

The Trolley, the Highlands, and the Tower

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Arguably one of Wilmington's most recognizable landmarks, Rockford Tower may appear a remote, ancient relic on the crest of its hill, but it is also closely linked to the history of Wilmington's growth in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

In February 1864, entrepreneur Joshua Heald, head of the Wilmington City Railway, inaugurated horse streetcar service out Delaware Avenue. By the end of the year, the company extended the route another mile via Union Street and then 17th Street to Rising Sun Village. Heald thus provided essential access to land that he, in his role as real estate developer, was subdividing for sale on the edge of the city's westernmost residential district.

Construction of sumptuous homes on Delaware Avenue soon established the street as Wilmington's "Mayfair." By 1880, development along the avenue reached the 1300 block. General Henry B. Judd, United States Army, lived at 1306 Delaware Avenue and businessman John Warner resided at 1300 Delaware Avenue. The next year, Henry B. Seidel, president of a local manufacturing company, occupied 1304. While the Warner family continued at 1300 Delaware Avenue for some years, in 1889 Mr. Seidel was replaced by George S. Capelle, president of the National Bank of Wilmington and Brandywine and paper manufacturer John F. Quigley took the place of General Judd. George G. Lobdell, president of the Lobdell Car Wheel Company, and Addie, his wife, moved in 1891 from their farm in New Castle Hundred to their new house at 1308 Delaware Avenue.

Many less wealthy but nonetheless successful citizens also erected homes for themselves in the district, buying building sites in the same direction out of the city and near the avenue. This expansion was facilitated not only by the improved transportation, but also the growing availability of land. The Brinckle family's first connection to the area dated from 1844 when John Rodney Brinckle, grandnephew of Caesar Rodney, built his house Gibraltar, at what is now the corner of Greenhill and Pennsylvania Avenues. In 1862, he sold the house and seventy-seven acres of land to his brother, the Rev. Samuel Crawford Brinckle. When Samuel died in 1863, he left his widow, Julia, the entire property plus several thousand dollars of mortgage debt. Fortunately for Julia Brinckle, in 1864 the trolley service was laid out along 17th Street, which ran directly through the Brinckle property. Recognizing a golden opportunity, the family subdivided the acreage surrounding Gibraltar and began selling lots. Calling their undertaking the Highlands, the Brinckles saw the first house constructed on West 18th Street

in 1872 and, by 1896, a map of the area showed lots sold along every street within the development and at least one house on most blocks.

As the 1890's waned, Wilmington's growing population put increasing demands on the city water system. The hill on which Rockford Tower stands, known as Mt. Salem Hill because of nearby Mt. Salem Church [built 1879] was ideal for a tower to which water could be pumped from the Cool Springs reservoir and from which it could then flow to homes in the Highlands neighborhood developing nearby. The Board of Water Commissioner's interest in a water tower in that vicinity coincided happily with a hope expressed by the Board of Park Commissioners in 1895--to build a "large pavilion and observatory" on the hill to provide a place from which to view the scenic Brandywine. In giving permission to the Water Department to build in then-new Rockford Park, the Park Commissioners required that the tower include an observatory and that it be constructed in a style and from materials--specifically local stone--that would suit the parks natural character. It was intended to look "antique" from the very beginning.

Work on the tower, begun in 1899, was completed in 1901. The tower stood on the land given by the DuPont Company in 1895. When the land was donated it was given with a restriction: no building open to the public was to be constructed there. Thus, before visitors could mount the 132 steps to the observatory, the city had to be persuaded to accept liability for any harm done if there was a powder explosion at the DuPont Powder Yards at Hagley. This arrangement accomplished, the tower opened to the public in 1903 and proved a popular destination. The extension of trolley service into the park in 1906 made it even easier for Wilmingtonians to make the journey to the park and the observatory deck atop the water tower.

Thus, Rockford tower, the most important architectural feature in Rockford Park, is also a significant structure of the city's history, reminding park visitors of the increasing demands for water that accompanied the development and growth of the city a century ago.

Over the years, Rockford Tower has been closed at various times for repairs. The Water Department is currently having a structural analysis of the tower's roof performed and expects the analysis and subsequent required repair work to the tower to be completed by the end of the year. There are plans to reopen the observatory to visitors on a limited basis.