

Mount Penn Preserve Newsletter

The History of the Reading Hillclimbs

By Keith Kennedy & Rich Rock

Twice a year the area surrounding Reading's iconic Pagoda and William Penn Fire Tower erupts with the sounds of engines racing, the smells of high-octane fuel and hot rubber, and the sight of race cars on Duryea Drive. It's the Reading Hillclimbs! The Pagoda and Duryea Hillclimbs, in June and August respectively, are put on by the Blue Mountain Region of the Sports Car Club of America and are part of the Pennsylvania Hillclimb Association Championship Series.

To the outside observer, the Hillclimbs may seem out of place due to the nature of the area, but there's a long history here. In 1900, Charles Duryea started the Duryea Power Company in Reading after he and his brother Frank invented the first gasoline powered engine in the United States circa 1893. The final test of any Duryea vehicle was to drive the

unpaved, winding road starting from City Park up to Mount Penn. The road was paved in the 1930's and in 1941, was renamed "Duryea Drive" in honor of Charles. In 1951, the MG Club chose Duryea Drive as the site for an automobile hill climb race, and it's been an annual tradition ever since.

The original event drew about 50 drivers. For safety, they wore nothing more than leather helmets. The fastest time on the original course was 2 minutes 42.3 seconds, an average of 51mph. The start was changed to its current location of Clymer Street and Duryea Drive in 1967. Over the years, "The Hill" has seen its share of famous drivers including Lex DuPont, Oscar Koveleski, Roger Penske and Kerry Hitt.

Today, about 100 drivers come from all over the east coast and the midwest for each event. There are a wide variety of cars competing- everything from



Hillclimb and the Reading Pagoda.
Photo courtesy of Mike Vanino

open wheeled formula cars to the fastest sports and muscle cars of today. The cars are prepared for safety with roll cages and racing harnesses while the drivers wear protective suits and sophisticated helmets. The fastest time on the Duryea course is 1 minute 45.5 seconds, an average of 75mph!

The events are open to the

public and admission is by voluntary donation to Pagoda Skyline, Inc. Bring the kids, these are family-friendly events! The Pagoda Hillclimb is held every June. The next Duryea Hillclimb is August 17-18, 2019.

More information is available at: www.bmr-scca.org



The William Penn Memorial Fire Tower: An Observation

By Corrie Crupi

When one thinks of the Mount Penn, or even the City of Reading, the first thing that comes to mind is the Pagoda.

But, overlooking the City of Reading, sits another one of Berks County's renowned landmarks known as the William Penn Memorial Fire Tower. At the crest of Skyline Drive, it sits in the center of the Mount Penn Preserve. This 120-foot-tall, imposing stone fire tower, is a sentinel that stands silently telling a tale of history and wonder.

Originally, in 1888, an impressive but smaller tower was built on this exact site and was the main attraction of the Gravity Railroad system. A devastating fire in 1923 destroyed this once stunning tourist attraction.

Rising from those ashes, in 1939 the William Penn Tower was built in memory of our once vibrant mountain top. It was a Works Progress Administration project constructed on the same foundation and designated for forest fire observation and

operation as a tourist attraction.

With the help of Pagoda-Skyline Inc., a non-profit group of volunteers, City of Reading, Lower Alsace Township, along with assistance from our state representatives and senator, the William Penn Memorial Fire Tower has been under major restoration efforts.

The ongoing nemesis is the moisture problem as the tower is unheated. Since it is perched on top of a mountain surrounded by forest,

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McKnight: the man, the mountain, the major– and the gap

by Phil and Mary Lou Kline

Residents of Berks County, especially we who are chronologically advantaged, know how a road in our county came to be known as “The Road to Nowhere.”

But is there a gap in your knowledge about the naming of McKnights Gap Road? Do you know where it is and why it came to be? And who was McKnight, anyway?

If your drive through northeast Reading takes you past the “Castle on the Hill” and out Hampden Boulevard toward Route 12, you’ll see a sign for McKnights Gap Road. Be adventurous! Turn right onto a winding road complete with a hairpin turn that leads to Skyline Drive. This road seems built to challenge your driving skills, but there is, of course, a practical purpose for this motorway. McKnights Gap Road provides a path to get you “up the mountain” and leads you from Hampden Boulevard in Alsace Township to the intersection with Skyline Drive.



Early settlers traversing Mount Penn took advantage of the mountain’s natural gap. Their path, carved into the side of the mountain, eventually became the paved road we currently know.

As you make your way up the steep incline, you’ll encounter the road’s twists and turns. A sharp left-hand turn in the road? No problem, just slow down a bit. An absolute hairpin turn further along? Well, yes. Steady your nerves, slow your speed, and you’ll savor (survive?) the adventure. Ah, at last – the stop sign at the end of the road, high atop the city. Now you just have to pull out. Keep your eyes and ears alert for cars coming from at least three directions and trying to navigate their own circuitous route. Without contributing too much rubber to the road surface, you’ve pulled out and arrived on scenic Skyline Drive.

