

THE CHESTERBROOK DEVELOPMENT

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(additions and amendments by Herb Fry)

Historical research leads to the discovery of information which can be used to interpret life in earlier times. That said, we also need to issue a disclaimer. It is hazardous to research recent history because much of it is not yet documented, and more hazardous yet to attempt to interpret it for contemporaries who have witnessed the same events. Opportunities for differences of interpretation abound.

As a resident of neighboring Easttown, the Chesterbrook development was more or less of academic interest, and much of the debate took place during a period when employment demands did not allow extra time for hands-on involvement. In retrospect, however, it becomes increasingly clear that what was perhaps the single most important event in the history of Tredyffrin Township took place on November 5, 1969 when the Richard Fox interests bought Chesterbrook Farm.

There is no dismissing the fact that Chesterbrook Farm, together with the adjoining University of Pennsylvania and Yohn parcels which comprise the 865-acre Chesterbrook development, is a vast assembly of land, over a square mile in size, more land than the entire railroad corridor reaching across Tredyffrin. It took from November 1969 to

November 1977 — eight years — until the first Chesterbrook home was finished. Speaking at a business seminar in 1993, just after the entire development was completed, Richard Fox said about getting it started, "It was a six-year fight." The legal battle went all the way to the state Supreme Court. Hundreds of residents of Tredyffrin and nearby communities flocked to hearings and meetings. According to the only poll taken of more than 2000 residents, they opposed Chesterbrook by a 9-to-1 ratio. But Fox finally got the go-ahead, and the development was started. In all, it took 23 years from the purchase of land to final completion.

One of the biggest mysteries was assignment, by post office officials, of a Wayne, PA 19087 mailing address to the homes in Chesterbrook. Wayne is in a different township, in a different county, with different demographics, a good six miles away. That post office address is not a good indicator of geographic location. It has proved a big problem for direct-mail advertising firms, as well as the home owners themselves.

Let's begin, then, with the date December 28, 1906. Alexander Johnston Cassatt, owner of the showplace Chesterbrook Farm and president of the Pennsylvania Railroad, died unexpectedly that day at his Philadelphia residence, 202 West Rittenhouse Square, less than a month after his 67th birthday. He died of whooping cough which he had contracted the summer before, and which could not be contained with medicines then available. His eldest son, Captain Edward Buchanan Cassatt, inherited the farm.

Edward Cassatt was 38 years old when he became the owner of Chesterbrook. He was a West Point graduate, a cavalry officer, a dashing person with a Type A personality. He lived life with all the gusto his money could buy (which was a good deal).

He was fortunate in his selection of the farm's general manager — Richard Colgan, who had been the right hand man of A. J. 's manager, R. Penn Smith. Captain Edward (and we have not been able to figure his true rank over the years) gave instructions that the number of animals should be kept, and the farm should be maintained, in the same condition as it had been during the time of his late father.

Two years later, Edward met and married his second wife, Eleanor Blackford Smith of Virginia, nicknamed "Bunny." At age 20, she was about twenty years younger than he, and she was as beautiful as he was dashing. She was known as a great beauty all up and down the East Coast, and she never went anywhere without a group of men paying her attention as she went. Captain Edward had an eye for the ladies as well as the horses, and together they were a handsome couple.

In 1910, they had a baby boy who was just as beautiful as they were — yellow hair, blue eyes, and all. Eighteen months later, the family went to England for the coronation of King George V. The baby became ill on board the ship, and with failing health, he died in Europe. When Edward and Bunny returned to Chesterbrook, they never spoke of the child again. By his first wife Emily, Edward had one child, Lois, who had been the apple of her grandfather's eye. She had moved to New York when her mother remarried, so there were never any children in residence at Chesterbrook Farm's main house.

Captain Edward started to breed thoroughbreds and soon went back into racing. The *Daily Local News* of West Chester reported that it "seems the glory days of Chesterbrook Farm are about to return." The Cassatt colors were soon seen again at leading tracks like Saratoga, Belmont, and Pimlico. Just as *The Bard* was A. J. Cassatt's greatest horse, *Flying Fairy* filled that role for Edward. Fairy set world records and captured the Preakness one year.

The other star of Captain Edward's Chesterbrook was a cow named *May Rilma*, hailed as the champion dairy cow of all breeds. In 1914 she produced a total of 19,673 pounds of milk, and 1073 pounds of butterfat. Chesterbrook Farm was a member of the Golden Guernsey Club of America, and the herders kept track of statistics for every cow — how much it weighed, how much milk it gave, the butterfat content. The record keeping was immense.

Edward Cassatt was 48 when World War I started in 1917. Even though he was too old to participate, he and Bunny entertained troops posted at nearby Camp Fuller in Paoli. They hosted movies at the race stables twice a week for local servicemen.

People in the surrounding community were always welcome to Chesterbrook Farm — it was not a closed corporation. Anyone who lived on the farm was quite free to invite their friends to visit and see the animals, walk the fields, and play in the street. It was a wonderful playground for the children who grew up on Chesterbrook during that era.

In January of 1922, Captain (or Colonel) Edward Cassatt died suddenly at the age of 53. We do not know what he died of, but we looked through the records for the year before and found a lot of doctor's bills from a Dr. Joseph Laird in Devon. Cassatt had many prescriptions for a cough, and one of our interviewees mentioned that "you could hear the man coughing all over the place." Our records also show that he had a very expensive tobacco habit. He smoked a lot, coughed a lot, and went to the doctor a lot, so you can only assume what it was that did him in as a relatively young man.

