OVER THE RIVER AND THROUGH THE WOOD

The first car-less connection between city and suburb will reunite Manayunk with its sister community to the west

STORY AND PHOTOS BY BRADLEY MAULE

When the Schuylkill Expressway opened to City Avenue in 1954, it planted a physical symbol of the growing post-war divide between city and suburb. On one side of the Schuylkill River sat working-class Manayunk; on the other, affluent Lower Merion Township, which had no need for its once-industrial riverfront. With nine large concrete arches, the Manayunk Bridge sulked across the river and expressway, an imposing reminder of time past.
Some six decades later, that bridge is the centerpiece of a plan to bring the two communities back together. When the Manayunk Bridge reopens in September, it will carry a new paved bicycle and pedestrian trail across the Schuylkill, connecting two existing trails on either side. While injecting new life into an iconic bridge, the $4.2 million project will also allow people to travel between Lower Merion and Manayunk — without a car, that is — for the first time in nearly 30 years.

“The symbolic aspect of the bridge connection is strong,” says Kay Sykora, executive director of Destination Schuylkill River and former director of the Manayunk Development Corporation, whose logo prominently features the bridge. “The process of working together, Lower Merion and Manayunk, was the most important part.”

Like the bridge itself, which spans a river, an expressway, two active freight rail lines, an active passenger rail line, two city streets, an island, a canal and a towpath, the project’s collaborative effort is complex. Stakeholders and funding came from the local, county, regional and state levels, while several non-profits and the public offered input. Tricky interagency coordination was required between SEPTA, Norfolk Southern and the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation. That the bridge will open less than a decade after the project was born borders on miraculous, a product of will in both Lower Merion and Philadelphia.

“This project is all about connections,” says Chris Leswing, Lower Merion Township’s assistant director of building and planning. “In Lower Merion, you have a bedroom community; in Manayunk, you have a vibrant main street: This [trail across the bridge] creates an immediate open-space connection to the riverfront and makes Lower Merion a better place. At the same time, it adds a lot of discretionary income to Manayunk.”

The abundance of that discretionary income is well documented, perhaps never more infamously than by novelist James A. Michener, who helped forge the chasm between Lower Merion and Manayunk with the stroke of a rather acerbic pen. Fresh off of winning the Pulitzer Prize for his first book, *Tales of the South Pacific*, and its smashing musical adaptation by Rodgers and Hammerstein, Michener in 1950 accepted a commission from *Holiday*, a travel magazine put out by Philadelphia-based Curtis Publishing Company. His task: profile the Main Line, where Curtis president Walter Fuller lived.

In his story, subtitled “Suburbia at Its finest,” Michener describes the Main Line through sweeping and zealous prose as “having no wrong side of the tracks.” In his own book on *The Hidden History of the Main Line*, Mark E. Dixon accurately describes Michener’s story as “pure puffery.” Michener’s dismissals of Philadelphia — “city toughs look longingly,”
he writes, at the genteel mansions across the border — are predictable and amusing. But his story takes a dark and unnecessary turn in describing Lower Merion's “ghost in the closet,” the community formerly known as West Manayunk:

[The] cliffside town of West Manayunk perches Pittsburgh-like in the gloom. "It's a disgrace to call that a part of Lower Merion," the Main Liner is likely to protest. "It really belongs to Philadelphia."

Fret not, though. After inventing the insult, he invents another quote to soften it, lauding the superior suburban school district for curing West Manayunk children of their deprivation: "By the time we get them in Lower Merion High, the officials say, 'you can't tell them from the others. Good kids, those Manayunkers.'"

While only a throwaway paragraph in an otherwise gushing essay, the snub did major damage. Three years later, the West Manayunk civic association took a vote of residents to rename the community, with Belmont Hills winning out. Concurrent to the name change, construction of the Schuylkill Expressway obliterated the neighborhood's lowest, working-class reaches. There once were houses under the two westernmost arches of the Manayunk Bridge. Today, there's only a crowded highway.

"Michener had a bug up his ass," laments Jerry Francis, president of the Lower Merion Historical Society. "He was young and still trying to make a name for himself, so he said something scandalous to get recognized." In Lower Merion, Michener is remembered far less for his Pulitzer (or the Doylestown art museum that shares his name) than for his Holiday story.

