

The Brandywine Zoo

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The current buzz of activity at the Zoo, as the new entrance gate, education pavilion, and gift shop are under construction, offers an excellent opportunity for reflecting on the origins of the Brandywine Zoo and its place in the history of Brandywine Park. Begun in 1904 as the Wilmington Zoo, with an offer from Dr. James H. Morgan to donate animals if the Board of Park Commissioners would provide the needed shelters and fences, the Zoo marked Wilmington's participation in a national movement for cities to create "zoological gardens" for residents to enjoy.

The last quarter of the nineteenth century was an important period for the establishment of zoos in America, a movement that followed the example set by English and European cities. By the 1870s, London, Paris, and Berlin all had "zoological gardens" that attracted large numbers of visitors. In the United States, Central Park's Zoological Garden was first planned in the 1850s and soon became the undertaking of the American Zoological and Botanical Society, which saw the zoo opened in the early 1860s. The Zoological Society of Philadelphia was formed in 1859, opening its zoological garden in 1874. Similarly, the Cleveland Zoo opened in 1882, the National Zoological Garden in Washington in 1889-1890, and the Bronx Zoo in 1895.

It is hardly surprising, then, that interested Wilmingtonians proposed a similar project for Brandywine Park. After Dr. Morgan launched the effort with his proposed donation, Samuel H. Baynard, after whom Baynard Boulevard is named, underwrote the cost of fencing the fishpond where "a number of varieties of ducks and geese" were installed. The Washington Heights Association, an organization of neighbors living near North Brandywine Park in Baynard's residential development of the same name, supported these initial efforts and, in 1905, changed its name to the Wilmington Free Zoological Association. For the next two decades, the group continued to support the Zoo, finally

turning over its property and interest in the Zoo to the Board of Park commissioners in 1926. Baynard made annual financial contributions over several years. In addition, he and several other prominent Wilmingtonians gave animals. In 1921, for example, Baynard donated two white deer to the Zoo, T. Coleman duPont presented eleven elk, and Senator L. Heisler Ball arranged for the donation of a buffalo from the Wichita National Forest. Over the years, the Zoo has also been home, at various times, to raccoons, ground hogs, foxes, bears, a Rocky Mountain goat and an angora goat, prairie dogs, an alligator, and an anteater. Most recently, the Zoo added a habitat to house a pair of Andean condors. The thoroughfare now known as Monkey Hill was initially considered an extension of Van Buren Street, cutting across the edge of the Zoo and linking the Van Buren Street Bridge with 18th Street. The bridge was completed in 1907 and the road leading up toward the crest of the hill was first graded in 1907-1908 and curbed and guttered in 1909. The city paved the road with Belgian block in 1922-1923 and, by the 1930s, had named the route "Buffalo Drive" because it ran past the Zoo's enclosure for buffalo, elk and deer. The fenced area was at the top of Monkey Hill along 18th Street where an open meadow now stretches for several hundred yards toward Baynard Boulevard. By 1938, a monkey house had opened at the foot of the hill and the name of the street up toward 18th Street changed from Buffalo Drive to Monkey Hill.

In 1954, there were two additions to the Zoo's features. "Bunnyland," with flagstone steps and gravel path, offered an improved means for viewing the rabbits in their hutches. The Children's Zoo also opened in June 1954 with eleven buildings designed to bring familiar Mother Goose characters to life. Sponsored and built by the Wilmington Lions Club, the Children's Zoo had 46,000 visitors in its first year and continued to attract children for the next two decades, until it was dismantled in the late 1970s.

The Wilmington Zoo became the Brandywine Zoo in 1969 when management of Brandywine Park shifted from the City of Wilmington to New Castle County. Zoo supporters formed the Delaware Zoological Association in 1979 and the group works not only to promote an interest in Delaware wildlife, but also to raise funds for Zoo improvements. Their efforts are undertaken in cooperation with the Delaware State Parks, managers of Brandywine Park since 1998.

In the early years of the 20th century, the Board of Park Commissioners, interested citizens, and the Free Zoological association undertook their endeavors in an effort to provide Wilmington citizens with an entertaining outlet that also promised some degree of education. The tradition continues today, with the Zoo offering extensive educational opportunities for patrons of all ages, from toddlers to adults.