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Sarah Logan Fisher Wister

By: Monica Shields

Sarah Logan Fisher Wister has been referred to as one of the "noted women of Germantown." However, relatively little information, in the traditional sense, is available concerning those aspects of her life that render her so noteworthy. By the traditional sense it is meant that Sarah Logan Fisher Wister fails to appear in any encyclopedia or historical reference guide, and that there is no specific index in any card catalog that is dedicated to literary works concerning solely her. Because of these facts, research involving Sarah Logan Fisher Wister becomes somewhat difficult. However, when one digs deep enough, one is able to reveal information about this noted woman, primarily through secondary sources, such as private journals and personal reminiscences. Thus, through these sources, and through the delving into of these sources necessary to uncover who exactly Sarah Logan Fisher Wister really was, one can assemble a fairly well rounded image of the woman that is Sarah Logan Fisher Wister.

Sarah Logan Fisher Wister was born May 18, 1806 in New Bedford, Massachusetts. Her parents were William Logan Fisher and his first wife, Mary Rodman. Little, if anything, is known about her childhood because the authors of the greatest quantity of information known about her were her son and her granddaughter. One account of her life does mention that, in her girlhood, "Wakefield was so remote that she was obliged to spend the school week in Germantown, returning home for Sundays only." Other than this minute detail, research fails to uncover any information prior to her marriage to William Wister.

In 1826, Sarah Logan Fisher Wister accepted the marriage proposal of William Wister, son of John Wister and Elizabeth Harvey, and they were married on September 26, 1826. This was not, however, the traditional marriage. Gossip at the time focused on the fact that it was "unusual for a young lady not to be married in either her father's house or in a Quaker Friends' Meeting House. It was doubly remarkable, because her father was such an important member of Meeting as William Logan Fisher of Wakefield." However, it was precisely this fact that prevented the marriage from taking place at Wakefield or in Meeting. "Staunch Quaker William Logan Fisher was not pleased when his daughter Sarah in 1826 accepted the proposal of Germantown born William Wister." He simply would not hear of "any Quaker using his beloved Wakefield to marry some 'worlds person' who did not even belong to Meeting." William Wister was not a Quaker by birth, so the marriage was looked down upon by both the family and Quakers in general.

Sarah Logan Fisher Wister was disowned by both her father and the Quakers. It is for this reason that her marriage could not take place in the traditional manner. She was married at Grumblethorpe, which was lent by William Wister's uncle Charles for the affair. As if the marriage itself (conducted by a Justice of the Peace) was not defiant enough, the couple took their vows in the parlor "whose floor was allegedly stained since the Battle of Germantown with the blood of the dying British General Agnew." Though her father refused to attend the wedding of his daughter, he gave as a wedding gift part of the property he had purchased from Charles Wilson Peale. She received the Belfield house and 12 acres of land which is now the land "west of Twentieth street and bought by LaSalle from Wister descendants in 1984." She would live here for the remainder of her life and it is within this house that many fond memories of her associated.

Sarah Logan Fisher Wister was later reconciled with her father, for Belfield was "just across the fields from her parents and sisters, and [it is certain] that her forbidden marriage was soon forgiven and all was well." She was also readmitted to Meeting, though an exact date is not known. She remained a "somewhat unconventional but still black gowned Quaker who defied her fellow religionists by...scandalous behavior...." This behavior included the keeping of a piano in the parlor at Belfield, which "was an additional black spot on her character from the Quaker point of view." On one occasion, she called for the children to cover the piano with a screen when she noticed a member of Meeting approaching the house. "The screen, a non-descript Victorian affair was only half as high as the upright piano and in no way obscured it. Grandmother, however, was satisfied with the gesture."

Another example of Sarah Logan Fisher Wister's defiant nature concerned her six sons. During her marriage to William Wister, she bore eight children, seven boys and one girl. Of these, six boys survived past infancy, namely William Rotch (father of Ella Wister Haines author of Reminiscences of a Victorian Childhood), John, Langhorne, Jones (author of Reminiscences), Francis, and Rodman. Unusual is the fact that "not only did she, born a member of the Society of Friends, consent to her sons becoming soldiers, but she herself assumed a vital part in the work of the Sanitary Fair...which raised funds for the soldiers." She did, however, maintain some Quaker laws, as she did not allow dancing at the many lavish parties she was known to throw. These stories provide a brief look into the personality of Sarah Logan Fisher Wister, but there remains much to be told.