He left Bunny, a very beautiful 33-year-old widow, with all of Chesterbrook Farm as her legacy. In 1924, only two years later, Bunny married the doctor. It was a second marriage for both. Her marriage to Dr. J. Packard Laird was brief, as after three years, in July of 1927, he died aboard the steamship *Cameronia* bound for Glasgow, Scotland. That was the end of another era. The Bunny Laird years, from 1927 to 1962, followed.

Bunny loved Chesterbrook very much, and she carried on with it as best she could. She didn't have the business sense of old A. J. Cassatt, and she didn't have the push and drive that Edward had, but she had R. A. Colgan as her farm manager. She entrusted the business of the farm to him, while she pursued her love of gardening and painting. She loved to pick flowers from her garden and paint still lifes. She had an interesting social life, but the farm began to slip.

In 1931, Peter Boland became the farm's general manager. It was his farming know-how and sound business skills that held the farm together for the next two decades. In 1937 Peter Boland was recognized as Chester County champion for the largest yield of corn. It was the dairy business which kept Chesterbrook afloat in the late '30s and '40s. There were no race horses — the horses were all gone. The

farm won many prizes for Golden Guernsey quality products, and regular milk routes distributed the milk to residents of the Great Valley vicinity. Jack Casey, brother of Mary Ellen Casey Monk and Sissie Casey Riedmiller, started the milk routes through the local area. Some of the calendars, ration books, and Merry Christmas bottle bands that are evidence of the good community relations the farm enjoyed are treasured collectibles today.

Still, things began to wind down. In 1952 the cattle herd was auctioned off at heartbreakingly low prices. They were almost given away. About 1952 Helen Boland, the oldest of the Boland children, became Bunny Laird's companion and chauffeur. They went everywhere together for the next ten years, enjoying shopping and social excursions.

In July of 1962, Eleanor Cassatt Laird — Bunny — died while vacationing at Harborside Inn, Northeast Harbor, Maine, at age 73. She left the farm to her niece, Mrs. J. Norman Henry; and A. J.'s grandson, A. J. Cassatt of Cecilton, Maryland. Old A. J. Cassatt's will, however, had said that the farm was ever to remain in the Cassatt family, so Mrs. Henry was discounted as an heir of the estate, and Alexander Cassatt inherited what was left of this once glorious farm.

As a point of history, in 1950, the Pennsylvania Turnpike crept through the northern part of the farm, and it upset Bunny no end to have the road there. About 1965, U. S. Route 202 was relocated to its present position, cutting through the farm on the south. But by then Bunny was gone, and the barns, houses, and stables were pretty nearly vacant. Helen Boland may have still been on the farm.

In my estimation, the day that Chesterbrook died was in May of 1963 when they auctioned off the carriages and equipment. It was Helen Boland, the secretary and friend, who took charge of the auction. The carriages were splendid -- Bunny Laird had a beige Phaeton with a silk parasol — and they were a sight to behold.

In 1968 the unoccupied main house, which had been built in the 1700s, burned down. Fire officials said that vandals had done it. Several other old valley houses burned or were vandalized about the same time.

The appraised value just after Mrs. Laird died was \$580,000 for the farm property, structures, and improvements. On November 5, 1969, seventeen years later, the 516.4-acre Chesterbrook Farm was sold for development to Great Valley Corporation for \$2,322,000.

References

(1) *Tredyffrin Easttown History Club Quarterly.*

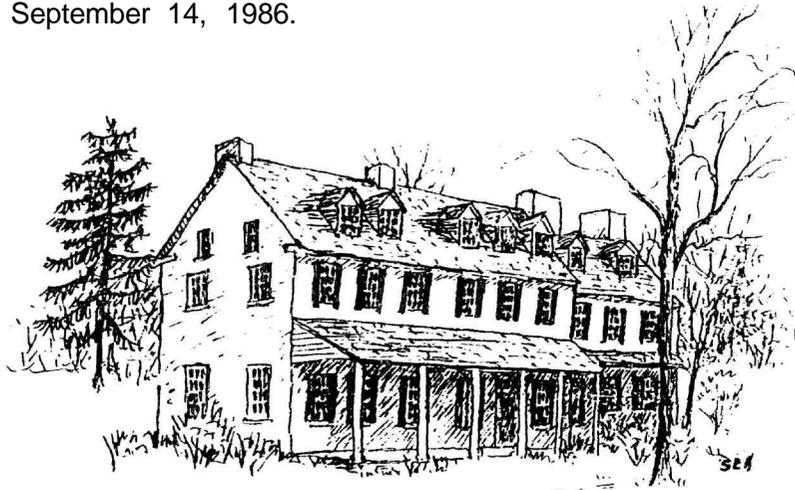
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Anne H. Cook, comp. and ed., "Reports of Chesterbrook Farm from the *Daily Local News*" various issues

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Barbara Fry, "Alexander Murdoch : The Shepherd of Chesterbrook"

(2) A file of material from the Tredyffrin Easttown History Club Archives on meetings sponsored by the DuPortail History Group. Audrey Baur served as a trustee of the historic DuPortail House, and chairperson of its History Committee. (Fox Companies restored the old farmhouse as a community center during construction of Chesterbrook.) Mrs. Baur organized six events held at DuPortail House between 1990 and 1995, where the history of the Chesterbrook area was explored and archived for future reference.

(3) "Chesterbrook Saga : A Chronology" from the *Daily Local News*, September 14, 1986.



CHESTERBROOK FARM -MAIN HOUSE -ON MILL ROAD

Sketch by Sue Andrews