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Wisters and Fishers in the Civil War

By: Jen Merritt

The Wister and Fisher families who lived on or near what is today La Salle's campus were prominent members of their community and many of them served diligently during the Civil War. Sarah Logan Fisher Wister, who moved to Belfield after her marriage to William Wister, served as a committee member of the Germantown Hospital Association, a group which was formed to collect and send supplies to the United States Sanitary Commission, the Civil War equivalent of the Red Cross. Her six sons, William Rotch, John, Langhorne, Jones, Francis, and Rodman Wister, were involved in the combat of the Civil War. Their second cousin, Harvey Fisher, grew up at Little Wakefield, today part of La Salle's south campus, and fought in the 150th Regiment Pennsylvania Volunteers as the captain of Company A. Besides the actual fighting of the war, several of the Wisters and Fishers kept accounts of their experiences as well as those of their families and neighbors that have given future generations a look into Germantown's past. One of the more extensive diarists, Sidney George Fisher, the first cousin of Sarah Logan Fisher Wister, had the complete collection of his diary entries recorded in *A Philadelphia Perspective*, edited by Nicholas B. Wainwright. Excerpts from the diary of Sarah Butler Wister, the wife of the first cousin of William Wister, were later published by Fanny Kemble Wister in *So That I May Tell You*.

The Germantown Hospital Association, of which Sarah Logan Fisher Wister was a member, was a contributing organization of the Women's Pennsylvania Branch of the Sanitary Commission. The Sanitary Commission was created to aid in the medical care of the Union Army until the Medical Bureau could reform its antiquated system. The Commission, however, remained in existence until the end of the war since it seemed that the need for its care would never be met. To perform its tasks, it relied a great deal on donations and contributions from various charities and groups to provide the Union soldiers with medical care and the supplies the men needed for comfort. The Women's Pennsylvania Branch of the Sanitary Commission did a great deal of coordination to see that these supplies were properly received, distributed, and accounted for. Contributing organizations would ship the supplies to the field where the Sanitary Commission was encamped along with the army, and a letter was sent back to each group to acknowledge and thank them for the shipment. The Germantown Historical Society has several letters from Maria J. Moss of the Women's Pennsylvania Branch of the Sanitary Commission to Mrs. H.A. Zell of the Germantown Hospital Association, thanking her for their many donations of clothing, blankets, and medicine. Though none of these letters mention Sarah Logan Fisher Wister, an undated letter from Mrs. H.A. Zell to the Resident Directors of the Germantown Railroad is signed with Mrs. Wm. Wister listed as a committee member.

Sarah Logan Fisher Wister's oldest son, William Rotch Wister, did not immediately join the military when the Civil War began; however, from its start, he played an instrumental role in getting the Union Army on a firm ground. His law office soon became one of the largest recruitment offices in Philadelphia, and he labored daily with his brother Langhorne to promote enlistments. When the number of volunteers throughout the nation began to diminish, the government found it necessary to offer rewards to entice new recruits to join the Army, but it was not immediately able to pay the promised bounties. Although it is doubtful that late payments would have been a hindrance to the Army's success, William Rotch Wister took it upon himself and his law firm to raise the funds to give each enlisting man half of what the government had

promised. He soon received the opportunity to become the captain of a company of soldiers, but instead went to the front as a lieutenant-colonel of the 20th Cavalry, Pennsylvania Volunteers.

In her memoirs, Ella Wister Haines writes that her Uncle John Wister was involved in the secret services of the Union Army along with his brother Jones. Jones, however, makes no mention of his brother's service in his *Reminiscences*, and Sidney George Fisher only says in his diary that John had to stay behind to take care of the family business. The Duncannon Mills was owned by the Fisher family and later inherited by Sarah Logan Fisher Wister. The company experienced a strain during the war on materials and workers; however, the company was earning money quickly due to increasing prices, although Jones was astounded when wages for his workers rose from 60 cents a day to \$2 or \$3 a day.

Sarah Logan Fisher Wister's third son, Langhorne, became the captain of Company B of the 150th Regiment, Pennsylvania Volunteers. This regiment was known as Bucktail Brigade, so-named to strive to copy the accomplishments of the 1st Pennsylvania Riflemen, another Civil War regiment. Wister later became the Colonel of the regiment when Colonel Stone was injured. The 150th received rear-guard duty, a task which entailed bringing up the stragglers from other regiments. This duty gave the regiment plenty to do, and it allowed them to set their own pace when other regiments were becoming fatigued and bored on the long treks. Moreover, the 150th often lucked out when it joined the Army of the Potomac because on several occasions they came onto the scene just as weather conditions improved. Wister was given a great deal of credit for keeping the men in his regiment in good spirits because he was apparently a motivational leader who demanded a great deal from his men. Wister was injured in the Battle of Gettysburg, but he kept fighting until the battle's end until he was forced to give up his command after the battle to recuperate. During his recovery time at Belfield his other Sarah wrote several letters to Mary Rodman Fox which gave a description of the family's reactions to hearing about Langhorne's capture as well as their relief upon hearing about his safety.