Francis' organization has gone to great lengths to repair the damage. As an early champion and ongoing steward of the Cynwyd Heritage Trail, the Historical Society produced a series of interpretive panels along the bicycle-pedestrian path depicting much of the riverfront industry and, indeed, West Manayunk — plus its relationship to the parent town across the river.

"Manayunk and West Manayunk were one community, just separated by a river," Francis says, noting that Pencoyd Iron Works, in Lower Merion, employed more than 6,000 people living on both sides of the Schuylkill. "We're now looking at a more encompassing regional identity, trying to blur the lines of township and city."

Francis has a daughter who is also doing her part. With a background in environmental science, including a stint at the Philadelphia Water Department, Sadie Francis operates the Cynwyd Station Café and Tea Room. Housed in a restored, circa-1890 train station, the café marks the handoff from SEPTA's Cynwyd Line to the Cynwyd Heritage Trail. In the restroom hangs a framed photo of the Manayunk Bridge under construction.

The younger Francis opened the café in 2014 not because of the commuter terminal, but for its location on the Cynwyd Heritage Trail and, by extension, its connections across the Manayunk Bridge. "We definitely wouldn't have opened here if not for the trail," she says.

Despite the Cynwyd Line's light use, transit factored heavily into the development of the trail and the reopening of the bridge. "There was a huge planning effort to complement transit, land use and economic development," says Lesswing, the Lower Merion planner. "It was especially important to SEPTA to provide options because there's no room to expand
parking at Cynwyd or Ivy Ridge [on the eastern end of the bridge].

When completed, the bridge will act as a crucial cog in connecting The Circuit, a 750-mile pedestrian and bike trail winding between nine counties across Pennsylvania and New Jersey. Aside from connecting directly with the Cynwyd Heritage Trail in Lower Merion and indirectly with the Schuylkill River Trail across the way, the bridge will also set the table for the Ivy Ridge Trail. Though still in the planning stages, that trail will run parallel to the river through Manayunk and all the way to the Ivy Ridge Regional Rail stop.

Leswing credits SEPTA for taking the lead in making the project happen. SEPTA owns the bridge, but more importantly, he says, “they speak railroad.” That allowed the agency to engage Norfolk Southern in negotiating work over a very active freight line, as well as a less active line on Venice Island. For its effort, SEPTA retains the right to revert the bridge back to rail use, although no such plans exist at present.

Opened in 1918, the Manayunk Bridge was built by the Pennsylvania Railroad for its Schuylkill Branch. With handsome concrete arches, it was designed to withstand heavy loads of coal. And the half-mile, S-shaped bridge is actually three bridges in one, with the central, arched, concrete portion bookended by steel and through-plate girder sections. After the demise of the Pennsylvania Railroad and its successor Penn Central, SEPTA purchased the bridge in 1976 and continued to operate passenger service to Ivy Ridge until 1986, when the agency closed it, citing safety concerns from weathering concrete.

After nearly 30 years, SEPTA is happy to see it put back to use. “While SEPTA will continue to maintain the structure itself, the project will provide for a good reuse of our inactive infrastructure while improving drainage and safety on the bridge,” says Liz Smith, SEPTA’s manager of long range planning.

Even before the Manayunk Bridge opens, plans have begun on the Cynwyd Heritage Trail’s next phase, called the “Connelly Spur.” It will begin on the Lower Merion foot of the bridge, descend 100 feet to the riverfront under the freight line and expressway, pass through the “Connelly Tract” (where O’Neill Properties is building a large apartment building on the former site of Pencoyd Iron Works, which later housed Connelly Containers), and finally across a renovated Pencoyd Bridge. There, the trail will place the user within a couple hundred yards of both SEPTA’s Wissahickon Station and the Wissahickon Transportation Center.

A third, farther-off phase will continue the trail across City Avenue through Fairmount Park and all the way to the Please Touch Museum.

Each extension will draw from differing, diverse users while building on the ones that already take advantage of the existing two-mile Cynwyd Heritage Trail, not to mention those trails within the adjacent 187-acre West Laurel Hill Cemetery. V. Scott Zelov, a Lower Merion commissioner and chair of the Parks and Recreation Committee, sees plenty of cyclists and walkers now, when he’s out using the trail himself.

“People who want to get out for exercise, families out for a stroll, students... people have really embraced the Cynwyd Heritage Trail,” Zelov says. And after the bridge opens? “You’re going to want to bring visitors to town out onto the bridge to see that spectacular view.”

“Plus we’ll have bike share up there in no time,” Leswing adds.