In June of 1899, in the summer of Westtown’s Centennial year, the eighty-five year old John Collins, a well-known Philadelphia artist, lithographer, poet and teacher, presented to Westtown alumni the gift of his original 1858 India-ink sketch of what had become a familiar scene, subsequent lithographed versions of which can even today be found in antique stores of this region. It depicts a southeast view of the Westtown Schoolhouse of 1858 under a stormy winter sky. The South Lawn glows with its snow-cover, as does the schoolhouse roof and the boys’ nursery and play-shed roofs immediately behind it. In the mid-ground and foreground of this sketch are twenty-one boys, eyed watchfully by their Governor, having fun despite—or even because of—the cold. Boys roll and stack snow into snowmen, boys pack and throw snowballs, and one boy is ready to duck behind a low snow-heap. In the distance, we see two boys pulling by rope a third boy on a small sled. And in the foreground, about to disappear off the left edge of the picture, are three boys on a sled, two sitting and one kneeling behind, presumably having given a running push.

This sketch may contain the earliest graphic depiction of what became a long outdoor tradition at Westtown: the sport of sledding or “coasting” as it has been often called here over more than one and a half centuries. But sledding at Westtown grew over the years into a technology and even an art that included the running, design and construction of sleds and the tracks on which to test them, by companies of boys who together experimented in run after run on various campus hills and roads, and went on to build newer sleds. By 1853, the sport included Westtown girls on their own track and later on with boys on the shared bobsled track down to the North Woods south of the present-day Westtown Lake. The cost for both genders would be the occasional scrape, bruise or even broken bone. But the outcome would not only be a love of the outdoors in winter at Westtown for generations of youth, but also a classic sled design that would—and still does—capture the attention of the nation.

The Early Period, 1830’s to 1868

According to an unsigned Westtown Literary Union essay , “Coasting at Westtown, 1834-1882,” we don’t have much specific information about the early period of Westtown sleds. It may have begun as early as the 1830’s, probably mostly involving smaller “jumper” sleds (at right)—some merely a 3’ or 4’ solid wood platform on two solid wood runners—that remained popular for about 50 years. These sleds often spun in circles downhill instead of running straight and so they could be hard to keep on an
iced track.² We also know from a student letter, that as early as 1844, boys prepared a track by packing the snow and icing it with water, so it could freeze overnight.³ The three boys at left in the 1859 Collins sketch, we may assume, were just beginning their plunge down that sharp incline behind our current Greenhouse and through the South Woods on a well-known boys’ track that was eventually to be declared too dangerous for student use.⁴

This essay also tells us that, from its beginnings, Westtown sledding involved some larger sleds that carried more boys, ran faster, and sparked both competition and spectacle. These sleds also tended to be simple in design, again comprising a solid wood platform and solid wood runners which were much longer and sometimes shod with strips of metal, much like the “Mountain Maid” (at left) that was built in 1872-73 and featured in a series of schematic drawings included in the Literary Union’s volume “Historical Essays” with an article on coasting. That sled was 8’ in length and 16” wide. These big sleds were run down an iced track, cruising until they stopped, and at that point a mark was made. Over a season, the sled with the furthest mark won the “bully flag.”⁵

The spectacle of these contests led to the popularity of the fastest sleds, which gradually inspired an oral tradition of stories rehearsing sled-names and deeds at the school, as is suggested in the following verses written by an unidentified Westtown girl in the winter of 1847-48, and included in the coating essay:

The Fashion goes foremost of any, and then
The next in the track is the Old Blue Hen,
The Pilot runs well; and the United States
Will outgo the Texas, although they are mates.
Gondolier, Osceola and Old Ironsides,
And the Snowbird, will also afford us good rides.

