.

"Of course, he had an eye toward Aintree and what would it take to be successful there as the ultimate steeplechase," said Ours, Morgantown, West Virginia. "But he cared about safety. He wasn't trying to go, 'Oh, let's see how many fall down.' He wanted to encourage the ones who were very skillful to come out and do this but also design the courses in a way that would help you—that should help the horse and rider to have a good sight line, to have a good chance."

Frederick Alfred Upsher Smith's Melita won the inaugural race. However, by 1958 the massive Aintree-style feature race was canceled due to lack of horses that could complete a track of that nature. But the more traditional Fair Hill Races, which also started in 1958 alongside the Foxcatcher Cup, continue today in front of William's grandstands.

TRANSITIONING INTO A NEW ERA

As William's health declined in the mid-1960s, he rolled up his stirrups and turned on the engine to his Jeep. His daughter Jean Ellen du Pont Shehan (then McConnell) started hunting at Fair Hill in the early 1960s, but around this time, she became Master of Foxhounds. Though he couldn't ride anymore, William followed his Foxcatcher Hounds from behind the wheel until his death in 1965 at the age of 69.

Shehan continued the traditions established by her father at Fair Hill while also creating her own. Having grown up on the Main Line of Philadelphia, she hunted with the Radnor Hunt and saw the importance of the newly established U.S. Pony Clubs system in the United States. She brought young riders from the Radnor Pony Club down to Fair Hill to learn the trade.

"Most of them never hunted; they were Pony Clubbers who were kids who wanted to ride," said Emerick. "They rode, and they did the [mounted games], the horse shows and things like that. But most of them had never actually followed real hounds. So that was the opportunity to come down and be in a pretty safe place, because if you fell off your horse, he probably wasn't going to go too far; it's all fenced in."

Beyond foxhunting and chasing, a new discipline took hold at the property: In the late 1960s, the first three-day event at Fair Hill appeared on the calendar. It was only held there for a few years, but it helped set the stage for what would come.

"It's a great piece of ground, and it lends itself to horses," said eventing legend and former Fair Hill International CCI4*-L winner Bruce Davidson, of Unionville, Pennsylvania. "As soon as you see it as a horse person, you understand that it lends itself to horses.

"It's vast. It's rolling," he continued. "It's got flat areas. The turf is exceptional. The soil is great. The forests are ancient and in great condition. The rivers and the streams are abundant. When [William du Pont Jr.] had it, he

controlled the wildlife. He didn't need deer, and he wanted foxes, and he wanted healthy foxes. He controlled it that way, which was a rather unique approach."

In 1975, the du Pont family and the state of Maryland reached an agreement for the Maryland Department of Natural Resources to purchase the property for $6 million. While George Strawbridge bought the land on the Pennsylvania side of the state border, 5,633 acres of William's estate became the Fair Hill Natural Resources Management Area, which today is 5,656 acres.

Ross Peddicord, executive director of the Maryland Horse Industry Board, noted the state likely had a few motives behind purchasing the property.

"I think the No. 1 [reason] was to preserve it as parkland," he said, "and No. 2 was to continue its equestrian usage. Having traveled around the world a little bit and seeing event complexes at Chantilly in France, and Badminton and Burghley, and some of the great equestrian venues around the world, this is America's answer to that.

"We have nearly 6,000 acres of prime, open land available for equestrian activities," he continued. "It's going to become more and more vital to maintain that as the world keeps being developed, and also to preserve it as a natural resource management area where we can happily co-exist with a number of wildlife species and under environmental protection. It's paramount not only to the health of our citizens in the state of Maryland, but it's also paramount to the health of the horse industry."

A THRIVING THREE-DAY EVENT

Fair Hill hadn't seen three-day event flags since the deed transfer, but that was about to change. The property's next era saw the disbandment of Foxcatcher Hounds in 1980—though Patricia du Pont stepped in with her own pack, Miss du Pont's Hounds, in 1981—and the establishment of the Fair Hill Training Center in 1983. Eventing came next.

