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The Remarkable Wisters at Belfield

By James A. Butler

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It happened in the 1920s, before the Age of Consultants. La Salle's president, knowing that the college had outgrown its location at 1240 North Broad Street, asked his fellow Christian Brothers to keep an eye out for a new campus site. Pushing their way through a high hedge, two Brothers out for a Saturday stroll saw the rolling fields at Twentieth and Olney. The land on which these Brothers trespassed was owned, at least in part, by descendants of the Wister Family; across it once strode some of Philadelphia's (and the nation's) most prominent writers, actors, civic leaders, industrialists, soldiers, and sports figures. The history of the nineteenth-century Wisters at "Belfield" encompasses three adjoining properties--and begins (perhaps appropriately for a future university campus) with a teenager who defied her father.



Early in the nineteenth-century, three large estates touched near the present Ogontz and Olney Avenues. The famous portrait painter Charles Willson Peale in 1810 bought a property of one hundred and four acres (much of it now La Salle's campus). Peale's house "Belfield," in part built in 1708, is now the President's House. On this property Peale painted and farmed--and corresponded with Thomas Jefferson about their estates of "Belfield" and "Monticello."

To the northeast of Olney and Ogontz was the second estate, "Butler Place" (the house stood near what is now Old York Road and Nedro Street). It was home in the 1830s to the doomed marriage of English-born Fanny Kemble, then America's most famous actress and soon to become known as one of its most passionate abolitionists, and her husband Pierce Butler, slaveholder on his Georgia plantation and grandson of a signer of the Constitution. Strong-willed Fanny's discovery that stubborn Pierce took her promise to "obey" as absolute produced one of the nineteenth century's epic and best-documented battles of the sexes. Fanny, especially in her later years, was a regular visitor at "Belfield"; the park at Ogontz and Olney is now named for her.

William Logan Fisher brought the Industrial Revolution to Germantown, and his woolen mills--along streams still flowing beneath present Ogontz and Belfield Avenues--once produced nine-tenths of America's hosiery; his property "Wakefield" stood, until its 1985 destruction by fire, on property south of Ogontz and Olney. Fisher's wife has her maiden name preserved in the Lindley Avenue that now forms La Salle's southern border.

Staunch Quaker William Logan Fisher was not pleased when his daughter Sarah in 1826 accepted the proposal of Germantown-born William Wister. Wister may have been somewhat more palatable than his Lutheran forebears, but he was still the son of a Quaker convert and thus a mere "Convinced Friend"--not a true "Birthright Friend." Sarah could not be married at Meeting (they disowned her for good measure), and her father would not hear of any Quaker using his beloved "Wakefield" to marry some "world's person" who did not even belong to Meeting. The groom's uncle finally offered the Wisters' ancestral home, "Grumblethorpe" on Germantown Avenue, and there--in the parlor whose floor was allegedly stained since the Battle of Germantown with the blood of the dying British General Agnew--Sarah Logan Fisher defiantly married William Wister before a Justice of the Peace.

Sarah's father refused to attend her wedding. He did, however, present her with part (the house and twelve acres) of the "Belfield" property that he had earlier in the year purchased from Charles Willson Peale; the rest of the land went to another of Fisher's daughters. The division of Peale's estate into what went to Sarah (land now west of Twentieth Street and bought by La Salle from Wister descendants in 1984) and what is on the east side (bought by us in 1926) splits the campus and bedevils La Salle to this day.

William Wister eventually regained the good graces of his father-in-law and operated for him a calico print mill on present-day Ogontz Avenue just east of La Salle's baseball field. Sarah remained a somewhat unconventional but still black-gowned Quaker, who (despite being readmitted to Meeting) defied her fellow religionists by such scandalous behavior as keeping a piano in the front parlor at "Belfield." Looking from that parlor up the pathway toward what is now Wister Street, she once exclaimed, "Children, I see Friend Eleanor Evans approaching. Put the screen in front of the piano!" That screen was only half as high as the upright piano, but it enabled Sarah and Eleanor to pretend to observe the Quaker proprieties. Sarah and William Wister's terrapin dinners--the hapless turtles raised to succulent maturity in the basement of "Belfield"--were famous throughout Germantown.

Sarah Logan Fisher and William Wister produced a sturdy brood of six boys (William Rotch, John, Langhorne, Jones, Francis, and Rodman), who--among their other achievements--helped to bring the sport of cricket to the United States. Indeed, one writer rhapsodized in 1910 about what is now La Salle's property at "Belfield": "The memories of these days are precious, and it would seem that Providence had preserved this lovely spot intact for the sentimental old cricketers, as the Magna Charta and the Liberty Bell are preserved for the Anglo-Saxon race."

One summer day in 1846, Jones Wister, rummaging through the attic at "Belfield," found cricket balls, bats, and stumps left behind by a visiting English soldier. Jones and his brothers drove the stumps into the ground just about where La Salle's tennis courts now stand. One of the early cricket balls hit in the United States smashed through the window of William Wister's (now our president's) office and whacked Wister's head. The exact words then spoken by William Wister have fortunately not survived, but his sons did move up the hill to where La Salle's first residence halls now stand and where the Belfield Country Club was founded and survived until the 1920s as a venue for ice skating, tennis, golf, and cricket.

The playing fields of "Belfield" soon gave way to other fields for the Wister boys: perhaps few Quaker families in the nation had six sons in uniform during the Civil War. Their mother, Sarah Logan Fisher Wister, continued to irritate her Quaker friends and relations by raising funds for the soldiers. Captain Francis Wister fought at Gettysburg, and Langhorne Wister there commanded the 150th Pennsylvania Infantry; that regiment fought at the center of the Union lines facing Pickett's charge. In March 1891, before Brigadier General Langhorne Wister's flag-draped coffin in the "Belfield" parlor, his niece remembered that the assemblage sat in utter silence for over an hour at this incongruous Quaker service for a war hero.