Our author tells us that one of the dominant sleds not mentioned in these verses, was the Red Bull, a sled that could hold five to ten children. Just think of the weight and the speed of such a sled! Just think of the thrill of it, on a track of ice, flying through virgin forest between ancient trees, on a sled not mechanically equipped to be steered! By 1852 the boys had made the girls their own track near the western edge of the South Woods. In her 1/19/1853 letter Martha Garrett tells a friend that though the sledding that winter is fun and fast, the boys are not as gallant as they were the year before in lending the girls their sleds.⁶

By 1864, we know that The Fashion was still drawing attention, but was now being passed by the Black Hawk. The favorite sled of the era, however, was the great blue sled, The Mountaineer, which was built sometime between 1853 and 1859. During this era at Westtown big sleds began to be built by groups of boys (perhaps in the Carpenter’s Shop) and owned by some of them, who bought a share in providing money for the materials and their upkeep. Each of the investors received a document called an “out” which certified his partial ownership. It is probably the case that the owner-group was also included in the team who ran the sled, who studied its operation and quirks, and provided its upkeep. That group
would include the steerer who sat in front, gouging the snow with his feet and prompting the other riders to lean, in their crude way of steering. At the rear knelt the surger, who would push the sled at the start of the run, and would bounce downward on the tail of the sled when approaching any obstacle it needed to jump. 7

These were memorable days, and many a story of rough rides of these early days would be told by Old Scholars (alumni prior to 1860) of the school to young Westonians, but this period of the early big sleds was soon to end. In fact, it went up in flames. All the big sleds, including the Blackhawk and the Mountaineer, which had been stored in the rafters beneath the roof of the boys’ playshed, were turned to sparks and ashes in the boys’ gallery fire of April 1868, as were the boys’ playshed, gallery and bathhouse. All that was left for coasting down hills were smaller single rider sleds stored elsewhere, but which had long been overshadowed by the heavier ones. Moreover, the growing popularity of ice skating had also begun to eclipse the joys of coasting. In the summer of 1865 the Westtown boys convinced School authorities of the need for a new skating pond and then spent that summer term helping hired workers build a dam across the meadow where Hickman’s Run streamed across the campus (on the future site of the Lake). The pond they helped create produced a skating surface several times the size of the Old Gristmill Dam pond of earlier days. Perhaps the even greater attraction of skating there, however, would be the fact that boys and girls would now be permitted to skate at the same time—not together, not yet—but within that same expanse, some days for a few hours at a time. 8

The Bobsled Era, 1870-1906

After that fire, no new sleds were built. The models for big sleds were gone, and the older boys who had run them would also soon be gone, on to university or employment. The next two winters were filled with the fun and skill-building of skating at the new pond. But stories of the big sleds flying down the steep track lived on, and so it was in the third long winter after the fire that the first big sled of a new generation—the Stella—was built.

Though an unnamed member of the Literary Union tells us in their December 1875 issue of The Argosy that Stella was “neither beautiful nor speedy,” he did see its importance as the “pioneer sled” of the time. Stella belonged to its builders, the boys of First Class (ie.”the top 8 or 10 boys”). The Literary Union coasting essay reminds us that Stella was knocked together and later tested by inexperienced boys. This author tells the story of its first run, that day when they carried the Stella to the top of a northbound downslope of what is now Walnut Hill Road, which descends toward Hickman’s Run. The steerer for that run, however, was an unnamed teacher experienced in the running of the big Westtown sleds of the past. On that afternoon those boys, led by their teacher, got their first taste of how to work with a big sled and study it through the long succession of runs that day, and that by winter’s end, “skill only came by dear experience.” 9

It is noteworthy that Master Thomas K. Brown had been a Westtown student from 1863 to 1868—at the height of the running of those big sleds. He was to graduate in the Autumn of 1868, and so, during the summer 1868 session—his last—he must have seen the wreckage of the boys’ playshed. When he came back to teach in 1875, he was still an expert steersman as well as a mathematician and “natural philosopher” (ie. scientist), and he carried those boyhood winter experiences in his heart. Brown’s former student, Morris E. Leeds, remembers Brown as a maker of sleds and tracks, and ultimately as the inspirer of a generation of innovators in sledding:
[This] alert young man... was a leader in winter sports. He laid out the sledding track and showed us how to bank and ice the curves. He steered the big sleds and worked on improvement of their design and construction...[The bobsled years, when Brown was a young teacher] were the great days of Westtown sledding. When the track was iciest, The Aurora, starting from near the north door, would go swiftly down the slope, take the rise and curve near the present Greenwood, enter the woods with scarcely slackened speed, gather headway as it sped among the great trees, dash over the race into the meadow where the lake now is, cross the road and set the ‘bully mark’ well out in the Chester Creek meadow, for others to beat if they could...[Master Thomas] observed the results of his experiments shrewdly, reasoned about them aloud for all who would listen, and tried again. That was his way whatever came within the range of his experience—he analyzed and reasoned about everything from the tennis stroke that went wrong to the free and unlimited coinage of silver, and he did it aloud for any to hear who would.”

