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William Logan Fisher (1781-1862)

Michelle Dillin
La Salle University

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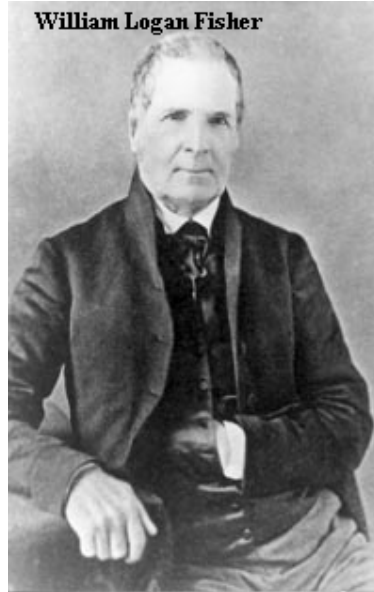
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Belfield & Wakefield: [A Link to La Salle's Past](#)

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William Logan Fisher

By: Michelle Dillan



William Logan Fisher

As the first family to occupy Belfield after the departure of artist and agriculturist Charles Willson Peale, the Fisher family's connections to La Salle's campus are indeed rich and many. Of particular interest is the life of William Logan Fisher, as he bought the Belfield estate from the Peale family in 1826.



Stenton

On 1 October 1781, William Logan Fisher was born into the family of Thomas Fisher and Sarah Logan. Only ten years earlier, Sarah inherited the

northeastern portion of the Stenton Estate, which belonged to her grandfather James Logan, Secretary to William Penn; it was on this very land that Thomas Fisher built the Wakefield mansion in 1798.

As a young boy, Fisher grew up on the Wakefield estate. He described his childhood as one "marked by no incidents of uncommon character" and referred to himself as a "dull scholar" in his memoirs. Of definite impact on the young boy's ambition and drive was his journey at age fourteen to New Bedford. After Sarah Logan's death, Thomas placed his son in the family and counting house of William Rotch Jr., now related to him through the marriage of his Uncle Samuel Fisher to Hannah Rodman. William Logan Fisher cites his connections to William Rotch, Jr, an eminent merchant, as having a bearing on his whole future character.

It was through the Rotch family that Fisher met his first wife, Mary Rodman. When she ventured to New Bedford to spend a winter with her Aunt Mary Rotch, she also made the acquaintance of a young William Logan Fisher. They spent a significant amount of time in one another's company and grew to be quite close; in his memoirs, Fisher says of his wife, "I am not sure that any cloud even for a moment rested upon the friendly intercourse I had with Mary Rodman." On 25 November 1802, William and Mary married. Although they intended to make New Bedford their permanent home, the couple journeyed to Philadelphia to spend their first winter as husband and wife.

Settling into New Bedford, Fisher immersed himself in commercial affairs, including ownership of several whaling vessels. In order to "exchange the perplexities of the countinghouse for the quiet scenes of rural life," he also maintained a small garden stocked with shrubbery, flowers and fruits. He earned sufficient money to support a simple lifestyle for his wife and their two young children, Thomas, born in 1803, and Sarah, born in 1806. In the same year of Sarah's birth, Fisher's brother Joshua died, and his father took ill. Thomas Fisher offered the Wakefield estate to William Logan Fisher and his family. In 1807, William, Mary and their two young children moved back to Germantown to reside on the Wakefield estate. In the fall of 1810, a third child, Elizabeth Rodman was born into the Fisher family. Only three years later, Mary passed away.

William Logan Fisher lived as a widower for four years before marrying Sarah Lindley, the daughter of Jacob Lindley, a resident of Chester County. Fisher had known Sarah since his youth: her father was a close family friend of Thomas and Sarah Fisher. In his memoirs, Fisher points out that Sarah's arrival at Wakefield brought many guests to the estate and, after thirty years of marriage, he remarks that "the connection has been a blessing to myself and my children." In addition to raising Thomas, Sarah and Elizabeth, Sarah Lindley Fisher bore three more children: Lindley in 1818, Charles William in 1820, and Mary Rodman in 1822.

The joys of three new children and a series of guests at his home contrasted with William Logan Fisher's change in health; the onset of a chronic liver disease brought him pain throughout the remainder of his life. He remarks that he "bore it without much complaint, never being confined to the house." Fisher never allowed this setback to prevent his continued involvement in industry, both in the Philadelphia area and elsewhere.