General Langhorne Wister

The doctor who attended Langhorne Wister in his final illness was his cousin Dr. Owen Jones Wister, who had married actress Fanny Kemble's daughter Sarah. Dr. Owen and Sarah Butler Wister lived at "Butler Place," adjoining "Belfield" to the northeast. A writer herself, Sarah in 1872 was squired around Paris by American novelist Henry James; James greatly admired Fanny Kemble ("magnificent," he wrote, "and draped . . . in lavender satin lavishly *décolleté*") and found her daughter equally captivating. But James's mother, less sure about this married woman--let alone Fanny's lavish *décolleté*--warned her son that Sarah was probably not "very dangerous . . . but beware!" No doubt James's mother was pleased when he wrote back that he "vaguely mistrusted" the "almost beautiful" Sarah. Henry James portrayed Sarah in his novel *Roderick Hudson* and in

several short stories. The novelist and such other luminaries as English poet Matthew Arnold and American novelist William Dean Howells visited Butler Place; they may well have wandered over spots where their works are now studied at La Salle.

In April 1870, Sarah Butler Wister ordered her only child, then nine, to hike across the fields to "Belfield" to visit his newly-born cousin. The Clarkson Avenue house that boy came to is now used by La Salle as its Fine Arts Studio (it was built in 1868 by William Rotch Wister, "the father of American cricket" and lawyer for the Stephen Girard Estate). This meeting of the nine-year old boy and the infant girl was memorable, and not only because the two married; he (Owen Wister, named for his father) wrote a novel estimated a half century after its publication to have been read by more living Americans than any other work of fiction; she (Mary Channing Wister) became a civic and educational leader about whom the Philadelphia *Public Ledger* reported "There is no woman in the city more widely known and respected throughout the country in every walk of life than Mrs. Wister."

The novelist Owen Wister left Butler Place as a child to be educated in Switzerland and in England. At Harvard, Owen first saw Theodore Roosevelt get his nose bloodied in a boxing match and then acquired a lifelong friend. But Wister, the archetypal Philadelphia gentleman from a talented and distinguished family, had nervous difficulties when faced with the choice of a career. His doctor prescribed a trip West and in the process changed American cultural history.

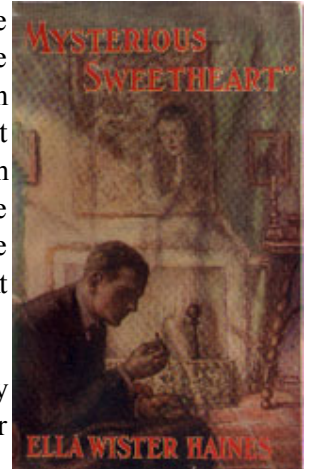
In Wyoming, Owen Wister found a landscape and the "cowboys" that he blended with saloons and shootouts (and a maudlin love story involving the perky schoolmarm) to set the pattern for subsequent "Westerns." His *The Virginian* (1902) has sold nearly two million copies and was a hit television series of the 1960s. Four movie versions have been made, and one featured Gary Cooper in his first "talkie." And when Cooper spoke, he poked his pistol into the insulting villain's stomach and delivered Wister's immortal line that summed up the bully politics of the early twentieth century: "When you call me that, *smile!*"

The woman Owen Wister first met in La Salle's Fine Arts Studio and later married made her reputation by harnessing women's energies to political, social, and educational reform. President of Philadelphia's Equal Franchise Society, Mary Channing Wister fought for votes for women. As founder of the nation's first women's civic club, she set the model for a national reform movement. At the age of twenty-seven, she served on the Philadelphia School Board and became (as the Governor of Pennsylvania later said) "a great leader of educational thought and accomplishment." A California newspaper called her death in childbirth in 1913 "a national bereavement." Theodore Roosevelt, whom the Wisters visited in the White House, sent a

handwritten note of condolence to Owen Wister: "Be brave . . . face the darkness fearlessly . . . you must bear yourself well in the Great Adventure."

La Salle's Fine Arts Studio was also the birthplace of Mary's sister, Frances Anne (named after Fanny Kemble). Frances Anne was one of the founders of the Philadelphia Orchestra, served on its women's committee for half a century, and wrote its first history. Shyness was not Frances Anne's problem, and she once ruled the great (and imperious) conductor Leopold Stokowski "out of order" for suggesting that the Orchestra move from the Academy of Music to a new hall. Her Gimbel Award as the Outstanding Woman of Philadelphia honored her work with the orchestra, as well as her founding of the Society for the Preservation of Landmarks (to which Philadelphia owes the survival of part of its architectural heritage).

Two other children in this remarkable family of Wisters were born after 1876, when the William Rotch Wisters moved across Clarkson Avenue to a newly-built house named "Wister." (It was at "Wister," within a Frisbee's toss of where they met, that Owen Wister and Mary Channing Wister married on April 21, 1898. That house, demolished in 1956, stood opposite what is now "Building Blocks," La Salle's childcare center.) The William Rotch Wisters' next daughter, Ella Wister Haines, wrote detective thrillers and directed public relations for Philadelphia Electric. The one son, John Casper Wister, became one of America's most prominent horticulturists.



Wister Hall, Wister Woods, Wister Street: Wister is inextricably woven into La Salle's consciousness. On October 1, 1994, Wister

family descendants and friends gathered at La Salle University to celebrate the 250th birthday of their ancestral Philadelphia home, "Grumblethorpe." Once again, then, merged the history of this family and the university built where so many remarkable Wisters lived.