Jones Wister's Reminiscences provides some insight into the kind of person Sarah Logan Fisher Wister was. He describes her primarily in terms of her religious beliefs, her treasured garden, and her love of sledding. He writes, "The guiding star of my life has been my mother. To her I am indebted for good advice and an example of stolid uprightness." He describes her as having taught him how to pray and ask for protection, though as he lay in the trundle bed beside her and William, he "considered and appeal to any other protection superfluous but always asked it because [his] mother wished it." He further describes her as being saintly and possessing a great reverence for sacred things, whose impression lasted with Jones throughout his life.

The gardens at Belfield are another aspect in the life of Sarah Logan Fisher Wister focused on by her son Jones Wister. The flowers that bloom in the spring served as a source of "intense pleasure to [his] dear mother, whose heart was so large that it extended to the entire juvenile population of lower Germantown." According to her son, Sarah Logan Fisher Wister's "garden was noted and her generosity unstinted [and the] flocks of well dressed young people who coveted her Sunday flowers would time their coming...so as not to interfere with her walk to Meeting."

One final aspect of Sarah Logan Fisher Wister's character described by her son is her love of sledding. "My dear mother was fond of sledding and would trust herself to no one but [Jones] to steer her and [he] took her down Duy's snow covered hills [now Wister street] many times." It is written that she loved the thrill of wining a race as much as any of the children. Also, it is noted that the mother and son team had been sledding after she had reached the age of eighty!

Ella Wister Haines' Reminiscences of a Victorian Childhood provides even more insight into the character of Sarah Logan Fisher Wister. Ella, her granddaughter, describes her primarily in terms of the daily dinners she held that were attended by many of the grandchildren, and their shopping trip. She noted that, "it seems strange that [her] earliest recollections should be centered around [her] grandmother Wister, and the home at Belfield, but the fact remains that Gram'ma, as we called her, completely dominated the lives of her eleven grandchildren." To her grandchildren, she was a "kind but firm autocrat" that none would ever dream of disobeying, for she was the Grande Dame of the family. Her dinners were attended daily by as many grandchildren as Sarah

Logan Fisher Wister could assemble. The dinners are described as being long protracted affairs, with tremendous amounts of excellent food which Gram'ma took great pride in, especially ham, sausage, and scrapple, whose smoking she personally superintended. Ella also recalls that

Dinner was not all that Gram'ma required. She required [them] to learn other things, to read aloud, to sew, and by the age of 12, to bake a loaf of bread which must pass her critical inspection. Immediately after dinner each week day having pulled her upstairs in the elevator [a wooden contraption suspended by ropes leading from one floor to the next that the children fought to control], we sat on stools at her feet reading aloud in turn...sewing came next.

Also recalled in the Reminiscences of Ella Wister Haines are the shopping and driving expeditions "which occurred every morning including Sunday at 11:00 all during summer and school holidays." She described the dress of her grandmother as consisting of black dresses with a white cap, hair parted in the middle, and recalls, "you could never mistake her for anything but a Quaker lady." Outings included shopping, where it was Sarah Logan Fisher Wister's motto to be "shown everything in the shop before selecting as she declared it was the shop keepers business to keep the patrons fully informed as to his offerings," trips to the zoo and to the circus, to children's plays and to the Broad street theater. Much of the shopping was for dry goods such as cotton and linen from which she made numerous dresses that she gave to the Schofield School where she frequently helped with lessons, to Germantown Hospital where she was an active member of the Women's committee, and to the Wakefield Infant School where she also helped with lessons. Associated with this interest in education is the fact that she was the "President of the Germantown Infant School on Haines Street" founded in 1828.

Sarah Logan Fisher Wister lived until the age of 85, having died on December 26, 1891. She died at Belfield where she was most fondly remembered. At the service held at Belfield, her sons "were afraid there would be no preaching or prayers for their mother because she had been thrown out of Meeting." The problem was solved by her son Jones. He went to Friend Reverend Louis F. Benson with the proposition that if no one had spoken a word by 2:55 (the service having begun at 2:00 and lasting for one hour) he would stand and deliver a prayer. He agreed, but it was unnecessary. At exactly 2:55, Friend Samuel Morris arose and did it for him. Her newspaper obituary, whose source is unknown, describes many of the same qualities as did her descendants in their writings. Emphasized were her kindness, innate happiness, warmth, open handedness, generosity, and religious dedication.

To conclude, the purpose of this paper has been to shed light on not only the factual information concerning Sarah Logan Fisher Wister, but also insight into her personality as it is viewed by her descendants. Although memoirs do not normally form the basis upon which research papers are written, they have proven useful. Perhaps they are a better source of information because they reflect the views of those who really knew the subject. Perhaps they are a lesser source because they include the personal biases not found in reference sources. Perhaps deciding their relevance is unnecessary because perhaps there is no other choice.

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