

# Wheatland's Landscape: 1848-1868

John Shenk

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Wheatland, the home of President James Buchanan, is a beautiful country estate located a mile and a half west of downtown Lancaster. Inside the vine-covered brick mansion, the rooms and furnishings have been faithfully restored to the minutest details. This renewal, now under the direction of Mrs. Gordon Parker, has been painstakingly accomplished with many hours of tedious research. Restoration was undertaken by interested persons who were willing to give of their time in careful study to accomplish the renovation of the interior of the mansion. But careful study of the grounds surrounding the mansion has never been undertaken; therefore, very little has been done to restore the landscape to its original appearance and design as it was in Buchanan's day.

Mr. William Jenkins built the brick mansion in the year 1823. Because — as some claim — it was built in a wheat field or overlooking golden fields of grain, Mr. Jenkins named the estate "The Wheatlands."<sup>1</sup> Soon the "s" was dropped from the word "Wheatlands," and the estate became known as "Wheatland." The trees were planted by Mr. William Jenkins; they were held in place by his youngest child, the late Mrs. John W. Nevin, following a contemporary superstition that trees or plants held in place by a child will never fail to grow. On her frequent visits to Miss Mary Rettew, last private owner of Wheatland, Mrs. Nevin oftentimes gazed lovingly at the towering oaks, recalling the days of their planting and her part in the ceremony.<sup>2</sup>

James Buchanan purchased Wheatland in December, 1848, from Mr. William Morris Meredith. Buchanan became established at Wheatland in mid-May, 1849.<sup>3</sup> Knowing that he would be a political contender for the presidential nomination, he began to invite his political friends to visit him at his new estate.

As one entered the right driveway on a warm June day, he might have found Mr. Buchanan sitting under the magnificent willow tree near the spring.<sup>4</sup> This was his favorite spot for relaxation and meditation. Close to the spring was a round spring house used to cool and preserve the milk, and the homemade butter and cheese. The wide lawn that stretched down to the country road was shaded by oaks, elms, larches, and evergreens.<sup>5</sup> The grass was closely shorn, possibly with the aid of some domesticated sheep. The lane leading into Wheatland on the left side of the house was shaded by dogwood and lilacs which filled the whole estate with their perfume.<sup>6</sup> Directly in front of the house were four towering evergreen trees, and before them two sycamore trees. Each tree was carefully planted so as to give a beautifully balanced appearance to the front of the house. Near to the circular turnabout in the right drive, a very large American beech

spread its branches to shield the entrance from the hot sun. No ornamental bushes or shrubs were planted close to the house because their small size would not add to the decorating scheme of the large house. The brick mansion itself was covered with a vine of English ivy that gave the house a cool appearance on a hot spring day. The back porch was shaded by a large wisteria vine covering almost the entire south and much of the east sides of the porch. Around the two center posts on the back porch, smaller vines twined upward.

In a letter written to George G. Leyser, Mr. Buchanan said: "I have a large & excellent garden — that is, it would be excellent if properly cultivated, and I wish to procure a good gardener."<sup>7</sup> After Buchanan learned that weeds grow at a "country home," and that the winds are cold in winter at Wheatland, he decided it was better suited as a summer home. Mr. Buchanan eventually acquired a gardener, one Edward Bolger, and promptly put him to work setting out twelve hundred strawberry plants.<sup>8</sup> The exact shape and size of the garden is unknown, but its location is sure. From the library in the east wing could be seen a diversified landscape, in which the garden was included.<sup>9</sup> Whether this was a flower and shrub garden or a vegetable and herb garden is not certain; in fact, most country gentlemen had both types of garden.

The flower garden, which would have been another of Mr. Buchanan's favorite retreats, was to the left and rear of the home. Flowers were planted in beds and borders designed to decorate the lawn nearest the house.<sup>10</sup> The housekeeper, Miss Hetty, must have been very busy keeping the sheep from chewing up the beautiful flowers. In the early spring, golden daffodils, hyacinths, pansies, primroses, freckled foxgloves, and sweet peas would have filled the air with fragrance. As summer approached, it was likely Sweet Williams, peonies, Canterbury bells, poppies, and allysum dominated the flower beds. As late summer and fall came on, petunias, honeysuckles, clove pinks, carnations, larkspur, four o'clock, and marigolds, it is not difficult to imagine, covered the flower beds like a beautiful patchwork quilt.<sup>11</sup> Bordering the garden on the west side was a large boxwood hedge.<sup>12</sup> Attached to the toilet was an arbor which was covered with roses most of the summer.

