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Photo Gallery

400th National Park

Published: April 2013



→ Melford Photography

Tour some of the locations within Delaware's proposed national park with photographer Michael Melford.



By the Photographer



→ Adirondack Park

New York State's sprawling preserve strikes an extraordinary balance between modern interests and the forest primeval.

History's Backyard

America's first state celebrates its "founding river" and more.

By Adam Goodheart

Photograph by Michael Melford

On a dreary stretch of Interstate 95, shadowed by the corporate office towers of Wilmington, Delaware, an overpass spans a narrow valley. Passing motorists, zooming through on their way toward Baltimore or Philadelphia, might cross a hundred times and barely notice the gorge's existence: hardly more than a wrinkle in the landscape, a glimpse of treetops vanishing in the rearview mirror. They would hardly guess at the little world enfolded within it, much less that it conceals what is arguably one of America's great waterways.

Drives of a Lifetime



→ Brandywine Valley

A road trip through the Brandywine Valley offers a taste of American aristocracy.

The Brandywine River is not, to be sure, the Mississippi, the Colorado, or the Hudson. It has inspired no epic novels, gouged no mighty canyons, carried on its bosom no famous ships. Indeed, in most places the Brandywine is navigable only by canoe or kayak, and you can easily skip a stone from one shore to the other. Its main stem is a mere 20 miles long, and for several centuries geographers have disagreed over whether it is a river at all or merely a creek. Yet no one could dispute that throughout those centuries, this bantam-size stream has consistently punched far above its weight. The Brandywine has powered technological revolutions, fueled gold rushes and wars, dazzled famous artists. A battle for the young nation's survival was fought on its muddy banks.

Today the Brandywine is drawing new attention thanks to a tract of land alongside it that may become the core of a new national monument: the 400th unit of the National Park System and the first within the state of Delaware. If proponents prevail, the rest of the country will finally notice the Brandywine—and the outsize course that it has cut through American history.

At 50 yards' distance, the Brandywine's brown surface often appears still, almost stagnant. Draw closer, though, and you realize that it is moving fast. You are rarely out of earshot of the chatter of water passing over smooth stones or of its southing as it tumbles down a milldam.

Waterpower: That one word sums up the long history of this river. From its source waters in the sandstone hills of southern Pennsylvania, the river falls seaward down a series of sloping planes. Except when in flood, this is not a whitewater river; it gathers its force not in headlong rushes but with a steady, businesslike insistence. In the final ten miles or so before its mouth, it drops 160 feet before plunging over low falls and feeding the deepwater harbor at Wilmington.

For much of its length, the Brandywine gorge's steeply wooded flanks are lined with the imposing remnants of a vanished society—although many of the ruins are little more than a century old. They are relics of the era when America's industrial and technological revolutions were powered by water. The Brandywine is just strong enough and just gentle enough, just narrow enough and just shallow enough, and just close enough to several great Atlantic ports to have made it the perfect incubator of industry.

At Hagley, an area not far from downtown Wilmington and the river's mouth, a row of what look like massive granite mausoleums juts into the stream. Inside these stone buildings, rusted machinery lies in neat rows, like stacked sarcophagi from the Iron Age. Near this spot, just after the turn of the 19th century, a family of minor Parisian aristocrats named du Pont settled with the intention of constructing a gunpowder factory. Hounded from their homeland by the French Revolution, they had headed for the new United States, seeking just the right power source for their enterprise. They found it here. Before long, the Brandywine's water was turning machines that crushed, mixed, and processed the raw ingredients: sulfur from Sicily and saltpeter from India, blended with charcoal from the valley's own native willow trees.

By 1860 the DuPont Company was the largest manufacturer of gunpowder in the

nation and soon was one of the largest in the world. Its products—with brand names like Eagle Gun Powder, Diamond Grain, and Louisiana Rifle—blasted the way for the Erie Canal and the transcontinental railroads; opened veins of California gold and Nevada silver; cut terrible swaths of destruction through Confederate armies, Indian tribes, and buffalo herds.

That gunpowder also touched off the explosive growth of one of America's great family fortunes. Soon the rapidly proliferating du Pont descendants filled the highlands along the Brandywine with their estates, each more magnificent than the last, crowding the river like châteaux along the Loire. Most still stand today, surveying the valley with lordly hauteur: great stony piles crowned with turrets and cupolas, swaddled in topiary and wrought iron. Those that have not become museums remain, to a large extent, in the hands of du Pont descendants (who now number in the thousands). A visitor to the Brandywine often gets the sense that it is one of the few places in America to which the word "feudal" can be applied.