In 1883, when the writer of our “Coasting” essay talks about the secrets of optimal coasting, he reveals a depth of mathematical and mechanical sense of the sled’s motion combined with an intuitively psychological awareness of the expectations, misperceptions and surprises of the ride, while distinguishing between the effect of racing heavily (and dangerously) down a long steep slope as if speed were the key, and the more subtle physical, emotional and indeed aesthetic feel of a restrained cruising for maximal distance on a very slick track. He shows just how real the well-known words of George Fox, “And this I know by experiment,” applied to the complexity of the Westtown boys’ experience of coasting, especially by builders and steerers of sleds, like Master Thomas.

Pleasure quite equal to that of the breathless dash can be had from more moderate motion if the second condition of good coasting is attained, that is, if we have a track from which we expect little but get much. A smooth sheet of ice may have an almost imperceptible slope, and yet a sled may attain a great velocity upon it. If a slight decline follows a steep descent, it seems level by comparison, and a moderate ascent will be exaggerated into a considerable rise. Where a track is very hard and smooth the sled and our bodies move together, or the sled may even seem to move us. But where the track is less slippery we are conscious of a continued pressure to move the sled.

Our track then, which will give the greatest pleasure must be a combination of short, sharp descents with long slight declines, and short easy rises, the whole ending in a long level or very gentle ascent. Over the whole must be a track of hard ice. On such a hill your pleasure is greatest and your work least.

Our writer completes this analysis with a thought-experiment in which he takes us on a moment-by-moment imaginary ride down just such a superior track with an imaginary watch ticking in the background. He describes the motions of the sled, the subtle variations of the track, our reactions to these motions, and teases us—with the initial downslope far in the past—bringing us toward the final destination:
...[now] we see a slight rise before us, exaggerated in appearance by our low position and our previous downhill slope. Surely we will stop on this [next rise]...But no, we go up and up, slowing to be sure, but with no conscious drag.--slowing, yet wondering that we are not already stopped. Now the top is reached, and over we go, with steady sweep. Again the motion picks up,--we go faster and faster, the sled seeming to pull us along. And so finally, the last long level is reached. On this, our force imperceptibly fails. We threaten to stop yet go on, dying out till we scarcely know when the runners cease to slide. Then we draw a long breath to express our subdued excitement. From the first plunge to the final stop there has been one continuing unbroken delight of motion.11

And so, the era began with the Stella. Within a year, it was surpassed by the Mountain Maid, a heavy, solid green sled of good design (see diagram above, p.2) with runners shod in steel. She could carry a team of ten boys providing 1800 pounds of body weight. Though the competition that year between the Mountain Maid and another new sled, the Pride of the Hill, was fierce, with its better design and a good steersman, The Maid won the bully, and the Stella did not come close.12 By this time, the sleds had vacated the furious descent in the South Woods with its record of collisions with trees, and were running on a prepared northward track beginning near the Old Laundry Building (somewhere behind our Power House) and running down toward the trail to the our current Lake that even today many older Westonians still call the “sled track” (at left in 1894-95). The December 1875 issue of The Argosy includes an editorial titled “A Public Track,” advocating a community choice of a single track carefully constructed and cared for, and not for the sake of mere competition, but rather for safety, for “the stirring of the blood” in legitimate exercise, and for sheer enjoyment.13 The appreciation of coasting is growing for a few toward an aesthetic complexity; the teacher in the building of tracks by this time is Master Thomas who was known to share his reflections on the “hows and whys” of coasting.

