

The Controversy of Lauxmont Farms

Before Columbus came to America, Susquehannock Indians lived on the hills above the Susquehanna River. John Smith's exploration spearheaded the arrival of white men. The Indians were killed and the Europeans created small farms. The river became a thoroughfare for people and trade. Now the river has been replaced by highways for transporting goods. Electric companies have built dams and harnessed the power of the river to make electricity. The use of the Susquehanna River may have changed throughout these centuries but it has continued unabated since before even the Susquehannocks lived along this mighty river.

In 1973, a man named Ron Kohr Sr. bought a section of this land above the river, today called Lauxmont Farms. He was in different businesses, including offering his lovely property as a setting for weddings. When he invested in racehorses, however, the turmoil began. In 1987 a lawsuit was filed against Kohr by angry investors. In two years he was bankrupt. Ron Kohr Sr. has since died, but there has been great controversy over his farm. The county has seized part of it with eminent domain to make a park, angering some citizens. Some has been developed into almost a million dollar homes, angering others. Still today the fate of Lauxmont Farms is uncertain and greatly contested.

In 2002 Lower Windsor Township began to contemplate purchasing Lauxmont Farms to create a park and help the Kohrs out of bankruptcy. Later that same year, the Kohr family submitted a plan to allow a six hundred sixty seven home development upon their property. The Farm and Natural Lands Trust of York County and the Lancaster York Heritage Region, along with township officials met with the Kohrs about creating a park in 2004. Two county commissioners, Lori Mitrick and Doug Kilgore supported the

park. Steve Chronister, the third commissioner has been against it since the beginning. The county wanted to buy eight hundred twenty five acres of the Kohr's land. A Susquehanna Heritage Park would be established, protecting one of the last Susquehannock village remains in the country. The plan would create a Native American heritage center, as well as hiking trails and picnic areas. The Kohrs rejected this offer, only offering four hundred acres. The county then compromised, saying the Kohrs could keep their homes and wedding business. This too was rejected. Meanwhile, large sections of the farms have been developed, turning farmland and forest into ostentatious mansions. In 2005 the county commissioners voted to borrow eleven million dollars and condemn part of the land for a park. In May 2007, seventy nine acres of the originally proposed eight hundred twenty five, became a park called Highpoint. Highpoint offers a sweeping view of the river but is marred by the homes upon the hill.

The blue trail runs along the development and across Highpoint, from where you can see the Kohr's farm. It turns away from the river, following Kline's Run Road. First there are peaceful farmlands. As the road climbs the hill, more and more new houses sit jarringly upon it. One house has an old cemetery in its front yard. On the top of the hill is Highpoint Park. A vast hilltop offers a grand view of the surroundings. North the bridges in Wrightsville are visible. South you can see almost to Safe Harbor. The beauty of it makes one wish that the Kohrs would allow the public access to explore and protect all of the eight hundred twenty five acres.

This use of eminent domain by the county has angered many. The York Daily Record asked the opinions of some visiting a local vineyard, Moon Dancer Vineyards and Winery. One man said, "I believe in eminent domain...if it's going to improve the

infrastructure...but not just for a park.” One wedding guest commented that “It’s too pretty to turn into a park.” Others are opposed to the development of Lauxmont Farms. After the elections, when Mitrick and Kilgore were not reelected, someone posted the following comment on the York Daily Record website, “For those who voted against Doug and Lori I have one comment...I do not want to see your names attached to letters to the editor in a few years complaining about traffic congestion in eastern York County. I do not want to hear you complaining about the cost of developing roads and utilities to service a new development.” It is the general belief that Mitrick and Kilgore lost the election because of Lauxmont Farms. It is true that they were write-in candidates because of the issue.

After years of contentious debate, in September 2007 Mitrick and Kilgore announced that they have given up trying to secure Lauxmont Farms for the county. Mitrick said, “To the people of York County who supported this effort, please understand that Commissioner Kilgore and I did everything we could to preserve a treasure.” Many people told the York Daily Record that they were happy that the county dropped the issue. Contrarily, the Kohr’s lawyer, Leon Haller was angry. He told the paper he is contemplating forcing the county to take and pay for the land or he may sue them. He is quoted in the Daily Record, “They screw me around for three years, then they walk away from it? Can they really abandon that?”

To others this abandonment of the land to housing development upon housing development is crushing. The Pennsylvania Indian Cultural Society and the Native Heritage Advisory Council are both upset with the county’s decision. They believe the Susquehannok remains should be preserved and not just on a small plot dwarfed by

almost million dollar houses. These organizations believe the best way to protect their heritage is through a park and not a miniscule oasis of nature and history surrounded by a sea of sprawling, opulent, land-decimating houses.

