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OPINION
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Brandywine Park history a delight to read, great to give

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I get asked every year at holiday time to recommend books that would please Delaware readers. Making a selection is particularly hard this year with what seems like a publishing explosion of Delawareana.

It's easiest to suggest that gift buyers visit the shelves of book stores that have a large selection of Delaware books. The Ninth Street Bookstore at Ninth and Orange streets in Wilmington comes to mind. Or check the Web site of the Delaware Heritage Commission at state.de.us/heritage/books.shtml. The commission continues to publish new books or reprint classics otherwise unavailable and sells them at a very reasonable price.

I will single out one book because I found it to be a complete delight.

"Within the Reach of All: An Illustrated History of Brandywine Park" vividly tells the story of the natural gem that divides the city, of the farsighted planners responsible for preserving the land along Brandywine Creek, and the evolution of the city's park system.

We take the park for granted, but as author Susan Mulchahey Chase makes clear, the park's creation had to overcome obstacles and relied heavily on the generosity of some wealthy citizens, and so today it fills the hopes of the original Board of Park Commissioners and puts wholesome and rational outdoor enjoyment within the reach of all.

The original 100 acres on both sides of the Brandywine were acquired in 1886. The businessmen and philanthropists who must be singled out for their initial work are William Poole Bancroft and William Marriott Canby. But Chase also gives credit to their fellow pioneer park commissioners who succeeded in overcoming years of lethargy and opposition. Until then, the city "had scarcely any provisions for parks or open spaces of any kind -- except for cemeteries," Bancroft had said.

Chase puts the proper perspective on the often-distorted role played in the creation of a park system by the famous Frederick Law Olmsted, the father of New York's Central Park and other urban park systems. She provides such factual gems as the origin of the paving of what we now know as Monkey Hill. Originally called Buffalo Drive because it was near the zoo's buffalo enclosure, it was a new extension from the Van Buren Street Bridge and aqueduct. Belgian blocks recycled from city street paving have been its washboard surface since 1922, and all efforts to pave them over have happily been turned aside.

She traces the history of the acquisition and development of all city parkland and the role of the various boards of park commissioners; of the changes in the stewardship of the parks; of the zoo founded a century ago; of the construction of every bridge, comfort station and pavilion; and of the memorials in Brandywine Park, only one of which honors a political leader, President William McKinley.

Chase, who lives near the park, has written histories of other local organizations and is a consultant on urban revitalization. Her thesis was on 1941 suburbanization in New Castle County, the pre-World War II era with no zoning but restrictive deed covenants.

Although it's historically complete, the book is never historically dry. Chase's style, like its title, is "within the reach of all." And as

pleasurable as the text are the illustrations. Many are old picture postcards. Some are new photographs. And unlike many other such books, eight pages are in full color. At \$28, it's a great buy at the Friends of Wilmington Parks office near Baynard Stadium.

I doubt anyone reading this column has not enjoyed some of the delights of Brandywine Park. This book will help any Delawarean win a new appreciation of what historian/professor Carol Hoffecker properly calls "the crown jewel of Wilmington's park system and the envy of other cities."

Harry F. Thernal has been writing for The News Journal since 1959.

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