The farmer's garden was located three hundred or more feet to the left and rear of the main mansion.<sup>13</sup> This garden probably consisted of a vegetable garden, an herb garden, and a grape arbor. Buchanan acquired a large family which consisted of seven orphan nephews, several half-orphan nephews, Harriet Lane, Miss Hetty (the housekeeper), the coachman, other household servants, and visiting political friends and neighbors. Thus, it would have been necessary to have a large vegetable garden. This it was, judging from the size of a strawberry patch made up of twelve hundred plants. The gardener would have been busy all summer planting, picking, or storing these crops in the barn or cold cellar: Drumhead cabbage, egg plant, red or white celery, peas, peppers, early beets, cauliflower, beans, tomatoes, potatoes, radishes, cucumbers, squashes, and onions.<sup>14</sup> Giant asparagus and Victoria rhubarb might have been found growing located in this area.<sup>15</sup> Here, too, was a grape arbor; the grapes were used to provide the family with wine. Grape varieties such as Concord, Diana, and



## *Wheatland*

Sketch by Henry MacNeill

Franklin were popular at the time, but the Franklin variety was considered the best to use when making wine.<sup>16</sup> Located here would have been an herb garden with rosemary, sage, tansy, mints, lavender, rue, and many other herbs used in the seasoning of food and in curing the ills of the flesh.<sup>17</sup> A berry patch would have been necessary to provide fruit for pies, jams, and jellies. The following types of berries were to be found in the garden at this time: Lawton blackberries, Houghton gooseberries, Red Dutch Cherry currants, and Brickles raspberries.<sup>18</sup> Because this sounds so appetizing, Mr. Buchanan's concern for finding a trustworthy and responsible gardener certainly would be understandable.

The orchard is approximately the same distance from the house as the vegetable garden, but to the right of the house.<sup>19</sup> In the late summer and fall, the apple, pear, and peach trees kept the household, especially the children, well supplied with plenty of fresh fruit. Miss Hetty made excellent apple butter, but for some reason Mr. Buchanan was not fond of this article.<sup>20</sup>

Behind the house and beyond the garden stood a noble wood, which, according to a gentleman at Washington, was the most beautiful hickory grove he had ever seen; in full possession of this grove was a single cow.<sup>21</sup> She produced the milk that was used with the peach pie and apple dumplings made by the housekeeper. Mr. Buchanan grew a few acres of oats and wheat which he must have thought was high in quality. A letter to Mr. Johnson states: "I am sorry you did not get the wheat in good time. It is of excellent quality. We have but poor prospects of a wheat crop in this county for the next Season. On account of the drought this fall, much of our wheat was not sown until very late & this promises better than what was sown earlier; but it is all unpromising."<sup>22</sup>

Which season is most beautiful on an estate like this: spring, summer, fall, or winter? Each season has its own beauty. As the snow falls and winter begins, everything becomes quiet and peaceful. It is in the season of winter in 1963, one hundred years after Mr. James Buchanan lived there, that I became interested in the lack of restoration of the grounds of Wheatland, and engaged in this research. Certainly having the authentic furnishings and fixtures inside the mansion is important; however, it seems just as important to me to be able to find a living tree in 1963 that was in existence in 1863, when Mr. Buchanan lived at Wheatland.

Several items of the original scenery that were present when James Buchanan lived one hundred years ago are still in evidence today. I have added a drawing to simplify and verify the location of the following information.<sup>23</sup> Tree number 6 on the drawing, a sycamore, has a circumference of ten feet six inches. Using as examples other trees I have studied, I estimate tree number 6 to be one hundred years old, already growing when Buchanan returned from Washington in 1861.<sup>24-25</sup>