And neither is such stirring of the blood only for the boys. This is the decade in which Westtown began to require a set program of exercise for the girls. And so, in response to a request from the building’s west (girls’) end, in 1873-74 Superintendent Aaron Sharpless paid a wheelwright at Cheyney to make a sled for the girls. The boys, however, somehow aware of the plans for that sled brought together their ideas for improvements to sleds since Stella and sent the specifications to a carpenter in West Chester for a better sled that would be a gift to the girls. The boys also managed to pull off a delivery of their gift, a lovely painted sled later named “Camilla,” a few hours before the school’s purchase--called by the boys “The Old Oaken Bucket”--arrived unpainted. With great drama, the boys--who had been polishing Camilla with their handkerchiefs--carried her gleaming down to the girls’ evening collection, where she was
universally admired and where, once left by the donors, the girls went on polishing it. In the
_Argosy_, we are told of the new sled that “it was pretty” and that in the following winter, it was a
standout in both speed and distance, as was _not_ the case with the Bucket.\(^{14}\)

The sledding, however, continued to create the same dangers, even with the change of course
and material sled-improvements that had been made. It was still common in these times for one
boy each day to go looking for the nurse, limping or holding his arm or his head, and the question
of _stopping coasting altogether_ was asked more and more. Then late in the winter of 1878-79, a
boy on a small sled streaking down the track collided with the prow of a large sled being pulled
uphill from the bottom of the track. He received a dangerous blow to the stomach, and suffered
in grave condition for several days. \(^{15}\)

The teachers gathered to consider the case, and our writer in “Coasting at Westtown” tells us
that they realized that “the power of regular organization had shown itself so efficient in
lessening many evils of the playground...[that] some of the teachers were [already] pondering its
availability in this direction.”\(^{16}\) And so, in preparation for the winter of 1879-1880, an association
was formed, made up of student sled owners and sled team-leaders who would meet regularly to
write and amend rules for the safe usage of the sleds and the track, and organize a schedule of
monitors responsible for observing track and sled conditions at all times on days when coasting
was permitted. These monitors would serve as watchmen of sled movement along the track,
appoint student work crews who would repair the track whenever traffic was stopped because
conditions had deteriorated, or remove a sled from use at any time that it needed repair or was
managed in a dangerous way. They also would form a special committee who would investigate
any accident, find its causes and act to provide a remedy.

The work of the association proved effective, but it was a major step forward in _design_ that led to
the greatest decade of this era, the 1880’s. Walter Brinton, a Westtown student from 1873 to
1878 and then an assistant teacher and later a School Committee member, wrote in the
_Westonian_ in 1930 that it was Master Thomas K. Brown who “engineered” the first Westtown
_bobsled_.\(^{17}\) Such a sled is built with its
seating platform above two “bobs,” one
beneath the front and one beneath the
rear of the sled, each bob with its pair of
wooden runners, and its steering
mechanism, allowing a measure of control
over its direction and up-down bumping
motion. (_diagram for The Jersey, at right_) The steerer, seated in front, used a
rotating “T-handle” to direct the front
runners; the rear runners were attached to the sled’s platform by a chain with enough slack to
allow for that bob to freely compensate for the motion of the whole sled without moving beyond
45 degrees off of forward. The product of Brown’s work was “the Jersey” the first bobsled used
at Westtown School, which was completed in 1878. The sled was 12 feet long and 16 inches in height.

A brief comparison of the Jersey and the Aurora (below, left, winter 1903-04)) gives one a sense of the kinds of improvements that were brainstormed, crafted—after 1888, probably in the new power-tool woodshop in Industrial Hall—and tested during this era. The Aurora, originally modeled in 1875-76 after the Mountain Maid (1872-73), was in 1881-82 (after the Jersey’s successes and experiments with other sleds) cut in half and remodeled into a double-decker bobsled.\(^{18}\) The upper deck, which provided seating that absorbed more of the shocks from the track, also allowed the team, seated higher, more force on curves when leaning together into the curve. The lower deck provided a footrest for the whole team along the rail. Steering was now completely in the hands (and feet) of the steerer, who could kick right or left to turn the front bob, and using the levers, could steer the rear bob. This was the steering mechanism-combination that was most used on successive generations of bobsleds of the era made at Westtown probably because the rear bob was now more flexibly used. Johnny Fitzpatrick, who became the cobbler at Westtown in 1902, was said to have stitched metal arches into the boots of steerers so they could turn the sleds’ front bobs without ruining those boots or hurting their feet as much.