The story of Lauxmont Farms is one full of contradictions between humans and nature. The Kohrs went bankrupt because of their investment in racehorses. The county has failed to make most of it a park because the people of York County have failed to reelect the commissioners who would make that happen. Greed on the part of the Kohrs has caused an environmental gem to be greatly endangered when it could easily be a park for everyone forever.

In January 2008, York College of Pennsylvania has had an art exhibit called Visions of the Susquehanna. Michael Allen's "Fallen Tree on the Susquehanna" portrays a bridge and a low dam, with a fallen tree caught upon the dam. Next to the painting, on a plaque describing the work, there is a quote from the artist describing his painting as exploring, "the shared relationship between so-called nature and the structures built there by men." This is an interesting perspective. I would interpret that as the artist believes structures built by men, like the dams of Holtwood, Safe Harbor, Conowingo, and the one in his painting quell nature and reign in the river. Is Allen right? Have the dams and the bridges reduced nature to "so-called nature"? The bridge in Wrightsville has been rebuilt six times, only once destroyed by humans. However, the river has never overwhelmed Safe Harbor since it was built. Saltwater fish that used to swim up the river from the Chesapeake Bay can no longer reach as far as Harrisburg, due to the dams. The Susquehanna's once racing rapids in its final drop to the Bay are now reduced to a placid lake. In many cases it is true. You can find examples beyond the Susquehanna River.

Global warming has been caused by the mistakes of humans. Humans have done so much to quell nature that we should preserve it wherever we can and as much as we can before it is irreparably ruined. The Kohrs were unwilling to preserve their land, preferring to exploit it. It is another tragedy.

In a recent issue of Paddler Magazine, Doug Ammons wrote an article commenting on artificial whitewater centers like the complex in Charlotte, NC. He writes of how many people have taken up the sport of whitewater kayaking from, “a sense of loving the outdoors, being close to nature, and...the enticement of being in places that are huge, empty, and beautiful.” I believe that many hikers have the same reasons for loving nature, that would be one reason I love both sports of paddling and hiking. Ammons goes on to say that dam builders, miners, and engineers often see the natural world as at our disposal, to be shaped and controlled. Now such shaping by humans is happening for recreational purposes too. The Ocoee River in Tennessee was reshaped for the 1996 Olympics, to have a more suitable whitewater slalom course. Ammons tells of a dangerous section of a river in his hometown, Missoula, Montana. There was a rapid filled with chunks of concrete and rebar. To eliminate such a safety hazard, the river bottom was paved. One day when it had been raining hard and the river was up, Ammons was surfing in his kayak on this man-made wave in the rain. He describes the wave as “a beautiful, big surging green animal.” The rain-swelled river had taken something artificial and remade it into nature.

This paddling vignette relates to hiking in two ways. It could open the argument that trails are imposing on nature superfluously, degrading it only for pleasure. Trails open the wilderness to litter and erosion. In his article, Ammons concludes that although

the river has been altered by humans, it can still be wild. I believe that this is true of trails. If there were no trails then arguably wilderness might disappear, for no one would know enough about nature to want to preserve it. More relevantly to my project, Ammons' story relates to the Pennsylvania Indian Cultural Society and the Native Heritage Advisory Council's plans for a Native American heritage center and a park in Lauxmont Farms. This plan could have made such a cycle of the man-made fitting in with nature at the magnificent Lauxmont Farms.

The Pennsylvania Power and Light Company, PPL, has just made a deal with the Lancaster County Conservancy in December 2007. The Conservancy will give PPL five million dollars for three thousand five hundred acres. The five million dollars will then be donated back to help maintain the land. This portion of land includes area in York County, from Lock 12 to Otter Creek. The Kohrs and Haller should see this forward-thinking example and consider doing such a thing themselves.

Another artist in the exhibit at York College, Lloyd Mifflin, was also a poet during the late 1800s. He wrote a poem deploring the building of the dams:

Farewell, ye wooded island, never more
Shall in your shade the Youth and Maiden woo!
Ye rocks, that jutted from the rushing blue,
Within whose eddies dripped the lover's oar,
A last farewell! Ye currents that of yore
Like maddened horses furious dashed, and threw
Your white manes to the air, farewell to you!
Forever mute your danger-luring roar!

Here, as I drift, no rapture doth awake
From hills or moving landscape, for my heart
Lingers beneath where I was wont to roam;
And memory sees, as on some sunken chart,
Down in that inert bottom of the lake,
The scarred old boulders yearning for the foam!

As Mifflin says, “Farewell, ye wooded island, never more,” one might be tempted to say, “Farewell, ye wooded lands, never more.” The county commissioners have practically done so, giving up on the land with their failed election. Alas we can only hope some of the land might be preserved and we must be thankful for Highpoint Park.