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

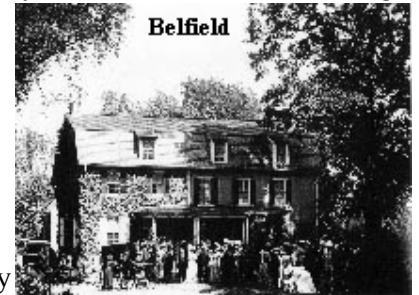
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Three Centuries on the South Campus

By James A. Butler

(Reprinted from *La Salle: A Quarterly La Salle University Magazine*, Fall 1998)

Pity our south campus! That tract of sixteen acres--acquired by La Salle in 1989 and extending downhill from McCarthy Stadium--must surely be the historical poor relation of the main campus "Belfield" property. After all, "Belfield" is a National Historic Landmark as the farm of colonial painter Charles Willson Peale. His mansion itself (partly dating from 1708) may be the second oldest college building in use in the country.



But weep not for the south campus, because its history may be even more significant and is certainly more varied. For example, an early owner possessed the finest library in the colonies; beside our land's streams camped British General Howe's redcoats; here American proprietary capitalism found its beginnings.

The story of the south campus begins, as any settlement of a new country must, with the land itself. Early in the eighteenth century, the horseback rider exploring his 500-acre "plantation" acutely felt what we in our cars scarcely notice: La Salle's property, approached from the south, rises as a formidable hill. And the rider observed, as we no longer can, two pristine and swift-moving creeks--one following the line of present-day Belfield Avenue and the other that of Ogontz Avenue.



That man on horseback is James Logan, described by one historian as "the most remarkable man residing in the American colonies in the first half of the eighteenth century." In 1699, the twenty-five-year-old Logan came to America with William Penn on the ship *Canterbury* to serve as Penn's private secretary and confidential agent. After Penn returned to England in 1701, Logan represented the Penn family for the next half century, becoming the most influential political figure in the colony. William Penn's land grant to his trusted aide included our south campus, and eight generations of Logans and their descendants lived here.



James Logan designed and built from 1723-1730 his magnificent house "Stenton," still standing just south of our borders and open to the public. There, he installed his 2,500-book library, then the finest collection in the New World. At Logan's death, these books were transferred to Benjamin Franklin's Philadelphia Library Company, where they form one of the city's principal cultural treasures.

Over the next century Washington, Franklin, Lafayette, Jefferson, Monroe, Madison came to "Stenton"--linking Logan's land (now, in part, our land) to the foremost names in America's early history.

To "Stenton," too, came the Native Americans with whom Penn had signed his famous treaty, and the tribal leaders of the Five Nations camped on this land. Chief Wingohocking asked his friend James Logan to exchange names as a mark of mutual respect, and there are still Native Americans named Logan. But James Logan explained he could not take the Wingohocking name for business reasons. Instead, he told the Chief that the beautiful stream winding through his property would forever bear his name. Wingohocking Creek, so important for the rest of the story of La Salle's south campus, now flows beneath Belfield Avenue, buried since the early twentieth century in a city sewer.

Chief Shenandoah of the Oneida Tribe, in Philadelphia to commemorate William Penn's celebrated Treaty, spent the night at "Belfield" in 1922. "Peace be on this house," Chief Shenandoah proclaimed as he blessed where La Salle's president now administers the university. "The hospitality of 'Stenton' and the Logans is still green in the memory of my people. Indians do not forget."

The creek named after Chief Wingohocking formed an important geographical feature during the Battle of Germantown, one of the American Revolution's most important actions. After the British captured Philadelphia late in September 1777, General Howe set up his headquarters at "Stenton," arraying his main force in Germantown along present School House Lane and Church Lane. And--no fool he!--Howe took care to protect himself well. His First Battalion of Guards camped between the east and west branches of the Wingohocking; that is, about where our St. John Neumann Residence Hall stands today.

Those 440 Guards were as surprised as General Howe when George Washington's troops charged through the fog at dawn, slashing through the British center on Germantown Avenue. But American Generals Nathanael Greene, William Smallwood, and David Forman arrived too late to attack simultaneously the British right flank (nearer La Salle). A contemporary British map shows the Americans retreating across the far western reaches of our campus.

Still, the Continentals had come very close to victory on October 4, 1777. A defeat of the British at Germantown, coupled with the stunning American victory at Saratoga the same month, might well have shortened the war considerably.

In Germantown, in the early years of the new nation, textile mills gradually replaced farms such as the one owned by Charles Willson Peale at "Belfield." James Logan's great-grandson, industrialist William Logan Fisher (1781-1861), then owned our south campus. Here a person could find health and serenity, six miles distant from pestilential Philadelphia ridden with dirt, noise, crime, and yellow fever. Fisher's mansion "Wakefield" stood until 1985 at the northeast corner of Ogontz and Lindley Avenues. (Lindley Avenue, our southern entrance, takes its name from Fisher's second wife, Sarah Lindley.)



Fisher bought mills along both branches of the Wingoocking, constructing a series of dams and mill races, traces of which survive two hundred feet west of our Communication Center. One of those dams flooded Charles Willson Peale's lower meadow, leading to a dispute between the artist and Fisher. Such disputes became moot, however, when Fisher also bought "Belfield" and its 104 acres in 1826, loaning the property to his daughter Sarah and her new husband William Wister. Fisher thus owned nearly all of what is now La Salle's campus. He went on to become such a prominent iron merchant that a jealous relative could grouse about Fisher's probable net worth of over half a million.

