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## Sarah Logan Wister Starr (1873-1956)

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

## Sarah Logan Wister Starr

By: Jeff Thompson

It is often said that history makes the man, observing the opportunistic realm of man rather than the dynamic individual. In some cases, however, dynamic individuals can be lost in history, like scientific truths that are left undiscovered and misunderstood. Sarah Logan Wister Starr lived such a truth. Local historians have overlooked her achievements and ambition because they had no impact on textual history, but in Philadelphia history, she remains the epitome of perseverance and deep rooted involvement.

Named after her grandmother, Sarah Logan Fisher, Sarah Logan Wister was born in Pierre County, Duncannon, near Philadelphia in 1873. Her Father John Wister descended from the wealthy Wisters of Philadelphia, while her mother descended from James Logan, Secretary to William Penn during the early colonial period. It was from the Logan side of the family tree that iron making seemed to take most importance. Starr writes in her "History of Stenton" that from James Logan to William Logan to William Logan Fisher and finally to John Wister, daughter of Sarah Logan Fisher, "the love of iron-making survived. John Wister was in charge of the family furnace at Duncannon for over 50 years.



Photograph of silhouette of Sarah Starr

Sarah had three sisters. The first, Jane Boas, died in 1869 at age three before any of the others were born. Elizabeth was the next oldest. She is described by her niece Mary Meigs as a model for how not to live, according to her mother, Margaret, born after Sarah. In "The Box Closet," Mary Meigs also describes Sarah as having "biting sarcasm," yet "dignified and noble." She had "dark, heavy-lidded eyes and an ironic mouth, a look of full intelligence and humor"(Meigs 34). She was a figure admired by her sister Margaret, and was seen as the opposite of Elizabeth who was more wild and unpredictable. Sarah even as a young woman was dignified and proper, as Mary Meigs writes, Sarah "held high the banner of family morality."

In 1901, at age 28, Sarah married James Starr, a mining official also descended from James Logan. James graduated from the University of Pennsylvania in 1891 and later earned a degree of Mining Engineering from Towne Scientific School in 1892. James was most well known for his collection of Chinese stamps. He was a specialist in Chinese Treaty Ports, member of the Collector's Club, American Philatelic Society, President of the China Stamp Society, Fellow of the Royal Philatelic Society in London, Shanghai Philatelic Society, and the Chinese Philatelic Society in Shanghai. Starr was also a member of the Board of Libraries, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia Club, Council of the Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States, the Pennsylvania Historical Society, Swedish Colonial Society, Germantown Cricket Club, Zoological Society and the Benjamin Tilghman Camp, 61, United Spanish American War Veterans. James was also a former accounting warden of the Calvary Episcopal Church in Germantown, an organizer of Troop A, Squadron Cavalry, PA Reserve Militia as well as a military tactician and marksman. As a miner, he climbed to the position of Secretary and Director of Madeira, Hill & Co., a coal-mining firm in the Atlantic Building in Philadelphia.<sup>8</sup>

Mary Meigs writes:

<a href="#">Welcome</a>
<a href="#">Reports -- People By Century</a>
<a href="#">Family Tree</a>
<a href="#">Three Centuries on South Campus</a>
<a href="#">Home Where "The Mansion" Was</a>
<a href="#">The Remarkable Wisters at Belfield</a>
<a href="#">Charles Willson Peale: "Your Garden Must be a Museum"</a>
<a href="#">Credits</a>
<a href="#">La Salle Home</a>
<a href="#">Connelly Library Special Collections</a>

Papa's death [in 1900] left a quartet of strong-willed women: Mama, Bessie, Sarah and Margaret. Bessie and Sarah had already proved Aunt May's dictum; they selected for husbands, businessmen who were as much alike as Tweedledum and Tweedledee (or so it seemed to my childish eyes). Their names were Stewart and Jim, both had benevolent faces and handlebar moustaches, and, at parties, chewed on their cigars and listened to their wives... 'Jim of course never speaks if he can help it...speaking is against his principles'... 'Jim actually interrupts!' But his little flare of rebellion was quickly extinguished and I remember only his good-natured silences while Aunt Sarah's tongue reeled out like a string with a colourful kite dancing at the end (Meigs 33).

Later, Meigs describes Sarah and James' marriage as "dreary...like a man and wife yoked together like a couple of oxen, plodding along in gloomy silence or to the sound of a monologue, hers or his" (Meigs 193).

In 1922, after the death of her mother, property of the Belfield Estate went to Sarah. Elizabeth, the oldest sister was extremely upset that she was not given possession of Belfield, and her desire led to a feud among the sisters.