As you navigate McKnights Gap Road, especially in the fall, you might wonder who maintains it and who will remove the ice and the snow in the coming winter. Fortunately for the road crew of Alsace Township, the challenging McKnights Gap Road is maintained by the crews of PennDOT.

Are you one of the brave people who drive this treacherous road on a daily basis? Well, perhaps you are maneuvering your way from the convergence of Alsace Township, the City of Reading, and Muhlenberg Township, taking a handy short cut to traverse Mount Penn heading to Lower Alsace Township. You might be on your way home, or heading for a visit to Antietam Lake and the enhanced Mount Penn Preserve, or to Stony Creek or other points in Lower Alsace Township. While Mother Nature provided the gap, adventurous trailblazers, early settlers and clever roadbuilders took advantage of her fortuitous design.

So, now that you know about the gap and the road, what about McKnight? From his birth in Reading in 1820 to his death at his Alsace Township farm in 1888, James P. McKnight led a notably interesting and heroic life. Born literally in the Union Bank Building on Penn Street where his father was a banker, James later attended Princeton University and became known in our community as a cultured man.

For 17 years he was a partner with Joseph Stichter in a successful hardware business on Penn Street. In 1850 he organized the Ringgold Light Artillery and drilled his men frequently at the Sinking Spring Parade Grounds.

In 1861 when summoned by telegram to report to Harrisburg for service, he was able to organize 101 men within 40 minutes and lead them to the Pennsylvania capital, arriving by train in Harrisburg at 8 that evening. A few days later, he led his men to Washington, D.C., to defend our US capital.

His unit was distinctively dubbed *The First Defenders* for its role in defending the Union early in the Civil War. McKnight later served as a major with the Fifth U.S. Artillery. After seeing action at some of the fiercest battles, he was made a brevet major-general. At the end of the war he returned to Reading and was an officer of the Reading Fire Insurance Company. A lifelong bachelor, he retired to his home, “McKnight’s Mansion,” situated at McKnight gap where he passed away peacefully, albeit suddenly, at 68 years of age.

Next time you are sporting up this challenging roadway, look for James’ house and pay homage to the road’s namesake, one of the bravest men of Berks County.

See you on the squiggle! Beep, beep'm, beep, beep, yeah!



The William Penn Memorial Fire Tower: An Observation

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the tower experiences extreme wind, temperature, and humidity. Although the steel stairs were replaced by Pagoda Skyline Inc. in 2000, these conditions are degrading and corroding the stairs. We continue to strive to upkeep the tower for the future.

When you visit the tower today there are numerous improvements that have been made including new fencing around the building giving off a stately appeal. A unique walkway shows an impression of William Penn holding the Pennsylvania Charter which is set in garden block.

As you enter the building, inlaid on the entry wall is the "shield of arms" of the William Penn family designed in colored Moravian tile. There are 168 steel stairs and two sets of

spiral stairs that lead to a circular observation area that includes an outside deck. A dome roof finished in copper with turret-sized windows encased in bronze completes the tower. Enjoy breathtaking panoramic views of the City of Reading, the Schuylkill and Lebanon Valley and the distant peaks of the Blue Mountains that entice many locals and tourists from all over.

In 2017, a multi modal grant was filed by Lower Alsace Township on behalf of Alsace Township and the City of Reading to reconstruct Skyline Drive and provide safer biking and hiking facilities along this scenic route. The Mount Penn Preserve continues to work together to make the area a better and safer tourist attraction.



History Mystery

Whose idea was it to build the Pagoda?

- Charles Duryea, automobile pioneer
- William Witman, city councilman
- James and Charles Matz, contractors
- William Penn's great-great grandson, Bic Penn

* See answer below



History Mystery Answer

The Answer is: b. William Witman, a Reading city councilman, mayoral candidate, baseball team owner, and the Pagoda's first owner.

By the way, James and Charles Matz were hired to construct it (1906-1908). Charles Duryea had developed the road leading to the Pagoda to test drive his hill-climbing car engines.

If you answered d, you fell for a really weak pun. Sorry, I couldn't resist!

*Submitted by Mike Reinert,
MP3 Marketing Committee member*

An interesting adventure awaits you in the Mount Penn Preserve

by Beth Burkovich, information provided by DVOA

Each year the Delaware Valley Orienteering Association (DVOA) holds a series of orienteering events within the Mount Penn Preserve.

So what exactly is orienteering? Orienteering is an outdoor navigation sport. Participants use a detailed map and compass to find check points along a mapped course while being timed. It's a sport for any age and is a great way to explore new places whether it's by yourself or with a group of friends and family. The DVOA provides instruction at all events and beginners are always welcome.

Come on out and join the DVOA as they host a two day event in the Mount Penn Preserve!

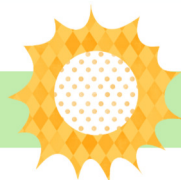
Saturday July 13th and Sunday July 14th (10am-1pm). Cost: \$7 for members, \$12 adult, \$7 for those under 21.