General Langhorne Wister

In *Jones Wister's Reminiscences*, the fourth son of Sarah Logan Fisher Wister relates how he joined the Army of the Potomac on June 19, 1864, the day after Abraham Lincoln called for one hundred thousand men to defend Pennsylvania as the Southern army crossed the Potomac River. Jones left his position of superintendent of the Duncannon Rolling Mill to take up arms, and he too fought bravely for the Army. He relates one incident during the Battle of Gettysburg in which he and two of his companions were asked to draw the enemy's fire by riding up a nearby mountain. When the three soldiers came upon the enemy, however, the other two fled, and Jones was forced to dodge their fire on his own. Fortunately, he acknowledges, they were poor shots. Jones does not speak much about his own military service in these memoirs, but he does relate a great deal about his brothers' experiences, especially those of William Rotch and Langhorne, whom he seemed to adore.

Another Wister to distinguish himself in the Civil War was Francis who became the captain of the 12th United States Infantry and later became the colonel of the 2115th Pennsylvania Volunteers. He received his captain's commission through John's friendship with General Simm Cameron, Lincoln's Secretary of War, and as Jones relates, Cameron never regretted this appointment because of Francis' excellent record of service.

There is very little record about Rodman's service during the Civil War, except that his father, William Wister, asked Jones to go back to Gettysburg shortly after his return home to look for Rodman who had been attacked by typhoid fever. Ella Wister haines remembered that Rodman, being too young to join the regular army, ran away from home to become a drummer boy.

Harvey Fisher of Little Wakefield, the first cousin of the Wister boys, was one of the first Germantown enlistments, and he became the second lieutenant of Company A in the 150th Pennsylvania at the age of 18 or 19. He wrote frequently to his mother, Letitia Harvey Ellicott, but his letters did not discuss his military service as much as his views on the war itself. Several of these letters were reprinted in Thomas Chamberlin's *History of the 150th Pennsylvania Volunteers*. He paid close attention to the election of 1864 between Lincoln and McClellan, and his dislike of the soldiers who supported McClellan was apparent as well as his disgust with those who joined the army to receive the bounties the government offered, and he noted that these two classes of soldiers usually overlapped. He was apparently very ill at several times during the war, but his ailments did not prevent him from taking charge of his company shortly after recuperating.

Sidney George Fisher, the first cousin of Harvey Fisher's father and of Sarah Logan Fisher Wister, wrote for the *North American* newspaper under the pen name of "Cecil." Most of his articles were about slavery and the Civil War, and he kept a personal diary about these same subjects. He was extremely loyal to the Union and an avid supporter of Lincoln, whom he felt would save the nation in its time of crisis. Many of his entries were about his cousin Joshua Fisher who was against the war and against Lincoln. Joshua's wife, Eliza Fisher, was a South Carolinian with relatives fighting in the Confederate army. Although a close friend of Fanny Kemble, Eliza made a trip to the South with Pierce Butler, Kemble's ex-husband who Eliza disliked greatly. Sidney George Fisher, however, assumed that secession proved a "bond of sympathy" between the two. He also related the various accounts he heard of fighting in the South and the behavior of the Union and Confederate troops there. The Union soldiers, he stressed, acted like perfect gentlemen and always paid for any provisions they took while their Confederate counterparts helped themselves to what they pleased. Though Fisher probably heard only select stories, many Southern accounts of the war would refute his statements.

The daughter of Fanny Kemble and Pierce Butler, Sarah Butler Wister, was married to Dr. Owen Jones Wister, the first cousin of William Wister. Her mother was an abolitionist and her father was a slaveowner who was jailed for a short time for being a Southern sympathizer. Though Sarah shared her mother's views regarding slavery, her journal entries during the war discussed many of the everyday concerns of such a disruption and the necessities of life. For example, she seemed to be more concerned about the poor quality of the clothing the women who volunteered to sew were putting together in their hurry to send something to the troops. These aspects of the war were in many ways just as important as the actual combat going on on the battlefield, and Sarah Butler Wister's diary gave a vivid description of this part of the battle.

In a sense, the Wister and Fisher families were a microcosm of the national struggle taking place during the Civil War. They experienced the hardships of battle and the sacrifices that had to be made at home. They were painfully aware of the problems of disease and wounds, as Langhorne and Rodman Wister and Harvey Fisher discovered, and the things that needed to be done to keep the troops healthy, a cause that Sarah Logan Fisher Wister embraced. They knew the difficulties of a war dividing a nation and in many cases families who had members in the North as well as the South, but they seemed to accept these divisions and move past them when the need arose. At the same time, the Civil war was a period in their lives which they wanted to record for future generations because they knew that its impact would be felt for years to come. They were simply trying to make sense of what was happening in their lives. Because they

perceived themselves as ordinary people, it is the letters, memoirs, and diaries they wrote about their everyday lives that give the most accurate description of what was happening throughout the nation at this momentous time.

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