Yet the du Ponts were, in a sense, late arrivals. It wasn't a French aristocrat who launched the industrial revolution along the Brandywine, but rather a Delaware shoemaker's son named Oliver Evans, one of America's greatest unheralded inventors and the godfather of automated manufacturing. In the 1780s he created a new system of flour milling that, with an ingenious arrangement of water-driven wheels, gears, and shafts, almost removed human labor from the process of turning wheat into flour. Visiting millers were incredulous to see Evans's mill grinding busily away as if by magic, completely unattended, while the owner himself worked placidly in a nearby field. Soon Evans-style gristmills—for which the inventor received the third U.S. patent ever granted—were lining both banks of the Brandywine, and their basic principles were being adapted to manufacture paper, textiles, and other products. The Brandywine Valley was to automation what Silicon Valley would later be to microprocessing.

Now, after 200 years, the core of the proposed national monument is emerging from the legacy of those fortunes. At its center is a 1,100-acre tract of upland meadows and woods known as Woodlawn, preserved from development a century ago by a Quaker textile manufacturer and philanthropist. It is one of the last large undeveloped sites in an area increasingly hemmed in by the encroaching outskirts of Wilmington and Philadelphia. On summer afternoons the song of cicadas blends with the whoosh of traffic from a nearby road lined with fast-food restaurants and strip malls.

Still, within the valley's narrow enclave, time's passage often seems suspended. Colonial stone houses, neat and dignified, stand amid rolling cornfields. They look almost like natural outcroppings of rock, cut from the same stone—ash gray gneiss and granite, tinged here and there with rusty orange—as the Brandywine gorge itself. History and landscape blend.

It is this uncanny confluence that has powered another of the river's outsize contributions: the movement in American art often known as the Brandywine school of painting, over which the Wyeth family has held sway for more than a century. The clan's exuberant patriarch, N. C. Wyeth, came here as a 20-year-old art student in 1902 and eventually made it his home, entranced as he was by the peculiar eloquence of his surroundings. "The tawny hills all around us speak volumes," he

wrote his parents back in Massachusetts.

In Wyeth's famous illustrations for the works of Robert Louis Stevenson and other authors, the Brandywine Valley's woods were transmuted into the forests of England, its meadows into the highland heaths of Scotland. Today a Continental Army greatcoat hangs from a peg in the painter's studio, alongside costumes from other eras that helped make historical ghosts visible.

N. C.'s equally famous son, Andrew, spent much of his long life in an ancient stone house on a corner of the Brandywine Battlefield. Here, in 1777, British troops under General William Howe trounced George Washington's army in one of the largest land battles of the Revolution. Andrew Wyeth's paintings—meticulous watercolors and temperas of time-weathered barns or the windburned faces of neighboring farmers—seem to hover in some indeterminate moment between the 18th century and the 20th.

Though it is often called the First State—a reference to its primacy in ratifying the U.S. Constitution—Delaware is the last one of all 50 states to have a unit of the National Park System established on its soil. The proposed First State National Historical Monument would attempt to make up for this by including not only the Woodlawn property but also a string of smaller historical sites throughout the state.

One of these, a 1740 plantation house that once belonged to the Revolutionary-era patriot John Dickinson, stands 50 miles south of the du Ponts' and Wyeths' domains, on a knoll overlooking flat marshes and misty fields. It feels far more distant. If the Brandywine Valley often seems tinged with New England hues, the middle and lower parts of the state resemble the tidewater South.

On Dickinson's plantation some five dozen slaves once harvested corn and wheat. Their master, one of the first and most eloquent advocates of American resistance to British tyranny, wrestled with the contradictions of espousing liberty while owning human beings as property. Unlike most of the new nation's founders, he moved to address this cruel paradox while the ink was practically still wet on the Declaration of Independence. In 1777 he drew up a deed of gradual manumission—and then, nine years later, freed all his remaining slaves immediately and unconditionally.

Among the other potential sites in the national monument is a 17th-century Swedish colonial church and fort, an early settler's house, and—perhaps most resonant of these—the Dover Green, a grassy quadrangle at the heart of Dover, Delaware's small capital. It was here that, in December 1787, delegates from across the state gathered to endorse the new federal Constitution recently signed in Philadelphia. They put their state the very first in line. There may be poetic symmetry if the National Park Service finally brings Delaware into its fold, this time as the last of all.

Adam Goodheart is the author of *1861: The Civil War Awakening*. Michael Melford is a regular contributor to *National Geographic*.



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