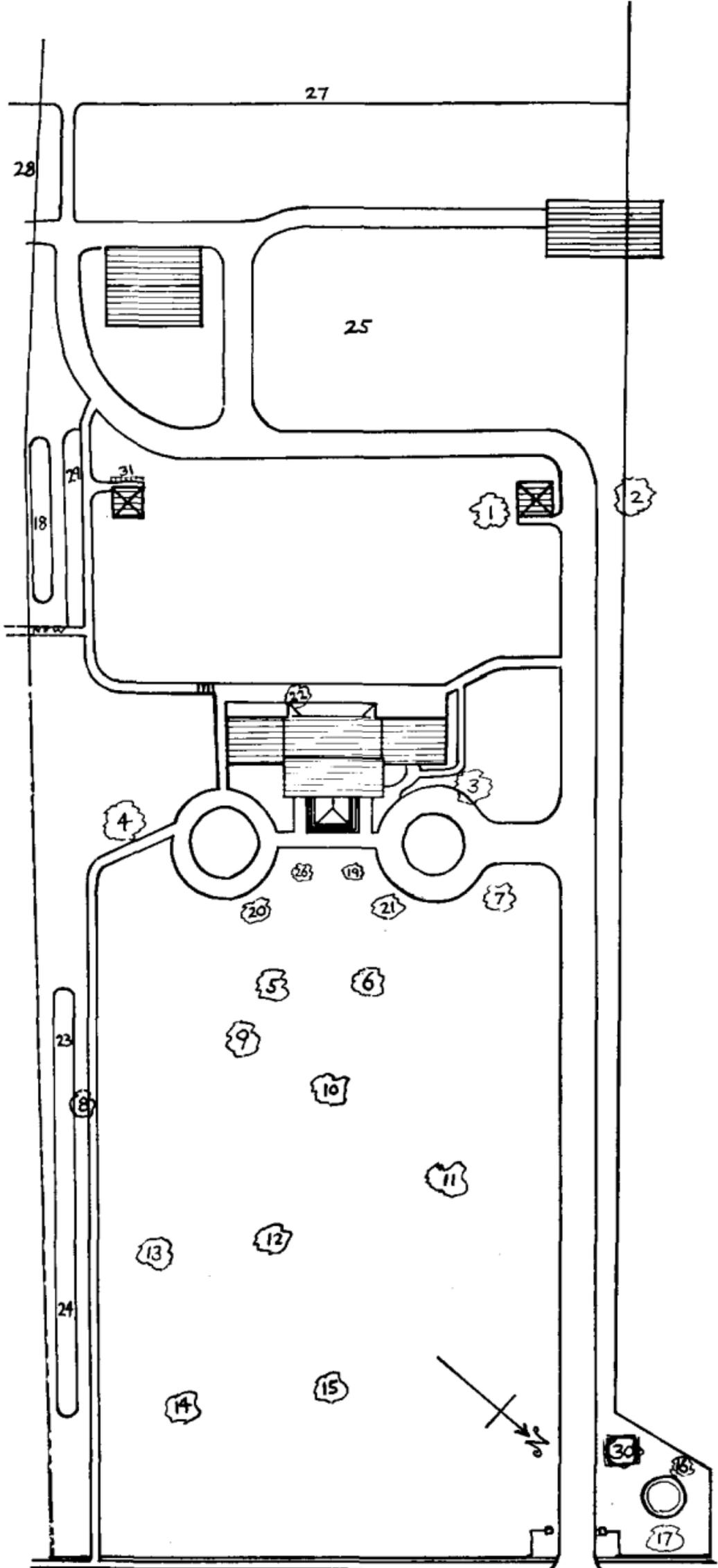
Trees numbered 2, 5, 7, 8, 9, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, have circumferences ranging from ten feet six inches up to thirteen feet, six inches. Likewise, these trees would be one hundred years old or older. Trees numbered 3 and 4, although only eight feet in circumference, are probably one hundred years old. Tree number 4, which has been shaded by surrounding trees for many years, appears quite large on a photograph taken in the year of 1900.<sup>26</sup> Tree number 3 appears on another photograph taken about the same time, showing this exact tree sixty years ago. The diameter then was approximately twenty inches. This tree has not grown more than ten feet in height in the past sixty years.<sup>27</sup> The only other plants that are still living, verified by photographs, are the wisteria vine on the back porch trellis<sup>28</sup> and the English ivy vine climbing the bricks on the front of the house.<sup>29</sup> These original trees and vines should be retained as long as possible because they are the only living remnants of Buchanan's estate. The location of the flower gardens and orchard remains the same, but the plants and trees growing in them are very likely not of the original species.

Plantings and a spring house identifiable from old photographs and writings are now missing from the lawn. These should be replaced. A very old ash tree that was cut down last year, number 1 on my map, should be replaced.<sup>30</sup> On a drawing in C. Ticknor Curtis's book appear two large evergreen trees located directly before the front porch of the house—

