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## "Waldheim" and its Inhabitants

**By: Justin Cupples**

Many important and influential contributors to Philadelphia's vast history once resided on the land that is currently the campus of La Salle University. Among those who lived on the land was the Wright family. Prior to my investigation of these people (and their mansion, "Waldheim," which was located on what is now the south campus of La Salle University) little was known about them. Through much piecing together and deliberation, though, I am able to confidently chronicle the lives of Mr. and Mrs. William Redwood Wright and the "Waldheim" household.



I will discuss William Redwood Wright before delving into the life of his wife or the mansion itself, for two reasons. First of all, he was the builder of the "Waldheim" mansion. Hence, from an importance point of view, he takes precedence. The second reason is that he was fifteen years older than his wife was. The fifteen-year gap between his and his wife's births is fifteen years of background history that one would not initially get if one began with Mrs. Wright.

William Redwood Wright was born in Philadelphia on December 16, 1846. He was educated at the Germantown Academy up to the age of fifteen. At that age he left school and went to work for his grandfather's shipping firm, Peter Wright & Sons. Feeling the obligation to serve his country in the Civil War, that same year (1861) he left his grandfather's shipping firm and joined Private Mark J. Biddle's company of infantry. For the remainder of the war Wright fought for the Union Army. Toward the middle of the war, he transferred into Henry D. Landis' battery of infantry (also as a private). In 1864, Wright was promoted to the position of Second Lieutenant in Company L of the Sixth Pennsylvania Calvary. The following year (during the waning of the war) he was promoted twice. The first promotion was to First Lieutenant and Adjutant of the Sixth Pennsylvania Calvary (Company L). Wright's responsibilities as an Adjutant were to aid and assist his commanding officer in the execution of various official duties. Wright's role as Adjutant did not last long, as he was again promoted to Captain of Company B of the Sixth Pennsylvania Calvary. At the ripe age of nineteen, William Redwood Wright had already reached the rank of commanding officer. He maintained this rank through the end of the war up to the point when his grandfather asked him to head up the New York office of Peter Wright & Sons. Unable to resist his grandfather's offer, Wright left the military and moved to New York City in 1870. He worked in the New York office until 1873, when he decided that he wanted to return to the city with which he was enamored—Philadelphia.

On April 18, 1881, William Redwood Wright married Letitia Ellicott Carpenter. The "Waldheim" mansion was build for the newly married couple. Situated on a 22-acre plot of land then owned by Letitia's father, George Washington Carpenter, "Waldheim" stood 2 ½ stories high. It had a wooden porch, a stone body and a brick foundation (which still remains but is in much disrepair). The structure itself faced what is presently Lindley Avenue. A driveway looped around the West Side of the house. In place of the driveway there now is a road, constructed by La Salle University, leading from Lindley Avenue to the main campus.

Only one year after the marriage of William Redwood Wright and Letitia Ellicott Carpenter, they had their first child, Letitia Ellicott Wright Jr. (born March 4, 1882). From that point up until 1892, Mr. and Mrs. Wright successfully had a child every other year. After Letitia Ellicott Wright Jr., came Mary Rodman Wright (May 25, 1884), William Logan Fisher Wright (March 1, 1886), Hannah Price Wright (January 5, 1888), Elizabeth Rodman Wright (July 14, 1890), and finally Redwood Wright (July 4, 1892).

William Redwood Wright continued to work for his grandfather's shipping firm throughout the remainder of the decade. Toward the end of the 1880's (and on into the early 1890's), though, he became very active in the Democratic Party in Philadelphia. In 1888 and again in 1892 he was a Democratic candidate for the position of Presidential Elector (Electoral College) but was unsuccessful in his winning either of the two elections. In addition to his candidacy for the Electoral College, Governor Patterson appointed Wright to the position of City and County Treasurer of Philadelphia for an unexpired term. The governor superseded the authority of the Philadelphia City Government by appointing (rather than elected) Wright. This was done as a measure to aid in blocking the powerful political machines that monopolized the city. The appointment was confirmed by the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania on June 12, 1891. Wright took office seat on June 23, 1891, and resigned as City and County Treasurer of Philadelphia on January 4, 1892. Afterward, he decided to start up a banking firm with his brother Sidney Longstreth Wright. The firm was called S. L. & W. R. Wright. William Redwood Wright worked at the firm until his death at age 68 (December 3, 1914).

At the time of his death, William Redwood Wright was primarily involved with two organizations. The first of the two was the Germantown Cricket Club. He was one of the most prominent members of both the Germantown Cricket Club and Philadelphia "high society." A testimony to this was his membership in the second organization—The Famous State in Schuylkill. The Famous State in Schuylkill was a gentleman's club along the Schuylkill River. Its members were among Philadelphia's wealthiest and most prominent socialites.

Mrs. William Redwood Wright was born Letitia Ellicott Carpenter on April 7, 1861. She was the daughter of George Washington Carpenter and Mary Rodman Fisher. Letitia Ellicott Carpenter was a direct descendent of James Logan, who left England in the late seventeenth century to settle in the colonies as William Penn's Chief Secretary and Counselor.

Letitia's fascination with nature began when she was a youngster, and carried through to her later years. Her childhood wonderment later elevated her to an expertise in the area of wildflowers. Mrs. W. R. Wright did place much emphasis on the conservation of wildflowers, but she started organizations and made personal efforts to improve the preservation and conservation of plant life. She was not only a speaker, but a doer. One such organization was the First Garden Club of Philadelphia (of which Mrs. Wright was a charter member). The most notable personal effort that Mrs. Wright made was her restoration of the "Stenton Garden." Mrs. Wright's ancestor, James Logan, was the original planter of the garden. It was initially planted with many flowers and shrubs that were indigenous only to England. What made her restoration notable was that she used the same plants that he did.

Mrs. Wright also had a variety of extracurricular involvements. In her early days she was an enthusiastic horsewoman, and rode for the Hare and Hound Club (one of the first riding clubs in Pennsylvania). She was an active member of the World War I organization The National League for Women's Service, for whom she volunteered her time to teach bee-keeping classes. Mrs. Wright also belonged to the Church of the Messiah at Gynwedd Valley. As a member of the church's auxiliary for the unemployed, she spent much time finding food, shelter, and eventually employment for the jobless.

After the death of her husband, Mrs. William Redwood Wright continued to live at "Waldheim." It was not until 1923 that she moved out of "Waldheim" and into "Boxwood Farm" in Ambler. In 1920, William Redwood Wright's brother Sidney became the trustee to the deed of trust (dated April 10, 1920) to the "Little Wakefield" and "Waldheim" properties (which spanned 22 acres). In 1925, the approximately 22-acre property was sold to George A. Nahm for \$350,000. The contract was signed by Sidney L. Wright, Mrs. William Redwood Wright, and her children. Three years later (1928), "Waldheim" was destroyed. The rather abrupt occurrence of the Great Depression saved "Little Wakefield" from condemnation, but could not save "Waldheim." Nahm had intended on constructing a housing development and putting roads through the property. The property (less one "Waldheim") was then purchased by the Sisters of St. Basil the Great in 1946. It had been untouched since the destruction of "Waldheim." The sisters maintained an orphanage and girl's school on the property until, on January 18, 1989, they sold the property to La Salle University.

Remnants of the foundation of the former "Waldheim" mansion are still in existence. One can still trek into the small patch of woods between the Neumann Halls Dormitory and the La Salle University commuter parking lot, and take a gander at the ruins of the home of historically significant people. Just make sure that the La Salle Security Force understands what you are doing before you examine the ruins (lest your interests be deemed legal rather than historical!).