According to a label typed for a 1940’s display of the Howard P. Wood (Class of 1940) painting “The Crash” (at right) the Aurora was involved in Westtown’s “most famous accident” in 1892. This sled, “tearing full speed down the sledding track, crashed into a wagon being driven along the race bank [later the shore of Westtown Lake]. The impact was terrific, causing a serious head injury to one of the boys.” Even with the safety precautions of the Association’s oversight coasting, the school continued to have concerns about safety in the use of the big sleds. Nevertheless, the Aurora was repaired and our source goes on to say, “In 1898 we hear that Aurora was leading all others...but [the bobsleds] were gradually replaced by the less dangerous Flexible Flyers, until by 1905 the old style sleds were no longer in use.”\(^{19}\) Once again, it was another watershed in sled design engineered by another Westonian that sparked another new advance for coasting at Westtown.
The Quest for the Well-Made Sled at Westtown

The Era of the Flexible Flyer, since 1906

Samuel Leeds Allen entered Westtown School in May of 1852 aged 11 years. He stayed a whole year. That places him among the boys who certainly watched and heard a shout of “Track!” followed by the rumble of the big solid wood sleds in the South Woods and heard the talk from older boys about building them and running them. As an 11 year old, though, he probably only rode on small jumper sleds, but knowing his character, was probably at least intrigued by what he observed. In his article “The Value of Play: How The Birth of America’s Favorite Sled can be Traced to a Hillside in Westtown,” author Mark Dixon writes:

> From his earliest days, Allen preferred mischief, exploration and tinkering over any assigned task. As a boy, he spent summers on an uncle’s farm, where he teased the maid by removing the pin from the pump handle. At Westtown—where his father sent him in 1850 to ‘get him out of the city’—Allen invented a small spring gun that he attached to the underside of his seat. The device was such a hair trigger that anyone walking past would set it off. It earned Allen several swats...For fun, he’d use a penny to draw a perfect circle, then write the entire Lord’s Prayer within it. He could kick a ball farther than any other boy, said [his cousin, George B. Allen]...because he’d studied the physics of the problem and “kicked it scientifically”... Eventually, the value of Allen’s observation and technology skills emerged. When he was 14, he spent a summer at George’s farm in Marple, where his job was helping an employee load hay wagons. Proper loading was essential, lest the hay slip off on its way to the barn. Allen watched a man load one wagon. “After that, Samuel loaded every load of hay and wheat that we hauled that summer,” wrote George. “Not one slipped.”

Allen’s serious side, however, was a facet of his character from boyhood too and surely contributed to his success as a designer and maker of farm implements, and an inventor with nearly 300 patents for machinery products and at least 6 patents his designs in sleds. Like Benjamin Franklin, Allen as a youth made lists for himself of habits he wished to cultivate, including “attention, observation, patience, doing things systematically, finishing everything undertaken [and] untiring industry.” He wanted to be thorough in his studies, to learn something from everybody and to be a “deep, powerful, comprehensive thinker.” A successful student, he believed, needed to continually exercise the memory and to persevere. Sounding very much like Franklin, he wrote, “Never neglect any opportunity of self-improvement.” It should not be surprising that Allen became a successful businessman who was eventually to be elected to the New Jersey Inventors Hall of Fame.

Allen decided to make sleds so that his employees would have work in the summer and fall, when those men otherwise left to find work on farms. He traveled to Albany and Rochester NY, and Burlington VT to study the market in sleds and have conversations about their operation and design with knowledgeable people there. As he worked on his own designs, he kept in touch with sledding at Westtown. Edward S.
Wood, a Westtown boy from 1883 to 1887, who was able to beat the Aurora one year, did so with the help of Samuel Allen:

When sledding was a major sport at Westtown Samuel L. Allen was much interested in the development of a sled that would, with eight men, win the flag from the larger and less carefully designed sleds. Albert Votaw, Henry Bartlett, Stogdell Stokes and myself ordered the “Ariel.” At first both front and rear bobs steered. This made the sled very difficult to handle on ice, because it was so sensitive that it was hard to control, and the statement that “The Ariel was climbing trees” was common in the school at that time.