The death of Mama in 1922 marked the beginning of a thirty-year family feud, with Sarah and Margaret united against Bessie [Elizabeth]. Mama had left Belfield, the old family house, to Sarah, and \$30, 000 each to Bessie and Margaret, and Bessie, who wanted a share of the house, was determined to sabotage the orderly settling of Mama's will... She behaved so badly that her sisters stopped talking to her. Years later they came together at Jim's funeral, held in the little front parlour at Belfield. They were like three mourning queens, all in black widows' weeds with veils over their faces. Jim's death united them, after a fashion, but could not dissolve the old rancours. (Meigs 35)

Throughout all of this, Sarah Logan Wister Starr maintained a life dedicated to service of her country and humanity. From 1921-1941, Sarah served as President of the Women's Medical College of Pennsylvania. She was the President of the Colonial Dames for many years, as well as President of the Women's Permanent Emergency Association of Germantown, which was founded over 60 years earlier by her grandmother, and revived during World War II. She gained honorary degrees from both Ursinus College in 1933 and the University of Pennsylvania in 1941. She was an Associate Trustee of the Board of Libraries at Penn. She founded the Zoe Valley Library at Chester in Nova Scotia, where her family had summered since 1874. Along with all of these high-ranking positions, Sarah was also a former Chairman of the Germantown Branch of the Civic Club, and belonged to the Acron Club, the Print Club, Sedgely Club, Germantown Historical Society, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, The Philadelphia Assembly, Athenaeum Society, Fountain Society and the Society for the Preservation of Landmarks.

Sarah valued the presence of historical landmarks for their place in American history as well as in her personal history. In 1938, she wrote an article entitled, "History of Stenton" which records the genealogy of those who lived at Stenton, and tells of the importance of the mansion in American History, citing her chief source as her grandmother, and other relatives. Most important, however, would be her "History of Belfield", a brief pamphlet which records the history of the Belfield Estate from the time of Charles Willson Peale, until it came into her possession.



On December 28, 1826, Billy Fisher bought Belfield from Charles Willson Peale for \$11,000. "It was very pretty in its way whilst they lived there, and they [the Peales] were almost too hospitable for their own comfort; for their kindness was abused by unreflecting people for their own pleasure" (Starr 7). A large portion of the estate including the mansion, out-buildings and gardens, was given to Sarah Logan Fisher in the same year as a gift upon her marriage to William Wister, son of John Wister. In 1922, the estate came into Sarah Logan Wister Starr's possession, and some changes took place.

Telephone and electricity were added by means of underground wires, so as not to disturb the beauty of the garden with large poles. Belfield saw the opening of Twentieth Street, which led to a restraining wall nine hundred feet long and in some places fourteen feet high in order to provide security and protection from heavy traffic and passersby. James added a series of water gardens and rock gardens. Sarah herself added a garden of 100 hybrid tea roses. After their return from China in 1933, a section of the garden was dedicated to the Chinese taste. "A plastered stone wall, separated by a tiny hip roof and an entrance to it is made through a large vase-shaped gate, on one side of which appears, in red, the Chinese characters which denote the year, month and day of its erection"(Starr 15). The garden also holds an orange and a lemon tree taken from the orangery of Butler Place when Owen Wister sold it.

In 1926, to celebrate the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the United States, a Sesqui-Centennial Exhibition was held at Belfield by Sarah. Many of the most distinguished names in Philadelphia came to the celebration as "Belfield joined in offering hospitality to them...this was certainly the most cosmopolitan gathering ever assembled here" (Starr 15). On the same day, the Officers of the National Society of the Colonial Dames of America and the presidents of several of the Corporate Societies held a meeting, celebrating the reproduction of Sulgrave Manor, their exhibit at the fair.

Sarah Logan Wister Starr served as the State Vice-Chairman of the World-War-One-era National League for Woman's Services, as well as the chairman of the Germantown Branch. Her efforts gained over 2 million dollars for the relief of Belgian children. She was also chosen to become the chairman of the Women's Committee of the Liberty Loan for the Federal Reserve District. As president of the Women's Medical College of Pennsylvania, she set up a \$300, 000 Wister Fund in honor of her parents.<sup>6</sup> This fund was used for the erection of new buildings on the site purchased in 1953 at Falls of Schuylkill by the College. Along with Frances Anne Wister and her cousin Anne Wister, she helped produce a magazine called "The Sparrow."<sup>6</sup> In June 1917, Mrs. James Starr, chairman of the Germantown women's committee, led the first loan parade for the Liberty Loan campaign, where several hundred women marched from the Woman's Club of Germantown to the grounds of the Germantown Academy.<sup>2</sup> For the first time, women had charge of booths on the streets where loan subscriptions were received. In 1937 she was an emissary of Pennsylvania Tercentenary Commission of Sweden and was later honored there by the King.<sup>7</sup>

Sarah Logan Wister Starr was a woman dedicated to uplifting the situation of humanity. Though she held many titles, her name will appear only as a side-note to an event. No web-search or Encyclopedia will hold her name, yet her obituary could fill an entire newspaper page. She was stern, accomplished and demanding, yet her submission to the human cause goes unquestioned. Her achievements alone can exceed understanding, but those who look out at LaSalle's Campus

can thank Sarah Starr for her preservation of a landmark that still stands today. Her footprints are left in the grounds of Belfield as a model of dedication and dignity. On August 21, 1956, before the leaves on the trees fell back to earth, Sarah Logan Wister Starr's funeral was held at on the grounds of Belfield.

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