More information on orienteering and events:

www.dvoa.org



*Check Point in the
Mount Penn Preserve
Photo Courtesy of Beth Burkovich*



Upcoming Events

Mount Penn Preserve COG

Kevin S. Barnhardt
Chair, Berks County
Lee C. Olsen, AIA
Vice Chair, Berks County
Kim Mallatratt
Treasurer, Alsace Township
Linda Kelleher
Secretary, City of Reading

David Barth
Alsace Township

Todd Weikel
Lower Alsace Township

Terry Styer
Lower Alsace Township

Bette Petrov
Mount Penn Borough

Claudia Hurwitz
Mount Penn Borough

Marcia Goodman-Hinnershitz
City of Reading

Reading Pagoda, Gift Shop and Café'

July and August: Thursday (2pm-6pm); Friday, Saturday, and Sunday (12pm-6pm)

September: Every Saturday and Sunday (12pm-5pm)

Every Sunday through September 29th: Intel's Pennside Drive-In Car Cruise (2pm-6pm, weather permitting)

Every Monday through August 26th: Antietam Valley Farmers' & Artists' Market (5pm-8pm)

July 10-12: Multi-Day Camp "Art in the Park" for ages 7yrs to 11yrs- Bingaman Nature Center (9:30am- 1pm), registration/payment required to jbrooks@countyofberks.com or 484-509-2667

July 12: Invasives: Featuring the Spotted Lantern Fly- Bingaman Nature Center (6:30pm)

July 13: Delaware Valley Orienteering Event- Rotary Club List Rd (10am-1pm)

July 14: Delaware Valley Orienteering Event- Rotary Club List Rd (10am-1pm)

July 21st: Reading Gravity Racing League- Oak Lane (11am-5pm), Rain Date: August 11

July 18: 1 Day Camp "Animal Detectives" for ages K-3- Bingaman Nature Center (9:30am-1:30pm), registration/payment required to jbrooks@countyofberks.com or 484-509-2667

July 19: Campfire Stories & S'Mores- Bingaman Nature Center (7pm-8:30pm)

July 21: Reading Gravity Racing League- Oak Lane (11am-5pm)

July 24: MP3 COG Meeting (Public Welcome)- Reading Pagoda (7pm-8pm)

July 25: 1 Day Camp "Wilderness Survival" for ages K-3- Angora Fruit Farm (9:30am-1:30pm), registration/payment required to jbrooks@countyofberks.com or 484-509-2667

July 26: Moth Night- Angora Fruit Farm (7pm-9pm) , FREE, but registration required to jbrooks@countyofberks.com or 484-706-0020

July 27: Twilight Tea and Storytime for ages 3+ - Angora Fruit Farm (7pm-8pm), FREE, but registration required to jbrooks@countyofberks.com or 484-509-2667

August 1: 1 Day Camp "Boots, Buckets and Beyond" for ages K-3- Angora Fruit Farm (9:30am-1:30pm), registration/payment required to jbrooks@countyofberks.com or 484-509-2667

August 2: Beautiful Bats featuring PA Bat Rescue- Angora Fruit Farm (7:30pm), FREE, but registration required to jbrooks@countyofberks.com or 484-509-2667

August 3: Reading Radsport Two Day Festival- West Reading (11am-4pm)

August 4: Reading Radsport Two Day Festival- Mount Penn Preserve Hill Climb and City Park Dirt Course (11am-4pm)

August 10: BAMBA and Vermont Adaptive Off Road Adaptive Demo Day- BAMBA List Rd Trail Head (9am-3pm)

August 10: Smokey Bear's 75th Birthday- William Penn Memorial Fire Tower (11am-4pm)

August 11: BAMBA and Vermont Adaptive Off Road Adaptive Demo Day- BAMBA List Rd Trail Head (9am-3pm)

August 17: 68th Annual Duryea HillClimb- Duryea Drive (9:30am-4:30pm)

August 18: 68th Annual Duryea HillClimb- Duryea Drive (9am-4pm)

September 7: Live music by the Hott Toddys- Klingers on Carsonia (9:30pm-12:30am)

September 8: Reading Gravity Racing League- Skyline Drive (11am-5pm), Rain Date: September 15

September 12: Roots to Wings Preschool Program "Doodlebugs" for ages 3yrs to 5yrs- Angora Fruit Farm (10am), registration/payment required to jbrooks@countyofberks.com or 484-706-0020

September 21: Girl Scout WOW Journey Day for Brownies- Angora Fruit Farm (9am-1:30pm), registration/payment required to jbrooks@countyofberks.com or 484-509-2667

September 22: Paws on the Path Dog Walk with Zoey- Antietam Lake Park (10am-11am)

September 29: Hike and Yoga- Bingaman Nature Center (1pm-3pm)

To see a full list of events and details in the Mount Penn Preserve, go to:

www.mtpennpreserve.org

www.facebook.com/mountpennpreserve

Add your event to our Website and Facebook Page

Contact: mountpennpreserve@gmail.com

