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The Life of William Rotch Wister (1827-1911)

By: Dave Stanoch

Both Philadelphia and Germantown are well endowed with a long and remarkable past. The European settlers who came to the area arrived way back in the 1600's. From this rich historic past, many individuals greatly contributed to the well being and success of these settlements, as well as the United States as a whole. One family lineage that is among the most renowned of the early settlers in the area is the Wisters. The Wister family played an integral role in characterizing the flavor of the Philadelphia area throughout the generations. One member of the Wister family of especial note is William Rotch Wister, who accomplished many professional, social, and academic tasks.

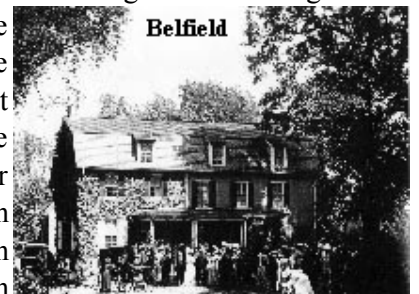
William Rotch Wister was a descendent of John Wister, the first Wister to immigrate to America from Heidelberg, Germany. Having arrived in Philadelphia in 1727, John Wister proceeded to have seven children, one of whom was also named John Wister. Born on March 20, 1776, the younger John Wister established a solid Wister presence in Germantown, PA. He constructed the family house, Vernon, and obtained the deeds to many acres of land from the surrounding countryside. John Wister married Elizabeth Harvey of Bordentown, NJ, on January 15, 1799. The couple had nine children, one of who was William Wister, born on February 3, 1803.



William Wister was married at the Wister house on Germantown Avenue, which was built by his father. The Wister house was later to be called Grumblethorpe. William Wister was wedded to Sarah Logan Fisher on September 26, 1826. The Fisher family was also one of the earliest families to settle the area back in the 1700's. Sarah's ancestor, James Logan, built the Stenton House years ago up the road from Grumblethorpe. With the wedding of William Wister and Sarah Logan Fisher, the two moved into

the Belfield mansion on the land originally owned by Charles Wilson Peale. Peale had been the neighbor of the Logan and Fisher families who owned the Wakefield and Little Wakefield property adjoining Belfield. At Belfield, William and Sarah had a total of six children reach maturity; William Rotch, John, Langhorne, Jones, Francis, and Rodman.

William Rotch Wister, born on December 7, 1827, was raised along with his siblings at the Belfield estate. William derived his "Rotch" name from the Rodmans and Rotches, relatives in Massachusetts who were the first people to settle the island of Nantucket off the coast of Massachusetts. When he reached maturity, he was he built the Fine Arts Studio in 1868, then moved to Wister House when it was completed in 1876 that existed between Clarkson Ave. and Duy's Lane. Duy's Lane has been renamed since then and is now known as Wister St., which



borders La Salle University's property and Germantown Hospital. His house was built in the elegant post-colonial style of the time. It included many unique features, such as a sloped steeple-like attic and a guarded porch. The house no longer exists today, having been

demolished in 1956 after the land had been turned over to Philadelphia. The house is from where William Rotch launched his life and made a name for himself in the history books.

William Rotch Wister grew up in a very urbane environment. His family was mostly composed of affluent settlers of Philadelphia, and William Rotch was no exception to the family's level of sophistication. When he was old enough, William Rotch attended the University of Pennsylvania, from which he graduated in 1845. Always interested in the practicing of law, William Rotch clerked for some of Philadelphia's lawyers until he himself was admitted to the Bar on October 6, 1849. During his time up to being admitted to the Bar, William Rotch became acquainted with some of the top lawyers of Philadelphia. He was an intern of sorts under Benjamin Gethard, Esq., one of the top lawyers in Philadelphia at the time, and worked in his Walnut street office. Through his time as an intern, William Rotch also met Mr. Meredith, who later went on to become Secretary of Treasury of the United States in 1849.