Plan of Wheatland's Landscape: (1) Ash, 11 ft. circumference\* (2) Elm, 11 ft. cir. (3) Tree, 8 ft. cir. (4) Beech, 8 ft. cir. (5) Sycamore, 11½ ft. cir. (6) Sycamore, 10½ ft. cir. (7) American Beech, 13½ ft. cir. (8) Tree, 11 ft. cir. (9) Tree, 11 ft. cir. (10) Cedar\* (11) Tree, 11 ft. cir. (12) Poplar, 11½ ft. cir. (13) Tree, 10 ft. cir. (14) Sycamore, 12¾ ft. cir. (15) Tree, 11½ ft. cir. (16) Willow Oak\*\*, replanted (17) Silver Maple\* (18) Boxwood Hedge\* (19) Evergreen\* (20) Evergreen\* (21) Evergreen\* (22) Wisteria vine (23) Dogwood\* (24) Lilac\* (25) Orchard (26) Evergreen\* (27) Hickory grove\* (28) Farmers' garden\* (29) Flower garden (30) Spring house\* (31) Rose arbor (32) Barn\*

\* Missing from landscape, 1963.

\*\*Original Weeping Willow or Black Willow.



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MARIETTA AVENUE

numbers 19 and 26 on my map.<sup>31</sup> Surprisingly enough, a photograph of the Wilson family on the front porch shows two tree stumps located in this position.<sup>32</sup> The bark on the left stump is still intact. It is either larch or hemlock; however, I am inclined to think that it is hemlock. In still another picture, these stumps have jardinieres on them. The base of the jardinieres that are there today is eleven inches; they are replicas of the originals, each of which covered only half of a stump. Therefore, the approximate diameter would be at least twenty-two inches; this would make them fifty years old or older.<sup>33</sup> Between the sycamore trees number 5 and number 6 and the circular driveway are shown two other large evergreen trees, numbered 20 and 21, both dead but still standing in 1900. These two dead trees are larger in diameter than the evergreen trees numbered 19 and 26.<sup>34</sup> All four of these evergreen trees now have been cut down; even the stumps have been removed. The photograph shows a very old and distorted cedar tree, number 10, growing at that time.<sup>35</sup>

Recently a new willow oak has been planted by the spring, but it is not of the original variety. Weeping willow or black willow do better in a wet area such as this. The spring house and silver maple tree, number 12, identified from a photograph by a leaf on the wire of the spring cover, are not present today.<sup>36</sup> The dogwood and lilac groupings number 23 and number 24, which were located along the right drive lane, should be restored. The boxwood hedge to the left and rear of the house has been destroyed. This hedge played a unique part in Mr. Buchanan's funeral. As the Masonic Order filed past Buchanan's grave each man dropped a sprig of boxwood into it, possibly from this very hedge.<sup>37</sup> The large vegetable garden and hickory grove can never be restored because the land is no longer a part of the Wheatland estate. It seems likely that many of the other large trees not identifiable on my map were planted by Mr. H. S. Williamson in the year 1892.

Mr. Williamson, a great lover of trees, invited his friends to suggest their favorite tree to be planted on this historic estate. These trees were to be known as "family trees." They were to be from the Columbian era because they would be of special interest in years to come; however, the tags and the map were lost long ago. Of the one hundred sixty-two trees supposedly planted by Mr. Williamson none can be identified as such today.<sup>38</sup> From 1892 until 1957 no new plans or designs were inaugurated.

The present grounds committee was established in 1957. The committee, as it stands today, consists of Mr. H. P. Smith, Jr., chairman, Mrs. Harry B. Hostetter, Dr. Dwight B. Ashbey, Jr., and Mr. Richard Bauman.<sup>39</sup> The official title of the group is "The Committee for Restoration and Beautification of the Grounds of Wheatland." This gives them tremendous liberties when making their decisions. The committee has made Wheatland beautiful, although the main purpose of restoration has many times been sacrificed for the conveniences and necessities of the modern day tourist trade. For instance, the boxwood hedge was destroyed to make room for a macadam parking lot. The stable was made into a meeting room for the Junior League of Lancaster. Instead of planting a weeping willow tree as was there originally, near the spring, a willow oak was selected by the Committee because weeping willow trees are dirty. Modern

installations underground in the area of the dogwood trees and lilac bushes has canceled any plans to replace these plantings. The English ivy vine was cut back and practically destroyed because it ruined the bricks and mortar of the mansion house. Gift shrubs and rhododendrons have been planted in front of the house, even though plantings of this type were not used near the house in the time of Mr. Buchanan.<sup>40</sup>

This grounds committee has done some very worth-while things. They have helped solicit funds for this nonprofit Foundation. The turf has been revived, and the trees are being treated for disease and injury. Plans have been made to restore the left driveway. Nevertheless, restoration should come before beautification. Restoration will provide beautification.

