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## John Wister (1829-1900), Active Iron Industrialist

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

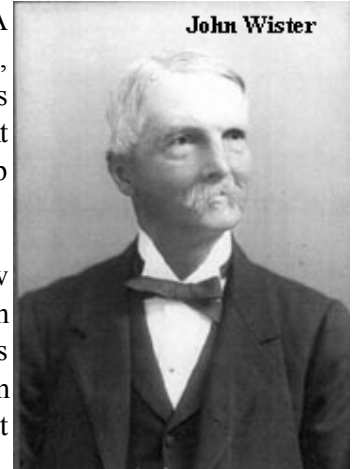
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## John Wister, Active Iron Industrialist

By: Raymond DiLissio

Money and power: a combination many would like to have. A man associated with what is now La Salle would, over his lifetime, obtain both. His name was John Wister, a great iron works owner. His positions were many, and his life was full of constant work. Nevertheless, John never complained and ended up benefiting from work in all his activities.

John Wister was born on July 15, 1829 at Belfield (now sometimes called the Peale House), located here on campus. John was born to William Wister and Sarah Logan Wister; Sarah's father, William Logan Fisher, originally bought the house from colonial painter Charles Wilson Peale. John was the second oldest of six boys in the family.



As a child, John grew up here in Germantown. He was very well educated because he was taught privately at a school conducted by Bronson Alcott, father of Louisa Mae Alcott of Little Women fame. Later, John attended Germantown Academy, which happened to be the leading boys' school of the time.

John Wister did not attend the academy for long, but neither did many of the boys during that time period. He left school at age fourteen that so that he could become an apprentice at the Iron Works of Fisher & Morgan in Duncannon, Perry County, PA. The distant location of the firm forced John to leave home so that he could make a living.

The firm was composed of William Logan Fisher and Charles Morgan. William Logan Fisher was the father of John's mother, and Charles Morgan was a popular businessman from New Bedford. The firm later dissolved when both owners aged and retired. Later, The firm operated under the name of the Duncannon Iron Company.

The style of the Duncannon Iron Company was different from that of the Fisher & Morgan firm. The Duncannon Iron Company possessed a much more effective blast furnace than that of Fisher & Morgan. Because of this superiority in equipment, it was one of the pioneer iron works in the state of Pennsylvania. The Iron Company was also comprised of a nail factory and rolling mills.

Wister became very active in the iron business. He spent his entire adult life in this company, and for more than half a century he filled every position including president, which he held from 1873 until his death.

Not only was John working very hard at the Iron Company in Perry County, but he also met his future wife there. Her name was Sarah Tyler Boas, daughter of Daniel Dick Boas, a well-known businessman of the area. They were married in Harrisburg, PA, on October 19, 1864. Sarah's mother approved of the wedding only because she knew John Wister was making enough money to support her daughter and possible future family.

The two of them had a happy marriage. Sarah gave birth to four children. They were all girls, the oldest, Jane Boas, dying at the age of three. The other three girls, in order from oldest to youngest, were Elizabeth, Sarah Logan, and Margaret. Elizabeth married Mr. Charles Stewart Wurts; Sarah Logan married James Starr; and Margaret went on to marry Edward B. Meigs. Both Wurts and Starr were wealthy businessmen and Meigs was a scientist.

If it seems that John Wister had done a lot of things, then it should come as no surprise that he also partook in the Civil War. He was deputized by the Governor of the State to represent the federal government in guarding the gaps in the mountains to the north of Gettysburg and Harrisburg. John also managed to raise necessary personnel to protect the numerous ironworks. These ironworks were important to the Union because they supplied the army with vital ammunition. During the critical period of Gettysburg, a personal pass bearing Wister's signature was needed to travel from one section of that portion of the state to another.

John Wister would not just stop there; he managed to hold many more positions. He was the founder and early president of the Duncannon National Bank. He also held the position of vice-president for the Perry County Railroad. On July 1, 1872, an agreement between John and two of his brothers, William Rotch and Jones, formed a partnership named J&J Wister, making John a senior member of the firm. This new company was another steel mill, located in Harrisburg, that operated a blast furnace.

There were many other positions that John would hold over his lifetime. He was the organizer and first president of the Trout Run Water Company. John also was the director of the Derry Coal & Coke Company and the Wilmore-Sonman Coal Company. To top it all off, John was also the owner of extensive holdings in coal companies and undeveloped mines.

With being involved in so many companies and holding so many positions, one would wonder whether John had any free time to spend on his own and with his family. John did find the time for himself and his family and was actually considered a good father. Extremely fond of outdoor life, John hunted and fished regularly. He found time to do things with his family by taking his children fishing every Sunday. John, an expert ice skater, also took them skating during the winter.

John Wister also took part in some other areas around his city. John became a power in the local Republican Party, although he never held office. His religious affiliation was with the Society of Friends also known as the Quakers. John happened to be a member on the team that played the first organized cricket match in this country, and he belonged to the Germantown Cricket Club.

John's extensive activities did not even finish there. He also belonged to the Harrisburg and Annadale gun clubs and was also a member of the Milton-on-the-James, a hunting club in Virginia. John did much pioneer work in stocking the streams of Pennsylvania from the state fisheries. 1

Eventually the mills started becoming extremely difficult to run. In many letters written by Sarah Logan Fisher Wister, his mother, to him, Sarah talked about how she could not wait for the Iron Company to be sold. These letters were written around the end of 1881. In 1890, John's life in Perry County would end with his move back to Belfield to care for his sick mother.

In 1890, John was sixty-one years old and had spent only fourteen years here when he was young. When Sarah Logan Fisher Wister died in 1891, the Belfield estate was given to John. William Rotch, the oldest child, was not given the house probably because he already owned many homes, including Wister which was adjacent to the Belfield estate.

John lived at Belfield until his death in 1900 at the age of seventy. On his deathbed John, the old cricketer, managed to say, "The game is up, old death has bowled me out." John died having lived here at Belfield for only twenty-four of his seventy years.

Although John's life ended in the 1900, a great controversy in his family would take place only twenty-two years later. It happened when Sarah Tyler Boas, his wife, died at the age of eighty. An article in the Germantown Crier appeared in March of 1922 that stated Sarah had died and there was a question of what was going to happen to the Belfield estate. The controversy was that the estate was given to Sarah Logan instead of Elizabeth. Elizabeth, the oldest child, felt she should have gained the house. The animosity between Sarah and Elizabeth led to a thirty-year period in which neither Margaret nor Sarah talked to their sister Elizabeth.

John Wister not only was involved with many organizations but also held offices in most of them. His career in the Iron Industry made him a very wealthy man. This very wealthy and powerful Wister family (with John among the most wealthy and powerful) owned much of the land that is now La Salle.

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