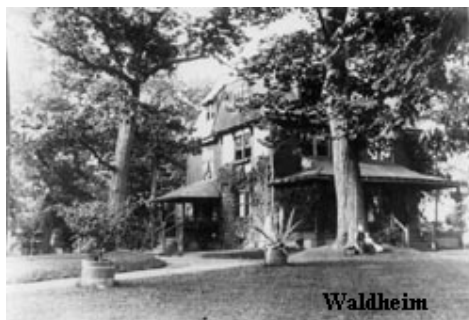
But it was Fisher's son, Thomas Rodman Fisher (1802-1861), who has national importance in the history of American capitalism. Thomas Fisher's home, built in 1829 and named by him "Little Wakefield," still proudly anchors our south campus property: it is now St. Mutien Christian Brothers' Residence.

About 1826 Thomas Fisher got the idea of gathering under one roof a number of individual knitters and their knitting frames. Fisher supplied the raw materials and sold the finished product. Almost by chance, he thus created the first knitting factory in America, the "Wakefield Mills," which over the next thirty years produced fully nine-tenths of America's hosiery and fancy knit goods. Located just off campus in what is now Wister Woods Park at the northeast corner of Belfield and Lindley, the mill was for decades awarded nearly all government hosiery contracts.

From his home at "Little Wakefield/St. Mutien," Fisher ran this immense enterprise, becoming the consummate capitalist in his ownership of raw materials, mill, tenant houses, and company store. Of him, industrial historian Martha C. Helpern writes, "Thomas R. Fisher has been credited with being first in the United States to conduct and successfully manage an organized mill in which a number of employees were engaged with steady work at good rates of pay."

Fisher also hired a salaried manager for the "Wakefield Mills," thus becoming one of the first to create the standard American model of proprietary capitalism.

Clearly, life at "Wakefield" and "Little Wakefield" was good (and profitable) throughout much of the nineteenth century. The south campus area itself, if one can believe its illustrators, looked more like a bucolic English landscape than a nasty American textile mill. Our land echoed with the halloos of steeplechasers of both sexes, clad in scarlet hunting array and riding to the hounds. "Wakefield," "Little Wakefield," the intervening pastoral meadow divided by its bubbling stream (now Ogontz Avenue), and the two rustic bridges connecting the properties became--according to the Germantown *Beehive*--"a beauty spot known over America and Europe for its nurseries of rare and American plants."



As the mansion "Wakefield" had hived off "Little Wakefield," so "Little Wakefield" produced "Waldheim" on the south campus. Built in 1881 for Thomas Fisher's grand-daughter Letitia and her new husband William Redwood Wright, "Waldheim" was for its four-decade life a large and elegant mansion. Its scale and splendor suited the social class of its inhabitants. William Redwood Wright, for example, was a captain in the army, a shipping magnate, a banker, and eventually City and County Treasurer of Philadelphia.

Every Friday from May 1917 until late in 1918, Letitia Wright walked fifty yards down the hill from "Waldheim" to "Little Wakefield/St. Mutien" to support the World War I effort by teaching bee culture. She conducted such apian activities for the National League for Woman's Service, a nationwide patriotic and service organization founded in 1917 to mobilize women for what the times allowed them to do.

The Germantown branch of the National League for Woman's Service, headed by Sarah Logan Wister Starr (a Fisher descendant then living at "Belfield"), used "Little Wakefield" as a commuting and residential demonstration school. Cohorts of twelve high school or college girls took up residence at "Little Wakefield" for a fortnight, paying nothing for room and board as they each day learned to serve their country by alleviating its very real food shortages: Monday, canning and preserving; Tuesdays, home economics; Wednesdays, "good, old-fashioned, real home-cooking"; Thursdays, gardening; Fridays, bee-keeping ("on account of the large demands for honey made constantly by France and England").

"If you cannot be a fighting soldier, be a farming soldieress," exhorted the National League for Woman's Service, and "farming soldieresses" swarmed over the south campus area. Yellow-smocked women tilled the land, canned and preserved its produce, tended beehives in their wide straw hats and nets. Late in 1918 this Germantown Branch shifted its efforts to care for some of the thousands of Philadelphians victimized by the great influenza epidemic. The first teaching to take place in a building now owned by La Salle thus educated students for community service.

After World War I, Letitia Wright and her children (and presumably her bees) moved to suburban Ambler, Montgomery County, thus ending the line of eight generations of Logans and descendants on the south campus.

Throughout the property, decline now set in. "Waldheim" and "Little Wakefield/St. Mutien" stood empty and desolate. In tones reminiscent of the most harrowing of Charles Dickens' accounts of Victorian hard times, a newspaper described the derelict Wakefield Mills as housing thirty families, all drawing water from a single hydrant. Sixteen people, some dying of consumption, shared a windowless room with chickens. The city buried both branches of the Wingohocking Creek in sewers. Ash landfill obliterated the picturesque ravines, leading to the subsidence that bedevils the Logan area to this day.

In 1928--when College Hall was under construction on the newly acquired main campus--a developer bought the south campus property from James Logan's descendants for \$350,000. He laid out streets, planned to blanket the hillside with 500 houses, demolished "Waldheim," and was about to level "Little Wakefield/St. Mutien" just as the stock market crashed. The Depression left the property abandoned. Right after World War II, the Sisters of St. Basil the Great purchased the land for a school, and La Salle bought the property from the nuns in 1989.

Decades of La Salle alumni share the memory: about-to-be graduates, robes flying, streaming out of the Baccalaureate Mass onto Logan Circle. That Logan Circle, so named to honor William Penn's secretary James Logan, does now indeed bring La Salle graduates full circle--and back three centuries to our south campus' distinguished owner and his talented descendants.

I gratefully acknowledge the research of Justin Cupples, Michelle Dillin, David Stanoch, and Lydia Stieber, which contributed to this article. --JAB