We finally made permanent the rear bob, and I personally was able to “feel” the sled out, so that the last two years of the sledding on the old hill, where there was real speed, carrying eight men, won the bully flag from the “Aurora” with fifteen or sixteen. [Samuel Allen] spent a great deal of time in designing the sled, so that the weight would be properly distributed between the two bobs. The runners were convex, and there were no screw-holes in them where they touched the ice or snow. 23

Of course, this Westtown Old Scholar interested in the science of coasting was also in touch with Thomas K. Brown. Of Allen’s work, Brown wrote:

Samuel L. Allen’s interest in sledding often brought us together at Westtown, and I remember his various experiments in sleds that steered, samples of which were sent out from time to time to be tried on our track. They always worked, but they were complicated and expensive, yet he always aimed at simplicity with its resulting cheapness. 24

Brown comments that Allen spent some time working with bobsleds, like the Ariel (above). One of those that he brought to Westtown for trials was the “Fleetwing,” which he brought for the girls to try when his daughter Elizabeth was at Westtown in 1884. She wrote about it at that time:

Fleetwing will carry six very comfortably. It is made in the very lightest and strongest way that could be thought of, and is just no weight at all for five or six persons to pull. Indeed three or four are sufficient. It is painted a beautiful gray blue and has a silver nameplate and a gong. It is steered with handles and the front sled [ie. bob] is fastened to the rear one by chains, so steering the front [bob] also guides the rear one, this being an advantage in turning curves. Many have been the predictions that Fleetwing would not run, and that it would upset…All the suppositions proved incorrect, and it made some very good runs. “Beat the Jersey? Oh my! Why it leaves that thirty or forty feet behind looking after it with wistful eyes” So said Lloyd Balderston. [Assistant Teacher that year.] 25

According to Brown, Allen stopped working on bobsleds, and for a time nothing further was sent by him to the school. Brown goes on:
...And then the ‘Flexible Flyer’ appeared—a completed creation. It was one of those marvels of mechanical simplicity which seem incapable of improvement. In many ways it is the most wonderful of all his inventions, for it stands alone as the one steering sled of the continent. I have long regarded it as a special personal privilege that an old Westtown boy, and a friend of mine, should have furnished to the young people of our country such a means for enjoying one of the most exhilarating and healthful of all the outdoor pleasures.26

The Flexible Flyer was patented in 1889, the outcome of a long process of experimentation by Allen and a product of his own intense attention, observation, industry and powerful thought. His broad observation of the growing technology around him was that “in nearly all the industries, we find an increasing demand for better speed, reduced friction, smoother ways, neater guiding and more accurate advancement.”27 The feature that made this small two-runner sled so accurate and easy in its steering, was the intentional weakening in the steel of both runners half-way to the rear of the sled, so that each runner could bend sideways, hinge-like, when the steering bar in front was rotated to the left or right. The runners were t-shaped (i.e. in cross section, an upside-down T) so that they could be bent like this, and so they ran lighter on the snow than would rounded steel runners. He also used wooden slats for greater lightness in the seat.28

Here was the triumph over the need for a track that starts with a precipitous angle of descent or the need for heavy weight to create momentum. Here was the ideal of lightness, less drag, and the possibility for seemingly effortless speed along a track on which a moderate initial descent followed by well managed brief inclines and relatively invisible later descents could yield a long, long run that makes us believe for a moment that the sled itself has defeated gravity.

By 1907, the sled track was now dominated by the Flexible Flyer. On the iced track to which Westonians were now accustomed—running from the Girls’ Tower, downhill and over the hockey fields, then into the wooded sled track to the meadow—the sleds ran fast and light and under more control. Some Flyers held three (as at left in 1910), some held five and some only one. One could steer with his hands or feet. Though not without their dangers, the Flyers were safer. Thomas Brown also observed that the Flyer brought the girls more equally into the health and joy of coasting, having always on the bobsleds to be escorted by male steerers and surgers who actually felt the greater joy of running the sled. Now everybody steered and felt the “mystery” of how the sled worked. These sleds were also less expensive and easier to take back uphill. The only key experience out of the Westtown tradition that running a Flyer lacked, was the need to design and build it. That job had already been done at a level approaching perfection.
Occasionally, stories of the old days and the big sleds reawakened interest in the bobsleds. In the March 1908 issue of the *Westonian*, a regretful Francis C. Stokes, Class of 1910 meditates on his 1906 memory of moving the sleds into the basement of Industrial Hall, and complains that no boys seem interested in them anymore, and that the steerers and shareholders of those sleds are all now gone. We note, however, that on the very next page of that issue, in her article “The Coasting Track by Night,” 1910 classmate Leah Cadbury narrates her experience of lying in bed with a window open, listening to the boys outside icing down the sled track with a hose from the Girls’ Tower, and the “tub runners” hauling water from the mill-race icing the bottom and lower track. Leah’s story is fraught with the excitement in the voices of a boy outside, announcing hot chocolate and a cinnamon buns, and her own excitement over the promise for everybody of a privilege day coasting come morning.