In 1986, Denis Glaccum brought the Fair Hill Equestrian Events Horse Trials inside the park's boundaries. Offered three times a year, the horse trials proved again that the discipline could be successful at Fair Hill. Then in 1987, a grant from the U.S. Equestrian Team helped to build intermediate courses and then in 1988 an advanced course.

In 1989, the Chesterland Three-Day Event (Pennsylvania) needed a new location for its CCI3* (now called a CCI4*-L), and its organizers, Elkins Wetherill and John Ryan, turned their focus to Cecil County. With a Founders Committee including Glaccum, Wetherill and Ryan along with Trish Gilbert, Kate Jackson, Jim Ligon, Bodgie Read, Col. D. W. Thackeray, Judy Thayer, Dick Thompson and Lana Wright, they established the Fair Hill International. In October of that year, Karen O'Connor (then Karen Lende) and Nos Ecus emerged as the first winners of the feature division after tackling Mike Tucker's cross-country track.

"It's one of the best pieces of property in this country to run a three-day event," said Gilbert, Churchville, Maryland.

"My vision was it should be five-star way back there when we started."

California native and 2015 Fair Hill CCI4*-L winner Tamie Smith knew of the facility's reputation long before she competed there for the first time in the 2000s. By then Derek di Grazia was designing the cross-country, including when Fair Hill served as the venue for the 2003 Pan American Games eventing.

"At the top level you're seeing courses kind of turn into this twisty, turny type field," Smith said. "And [Fair Hill is] just like a really old-school, long-format type feel. It's always been that way for us. We just always know if your horse gets around Fair Hill, you have a proper four- and five-star horse."

Davidson agreed.

"I say as a person who loves horses and competing, it's always been a special place," said Davidson. "For our sport, it's a demanding piece of ground because it's got a lot of terrain. There's a lot of hills, up and down. There's a lot of natural streams and things like that. You know when you finish a big three-day there how good your horse really is. Because it's as demanding as any course in the world as far as terrain."

In the 32 years since that initial running, the Fair Hill International has grown alongside the facility's other equestrian uses, including endurance, driving and trail riding. Non-equestrians became a part of the makeup as well, biking and hiking the expanse.

"The multiuse and the foresight of the people involved to preserve it and utilize it in the way they have—it's really the paradigm for the other state parks," said James C. Wofford, Upperville, Virginia. "Of course [there's] the Kentucky Horse Park but [also] the Virginia Horse Center and the New Jersey Horse Center that I can think of right away. They're wonderful, and in many ways they're more elaborate and more modern, but they're following the footsteps of Fair Hill."

Gilbert's larger vision for eventing on the property started to take form in 2016, when the state granted the Fair Hill Foundation $10 million to create a world-class equestrian facility to host the country's second five-star and the world's seventh: The Maryland 5 Star. (The Land Rover Kentucky CCI5*-L takes place every spring.)

In July of 2017, the U.S. Equestrian Federation Board of Directors approved the recommendation to add the event with a start date of 2019, though the inaugural event was postponed for two years. It will start Oct. 14 this year, also hosting a CCI3*-L and the Dutta Corp. USEA Young Event Horse East Coast Championships alongside the five-star.

"It's important because it brings an international level, and it will attract the best international riders so that we don't always have to travel and expose our younger riders to Europe," said Davidson. "We can bring it here and create the same level of competition. There are very few five-stars in the world. And the fact that we have one in the spring and one in autumn is the best way to build the foundation—if not the foundation, the pyramid. The pyramid starts at the bottom and finishes at the top, and that is the top. I think it will make the sport keep spreading out and expanding in our area and in the Northeast."

Davidson said he was among those who dreamed of the event reaching this level from the time it began. "It always lent itself to that, and as the sport has grown and as the demand for the sport has grown, we've been able to produce it," he said. "And I think each year, it's going to get bigger and bigger and better and better."

Ian Stark's cross-country course will begin in front of William du Pont's stands, where 87 years ago, in the aftermath of the Great Depression, his friends, neighbors and other spectators placed bets on their favorite chaser.

"This place would not exist if it weren't for horses," Kilby said. "If du Pont hadn't come along with his horse mania, this would be one continuous housing development."