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Home Where "The Mansion" Was

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Recommended Citation

Butler, James A., "Home Where "The Mansion" Was" (1994). *Local History Essays*. 3.
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Home Where "The Mansion" Was

By James A. Butler

(Reprinted from *La Salle: A Quarterly La Salle University Magazine*, Spring 1994)

The Wister Family owned four homes on the Belfield estate. Two buildings survive: "Belfield"--or "Peale House"--itself, and the "Mary and Frances Wister Fine Arts Studio" (built by the William Rotch Wisters in 1868). The William Rotch Wisters' stunning second house, "Wister," was built in 1876 on the side of Clarkson Avenue opposite from the Arts Studio; "Wister" was donated to Fairmount Park in 1949 and demolished in 1956. La Salle used the fourth building, a spooky and gabled edifice in the high Victorian style, to house about ten seniors per year from the early 1960s to 1968. Some awed La Salle student (or some publicity conscious administrator) called it "The Mansion," and the name stuck.



"The Mansion" was built in the waning years of the nineteenth century for James Starr and Sarah Logan Wister Starr (this Sarah was the granddaughter of the first Sarah Wister to come to "Belfield" in 1826). The house faced now-gone Cottage Lane, which ran from Germantown Hospital to Twentieth and Olney, dividing properties where La Salle has now built Hayman Hall and the St. Miguel Town Houses. Another one of those prominent Wister women, Dr. Sarah Logan Wister Starr served as President of the Women's Medical College (now Medical College of Pennsylvania); she and Margaret Lennon of our Registrar's Office were sometimes the only women to march in La Salle's graduation processions. The College strained Dr. Starr's neighborly impulses when it added lights to McCarthy Stadium for night football during the 1930s.

La Salle about 1961 leased "The Mansion" from Dr. Sarah Starr's daughter, Sarah Logan Starr Blain, then living at Belfield. Don McAvoy, '64, remembers life at the Mansion, isolated from the rest of La Salle and surrounded by Belfield's farm animals (chickens, roosters, ducks, and the one cow). Brother Gavin Paul, Vice-President for Student Affairs, lived in an apartment in "The Mansion," but the residents still enjoyed extraordinary freedom compared to the usual 1960s dorm regulations.

But "The Mansion" came more and more to resemble "The Hovel." After La Salle purchased the property, it and next-door twin house "Shaw Manor" fell in 1968 to one of the most pressing of university needs: parking. Those few students who lived in "The Mansion" belong to one of the most exclusive of La Salle's clubs.