



Built in 1730 by Joshua Peirce, the Peirce-du Pont House is the oldest structure at Longwood Gardens. Resident black cat, Spooky, age 18, greets visitors from under the informational placard, right. (Photo by Nicole Pensiero)

# Beautiful Brandywine Valley

By Nicole Pensiero

Of all the places you can travel to from South Jersey that take little more than an hour, perhaps none offers quite the mix of nature and culture as the Brandywine Valley. This beautiful region – which runs some 35 miles from the rolling hills of southeast Pennsylvania to northern New Castle County, Delaware – is a fantastic year-round destination.

Named for a river that, in places, is as slender as a creek, the Brandywine Valley offers something for everyone: fun museums and attractions, great culinary options, and breathtaking natural beauty. And while it is doable as a day trip — a common activity for visiting Longwood Gardens near the holidays — spending a full weekend is really the best way to get to explore the region.

Our recent getaway to the Brandywine Valley — located in both Delaware and Pennsylvania — offered an ideal weekend adventure, coinciding with the start of seasonal celebrations at Longwood Gardens and nearby Winterthur, another famed botanical garden.

As with those two popular attractions, travel almost anywhere in the Brandywine Valley, and you will encounter the name *du Pont*. Pierre Samuel du Pont de Nemours, the first member of this notable clan to arrive in America, emigrated from France in 1799. A few years later, his son, Eleuthère Irénée, established a gunpowder plant, which you can still visit today (the Hagley Museum). By the early 20th century, that gunpowder business had grown into the world's largest chemical company, and the du Ponts became one of the richest families in America. They poured a good deal of their wealth into their homes, as well as into philanthropic endeavors — and their “fingerprint” is found nearly everywhere in the region.

In the early 1900s, the many du Pont mansions and gardens in the Brandywine Valley came to life: in 1909, Pierre S. du Pont began working on his property, Longwood. That same year, Alfred I. du Pont, embarked on the construction of the Nemours Estate, his enormous Wilmington mansion, and formal gardens. A few years later, Henry Frances du Pont took over development of the gardens





*Near the holidays, Winterthur is filled with an array of Christmas trees. This breathtaking dried flower tree, which greets visitors at the main entrance, is adorned with 25 varieties of flowers, totaling about 4,000 blossoms in all. (Photo by Nicole Pensiero)*

near his family home, called Winterthur. Meanwhile, Lammot du Pont Copeland purchased land for his home and garden at Mt. Cuba, Delaware. Even with an elaborate du Pont family tree printed on a Winterthur brochure, it is hard to keep everyone straight, much less figure out how they are related to one another. But one thing is abundantly clear: this was a family with a true passion for nature and gardening.

There are so many fun things to see in the Brandywine Valley. Here are a few highlights:

- The Delaware Art Museum in Wilmington. This lovely arts center has a 9-acre sculpture park, an elaborate collection of stunning Pre-Raphaelite art, as well as an extensive collection of works by Wilmington native, painter, and illustrator Howard Pyle (1853-1911). Pyle was hugely influential to his student, C. Wyeth, best known as an illustrator of classic children's books (and as the father of artist Andrew Wyeth).
- Speaking of the Wyeths ... the popular Brandywine River Museum, in nearby Chadds Ford, Pa., features an extensive collection of art by N.C. Wyeth, Andrew Wyeth, and Andrew's son, Jamie.
- With more and more people drawn to nature during the ongoing pandemic, Longwood Gardens — with more than 1,077 acres of gardens, woodlands, and meadows — is a major draw to the region. Founded by industrialist Pierre S. du Pont (1870-1954), Longwood Gardens in Kennett Square, Pa., got

*A fountain light show at Longwood Gardens.  
(Photo courtesy of Daniel Traub/Longwood  
Gardens/Wilmington Visitors Bureau)*



its start in 1906, when du Pont purchased a farm and began developing the property's gardens in a piecemeal fashion. A massive conservatory opened in 1921, becoming a perpetual indoor flower show that still draws hundreds of visitors daily. When the weather warms up, there's a fantastic fountain light show (May through October); the Christmas season there is legendary.

- Only about 10 minutes away, you will find another du Pont attraction: Winterthur, which houses what is called the "most significant collection of American decorative arts in the world." There is also a beautiful, naturalistic garden set within 1,000 acres of rolling hills, streams, and meadows. Winterthur, (pronounced "winter-tour"), is the former home of collector and horticulturist Henry Francis du Pont (1880-1969). It houses a 175-room mansion, stunning outdoor gardens, as well as an area called the "Enchanted Woods" — a children's garden complete with a flower labyrinth, fairy cottage, and Troll Bridge. Beginning May 7 and running until January 8, 2023, will be the exhibit "*Jaqueline Kennedy and Henry Francis du Pont: from Winterthur to the White House*." The exhibit will

explore the partnership between the two, who worked together to help restore the White House interiors in the early 1960s.

- Another lesser-known du Pont property is the Cuba Center. With beautiful, natural gardens — many filled with indigenous plants and flowers — that are open from April to November, the Mt. Cuba Center has lovely walking trails and also offers an array of year-round classes on many topics for those interested in gardening and plants. This is a lovely and understated natural oasis.
- If you are looking for something a bit more elaborate, check out the Nemours Estate, a 77-room mansion, and home of the largest formal French gardens in North America. Built in 1909-1910 by Alfred I. du Pont for his second wife, Alicia (in an apparent attempt to win her love), this estate is modeled after France's Palace of Versailles and features nearly 200 acres of scenic woodlands.
- There is also a fabulous 108-year-old theater inside the famed du Pont Hotel (yes, there's even a hotel with their name), The Playhouse on Rodney Square. Recently renovated, it has a





Another, but lesser-known du Pont property, beautiful Mt. Cuba features lush gardens and walking trails. (Photo by Nicole Pensiero)

full slate of shows this year, including “Riverdance” in April.

- There is no shortage of good beer and fun breweries to be found in the region. The Greater Wilmington Convention and Visitors’ Bureau has a great itinerary.
- If you are up for a nice outdoor stroll (or hike), visit Wilmington’s Brandywine Creek State Park, with its more than 14 miles of trails. It’s an outdoor wonderland, great for picnics, birdwatching, hiking, and more.
- And if you have little ones, check out the Delaware Children’s Museum, right on the Wilmington Waterfront, with an array of fun, interactive things to do and see. (Closed Mondays).

There are many great places to enjoy a good meal. Our favorites were Buckley’s Tavern in Centreville, Pa. (best chicken pot pie ever!) and Mrs. Robino’s Italian Restaurant in downtown Wilmington. Mrs. Robino’s is one of those neighborhood places much loved by the locals and was even featured in Guy Fieri’s “Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives” a few years ago. The prices are right and the homecooked meals, fantastic.

The Brandywine Valley is a little treasure right in our own backyard, so to speak! For more information, go to [www.visitwilmingtonde.com](http://www.visitwilmingtonde.com).

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