

Kentmere Parkway

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At the northwest end of Brandywine Park, a thread of lawn links the park to Kentmere Parkway. After following a straight course for several hundred yards, the broad boulevard curves gently to the west until it ends at Rockford Grove, which is the start of Rockford Park. Measuring just under a half-mile long, the parkway's green median is planted with mature trees and flanked on either side by substantial homes that are set well back from the roadway.

Kentmere Parkway, the green link between Brandywine Park to its neighbor Rockford Park, can claim close ties to the ideas of Frederick Law Olmsted, renowned designer of New York's Central Park. In 1883, Olmsted's endorsement of the riverside site persuaded the Board of Park Commissioners to acquire the land that became Brandywine Park. In less than a decade, F. L. Olmsted and Company would play a role in the creation of Kentmere Parkway.

In 1885, William M. Field and his wife, Jennie Riddle Field, offered a 100-foot right of way from Rattlesnake Run to what would become Rockford Park. The right of way included the path that Kentmere Parkway now follows. In his offer, Field indicated that he wanted the land to be a parkway called Kentmere Avenue. It took the Park Commissioners until 1889 to accept Field's offer because they wanted to consult with designers in Olmsted's practice about the thoroughfare's layout and about what restrictions would be needed to maintain it as a greensward through the developing residential neighborhood. J. C. Olmsted, Frederick Law Olmsted's nephew, and Park Commissioner William Poole Bancroft collaborated on plans for the roadway. Begun in 1891 and completed early in 1892, the parkway followed a curvilinear grading plan rather than Field's suggested straight path. Its gently curving route provided an important contrast to the rigid grid of the surrounding older urban neighborhoods.

At the Rockford Park end, Kentmere Parkway provides the setting for the Thomas F. Bayard

Memorial statue. Thomas F. Bayard [1828-1898] served the nation, the state, and his native city in various capacities. During 1853-1854, he was the United States District Attorney for Delaware. Beginning with his election in 1869 to the United States Senate, he served three terms as one of Delaware's Senators. In 1885, President Grover Cleveland named him U. S. Secretary of State, a post he filled until 1889. Bayard's service to the nation took him abroad in 1893 when President Cleveland appointed him the first American Ambassador to the Court of St. James, making him the first U.S. ambassador to Great Britain. Prior to his appointment, America had sent ministers rather than ambassadors as representatives to foreign countries. Bayard returned to America in 1897 and died the following year.

Scholars assessing Bayard's influence on American history often credit him with forging the first strong links between the United States and England. He undertook this challenge when relations were strained as both America and England sought to extend their power around the world, America pursuing a policy of "manifest destiny" and Britain set on a course of empire building. Bayard found success in his efforts by focusing on the common heritage of language and history as the basis of collaboration.

Bayard's link with Wilmington's parks dates from 1869, when he served on a five-man committee that investigated and reported to City Council on the possibility of a park along the Brandywine. Lack of funds for nearly two decades made further action toward the creation of a park impossible, but, when the original Board of Park Commissioners convened in 1883, he took a place on the Board, a position he held until his death in 1898. Bayard was the Commissioner who suggested consulting with Frederick Law Olmsted about the purchase of the first parkland along the Brandywine, a recommendation that eventually provided the impetus to launch the city's park system.

On 22 June 1907, five thousand people turned out to honor Thomas Francis Bayard's memory when the memorial was dedicated. The statue originated in England, the work of Effie Stillman Richie, who sculpted the model for the statue and J. W. Singer and Son, Ltd., the firm that cast the bronze version. Bayard, shown in clothing typical of his lifetime, holds what contemporary news accounts called "a characteristic pose, with his cloak thrown over one arm."

It is interesting to reflect on the "firsts" that are represented by Kentmere Parkway. The roadway itself was the first link in what has developed as Wilmington's greenway system, Thomas Francis Bayard was America's first ambassador to England, and Frederick Law Olmsted, one of the nation's premier landscape architects, played a significant part in guiding the design of the parkway.