And it seems that Francis Stokes and other boys of 1910 who in 1906 may have helped put the bobsleds away, finally got their wish for seeing the old sleds in action in the winter of their senior year. In the February 1910 issue of the *Westonian*, in a brief unsigned report titled “The Return,” it feels as if for the author some mythic giant has reawakened. That writer, probably a member of 1910 (as were all of the editors of the “School and Campus” section in that issue), like an epic poet cites the names of the sleds they beheld on that day:

…”Out of the obscurity and gloom where they have waited since 1906, have come the “Centennial,” the “Defender,” the “Monitor,” the “Twilight,” the “Ramona,” the “Aurora,” and the “Polaris.” On the icy West Chester road, a track all ready for using, these old-time favorites won the hearts of Westtown children, who heretofore had known them only by tradition…”

The author then cites the epic list of the great steerers of bobsleds that the watcher imagines passing by, including the teachers—all aging alumni—who were running the sleds that day:

…as those who remembered their glorious past watched the old sleds flash by it was easy to imagine that one saw Robert Yarnall, or Abbott Willitts, or William Bates, or Albert Whitacre, steering…[and] six of the famous steerers of olden time are here…Thomas Brown, William Wickersham, Egbert Cary, Bacon Evans, Richard Brown, and Charles Palmer. All but the first and last took sleds down on this particular morning and showed their old-time skill. 29

Since 1910, the awakened nostalgia for such a great parade has surfaced again. I have heard that in the 1970’s, under the inspiration of Andy Buckman, Class of 1971 and later the wood shop teacher, some of the big sleds saw the light of day again. And I remember that in 1998, during preparations for the renovation of Industrial Hall and the Bicentennial, I was called down to the basement of that building to the crypt where some of those sleds may have rested perhaps since 1910, to look with wonder and then to carry the bones with a team of boys to the wood shop, where a few of these sleds could be prepared to join a variety of Flexible Flyers for the Bicentennial display in the Old Gym above the Dining Room. Today several of the old bobsleds are still resting in storage on this campus, amidst the tokens of our history.
The Quest for the Well-Made Sled at Westtown

As word has leaked into the public consciousness that Westtown is intimately linked with the development of the Flexible Flyer, the school has been the recipient of what is now a collection of 83 Flyer sleds of all shapes and sizes, from as close to the birth of the Flyer as our 1900 “Fire Fly” to two sleds from the 1960’s. We have the late Ed Sharpless, Class of 1936 to thank for his skilled and loving repair and/or renovation of some of these sleds over the years--some so that they might be used each year by young Westonians on the hills around the campus, and others so that they might return to their authentic wholeness for purposes of display and study. Most of the sleds in the collection are in good condition, some are rusty, and only a few are broken; nevertheless, those that are used for teaching physics, historical research or just for fun and fresh air are still carried or pulled by Westtown’s boys and girls amid plastic coasting dishes and Dining Room trays back uphill to a frozen South Lawn.

Notes from the Text

5. Ibid., pp. 281-286. The sled drawings, taken from the “Coasting at Westtown, 1834-1882” in Historical Essays, are unsigned schematic diagrams, from 1883, of four sleds, the “Jumper,” the “Mountain Maid,” the “Jersey” and the “Aurora” with a separate page labeling those diagrams. They are in the Subject File, “Sledding,” in the Esther Duke Archives at Westtown School, Westtown, PA.
7. Ibid., pp. 223-224.
8. Ibid., pp. 224-225.
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23. Ibid., p. 111.

24. Ibid., p. 111.

25. Ibid., p. 110.

26. Ibid., pp. 111-112.