Interest in the textiles industry was taking root in Germantown during the first few years that Fisher occupied Wakefield. Shortly after moving from New Bedford, he purchased approximately four acres of land, which included a mill with a spinning jenny, from the Roberts family; he planned to cultivate his own interests in textiles through a series of mills along the Wingohocking Creek. This venture marks the beginning of what would become the Wakefield Mills Manufacturing Company, eventually managed by Fisher's son, Thomas and his grandson Ellicott; under Thomas' direction, the most talented English stocking knitters of Nicetown and Germantown were, for the first time, gathered together under one roof to produce cloth. In its prime, the Wakefield Mills, powered by steam and water, produced an estimated nine-tenths of all hosiery and fancy knit goods in the United States.

In addition to the Wakefield Mills venture, William Logan Fisher also involved himself in a partnership with his son-in-law William Wister; together they launched a calico print mill north of Wakefield Mills along the Wingohocking. By 1829 or so, Fisher has relinquished the reigns of this business to Wister.



Family connections in the business world inspired other ventures as well. An 1834 visit with his brother-in-law Jacob Lindley drew William Logan Fisher into the iron industry in Perry County, Pennsylvania. In partnership with Charles Morgan, he purchased a parcel of land in Clark's Ferry, Pennsylvania, along the Susquehanna River. Fisher built the Duncannon iron mill; the management of the mill required that he and Sarah spent part of each year at Wakefield and part at Duncannon.

As his business successes accumulated, William Logan Fisher's family also changed and grew. In 1826, his daughter Sarah Logan Fisher married William Wister at Grumblethorpe, a house in Germantown. Because Wister was a "world's person," Fisher refused to allow his daughter to marry at his Wakefield home. Once the couple wed, they lived at Belfield, which Fisher purchased from Charles Willson Peale earlier in the same year. Thomas Fisher, the eldest son of William Logan Fisher, married Letitia Ellicott in 1829 and lived in the Little Wakefield house. This land was passed down through the family for many years, but was eventually sold to the Sisters of St. Basil The Great, who sold to La Salle University in 1989. Today, La Salle's Christian Brothers operate the Little Wakefield house as the St. Mutien Hall.

Throughout the course of his adulthood, William Logan Fisher was also a prolific writer. The most frequently addressed topics among his works include the "higher principles of human nature," as well as Quakerism and religion in general. Quakerism was indeed a prolific topic at

the time, since Fisher's religious contemporaries were divided into three Quaker factions: the conservative Orthodox, the progressive Evangelicals and the liberal Hicksites. Fisher, a follower of the liberal ideas of Elias Hicks, became known as a controversial author tackling issues such as socialism, the laws of the Society of Friends, and a history of the Society. His disdain for the state of affairs in the Society of Friends is revealed when he states that he feels a "decided objection that any if my children should connect themselves with any society called religious, as they now exist... it seems to me that sitting under a hireling Minister is in itself calculated to degrade the mind." This request appears in the final paragraphs of a memoir written for his grandchildren.

William Logan Fisher died on 24 September 1862. An obituary author for one Perry County newspaper wrote that Fisher had been "patiently awaiting that change which must come to all, and that he regarded Death... as but a door from one state of existence to another." A letter from his daughter Sarah Logan Wister to her half sister Mary Rodman Fox states that Fisher's Wakefield home was "so lonely and so quiet" without him.

In a twenty page will dated 6 March 1862, Fisher divided his land and holdings amongst his family; the document named Elizabeth Rodman Fisher, William Wister, Samuel Fox and his grandson Ellicott Fisher as its executors. The land containing the Wakefield Mills was given in part to all of the following people: William Wister and Samuel Fox, both sons-in-law to the deceased, his grandson William Rotch Wister, his daughter-in-law Letitia Fisher, his daughter Elizabeth Rodman Fisher and his son Thomas' three sons. Fisher forbade the sale of this property outside his family. Little Wakefield was willed to Sarah Logan Fisher Wister, who was also named, along with Mary Rodman Fox, as a recipient of the Belfield estate. In an attempt to keep a controlling interest among his descendants, William Logan Fisher also ordered that his shares in the Bloomsburg Railroad and the Duncannon mill remain in the family. He specified that his unmarried daughter Elizabeth should maintain the Wakefield property.

Perhaps as evidence of his passion for writing, Fisher also asked that his books be preserved in his father's mahogany bookcase. Although he conceded that the books were probably of little value, he wished to have them, along with his letters of correspondence, kept in his name. The executors were also ordered to provide every comfort necessary to Sarah Lindley Fisher, who had proved to be a "most faithful wife, companion and friend."

William Logan Fisher, in terms of his family, his property and his business ventures, contributed to the rich history of the Philadelphia area, especially Germantown. It was under this intelligent businessman and writer that the lands of La Salle University's current campus were united under the Fisher name. From his descendants, La Salle University purchased the land in increments, beginning in 1926 and ending in 1984 with the purchase of the purchase of the Belfield mansion and remaining lands; the 1989 acquisition of the Little Wakefield area completed the long transition of the property from William Logan Fisher to La Salle University.

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