Wheatland's beauty for future generations will not be found in macadam driveways and parking lots, attractive corner plantings, and exotic flowers and trees, but rather through the careful, conscientious, research of dedicated men and women. Applying this research to the Wheatland estate will provide a complete picture of the estate as it was between the years of 1848 and 1868.

## NOTES

1. Philip S. Klein, **The Story of Wheatland**, p. 7.
2. "Plans Mature For Making Buchanan's Home National Shrine," **Intelligencer Journal**, May 30, 1934, pp. 6-7.
3. Philip S. Klein, **President James Buchanan: a Biography**, pp. 206-207.
4. Philip S. Klein, **The Story of Wheatland**, p. 37.
5. **Ibid**, p. 37.
6. Information received in a conversation with Mr. H. P. Smith, Jr., chairman of Wheatland grounds committee, Tuesday, March 12, 1963.
7. Philip S. Klein, **The Story of Wheatland**, p. 20.
8. Philip S. Klein, **President James Buchanan: a Biography**, p. 207.
9. Philip S. Klein, **The Story of Wheatland**, p. 40.
10. "The Flower Gardens and Lawn," **Lancaster Examiner and Herald**, Wednesday, March 6, 1861, p. 4.
11. Stevenson Whitcomb Fletcher, **Pennsylvania Agriculture and Country Life 1640-1840**, p. 229.
12. "Two Wheatlands In County," **The Lancaster Sunday News**, March 21, 1943, p. 13.
13. Information received in conversation with Mr. H. P. Smith, Jr., chairman of Wheatland grounds committee, Tuesday, March 12, 1963.
14. "New Garden Seeds," **Lancaster Examiner and Herald**, Wednesday, February 27, 1861, p. 3.
15. "Pequea Valley Nurseries," **Lancaster Examiner and Herald**, Wednesday, February 27, 1861, p. 3.
16. "What Fruit Shall I Cultivate," **Lancaster Examiner and Herald**, Wednesday, March 27, 1861, p. 4.
17. Stevenson Whitcomb Fletcher, **Pennsylvania and Country Life 1640-1840**, p. 229.
18. "Pequea Valley Nurseries," **Lancaster Examiner and Herald**, Wednesday, February 27, 1861, p. 3.
19. Information received in a conversation with Mr. H. P. Smith, Jr., chairman of Wheatland grounds committee, Tuesday, March 12, 1963.
20. George T. Curtis, **The Life of James Buchanan**, II, 629.
21. R. G. Horton, **The Life and Public Service of James Buchanan**, p. 423.
22. John Bassett Moore (ed.), **The Works of James Buchanan**, VIII, 428.
23. Map included with report.
24. Information received at Herr's Lancaster County Nurseries, Lancaster, R. D. #6, Penna. Four Norway maple trees on property fifty or sixty years old. Diameter twenty inches—information verified by Abram Herr, owner, Monday, March 8, 1963.

25. Information received at farm of Melvin Shertzler, Lancaster, R. D. #6, Penna. Black walnut tree cut down in 1962, eighty-five years old. Diameter of tree stump is thirty-two inches. Information verified by Abram Herr, owner, of Lancaster County Nurseries, Monday, March 8, 1963.
26. Photograph, no. A. 6, [See appendix].
27. Photograph, no. A. 3, [See appendix].
28. Photograph, no. B. 1, [See appendix].
29. Photograph, no. A. 3, [See appendix].
30. Information received in a conversation with Mr. H. P. Smith, Jr., chairman of Wheatland grounds committee, Tuesday, March 12, 1963.
31. George T. Curtis, *op. cit.*, II, 1.
32. Photograph, no. A. 2, [See appendix].
33. Photograph, no. A. 3, [See appendix].
34. Photograph, no. A. 5, [See appendix].
35. Photograph, no. A. 1, [See appendix].
36. Photograph, no. A. 4, [See appendix].
37. Philip S. Klein, *The Story of Wheatland*, p. 57.
38. "Williamson's Plan," Lancaster (Pennsylvania) Historical Society, archives.
39. Information received in a conversation with Mr. H. P. Smith, Jr., chairman of the Wheatland ground committee, Tuesday, March 12, 1963.
40. Information received in a conversation with Mr. H. P. Smith, Jr., chairman of the Wheatland ground committee, Tuesday, March 12, 1963.

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- "What Fruit Shall I Cultivate," *Lancaster Examiner and Herald*, Wednesday, March 27, 1861, p. 4.
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- "Wheatland," Lancaster (Pennsylvania) Historical Society, archives. [For identification of photographs see appendix].
- "Wheatland," Lancaster Newspapers Inc., archives. [For identification of photograph see appendix].
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