When William Rotch became a member of the Bar in 1849, he was only one of a handful of lawyers within Philadelphia, all of whom knew each other pretty much on sight. William Rotch found practicing law both enjoyable and lucrative. However, many of the traditions law has today were non-existent during William Rotch's time. For instance, it was not uncommon for a court case to be a team effort in William Rotch's day. While today law is thought more as a one-on-one sparring between lawyers, often times multiple defenders would come to aid the most ordinary criminal. That kind of team defense is restricted to millionaire former athletes and presidents of the United States today. In addition, it was then the accepted norm for lawyers to practice from their homes and not have separate offices like now. Even in his last few years, William Rotch remained staunchly behind the principle of law being practiced from one's home to encourage a more informal atmosphere and make the clients feel more at ease.

Over time, William Rotch became very adept at executing the duties of a lawyer. He became the solicitor and director of many esteemed organizations. One such arrangement saw William Rotch as the solicitor for the National Bank of Germantown from 1851 to the time of his death on August 21, 1911. He also doubled as director of the bank from 1901 till his death as well. Another duty executed by William Rotch was acting as the director of "Hand-in-Hand" Fire Insurance Company. This company was also known more appropriately as the Philadelphia Contributorship for the Insurance of Houses from Loss by Fire. It was one of the original companies in America to offer insurance of this type.

The duties did not stop there either. Further major clients included the likes of the Philadelphia Savings Fund Society, which annually appointed William Rotch as one of its auditors from 1878-1911. Though this arrangement was supposed to be temporary, William Rotch's expertise was obviously very appreciated and not very easily forsaken by the Society. Moreover, his skills were appreciated as director of the Guarantee Trust Company and of William Wharton Jr. & Co., Inc. The latter was a railroad supply manufacturer integral to the Western expansion of the United States.

It is obvious that William Rotch was a very industrious man when it came to his profession. Many aspects of William Rotch's character contribute to his success as a lawyer. For one, he was a man of great integrity. William Rotch advocated that an attorney was an officer of the court and of the law first, and represented his client second. The concept of an attorney being an ethical guardian of the law was of the utmost concern to William Rotch. Dedication of his kind to justice is unseen in the law practiced in America today. Moreover, William Rotch possessed the ability to look beyond trivialities and understand the big picture. Family and professionals alike often praised him for his keen wit in getting to the heart of the matter without beating around the bush and becoming obsessed with needless distractions.

With the countless duties and tasks of being a lawyer, it might be thought that William Rotch did not dedicate much time to his outside interests and family. Nothing can be further from the truth. William Rotch was very involved in the social scene of the Philadelphia and Germantown area. He spent a great deal of time on extracurricular activities. Among his most famous accomplishments is him being dubbed the father, and in his old age grandfather, of American Cricket. The story goes that in 1842 while walking near Logan Station, William Rotch spotted some English millworkers playing cricket. William Rotch was so intrigued that he investigated the sport further and finally decided to start an organization in America dedicated to the sport of cricket. Subsequently, he was a founding member of the Germantown Cricket Club in 1854. Later in 1889, the Germantown Cricket club merged with another cricket group, the Young America Club founded in 1855. Unfortunately, the American cricket players were hopelessly outclassed by their British counterparts, but played with zeal nonetheless and enjoyed the game thoroughly.

In addition to his affiliation with the game of cricket, William Rotch was a member of the Union League and the Military Order of the Loyal Legion, both gentlemen's clubs. Also, during the American Civil War, William Rotch was a Lt. Colonel of the Twentieth Cavalry regiment of Pennsylvania Volunteers. At the time, everyone was responsible for raising their own volunteers and William Rotch raised a few hundred from Germantown and the surrounding area. However, despite his preparation and readiness, the 20th volunteers never saw any action and William Rotch never tasted battle like his brothers Langhorne and Francis who were at the Battle of Gettysburg.

Between his career and his personal interests, William Rotch did not have much time for his family. Because of the demands of his professional obligations, William Rotch bought another house at 1112 Spruce St., where he and his family stayed most of the year until the summer when they returned to the Wister house on Clarkson and Duy's Lane. Even though he did not have much time to personally bond with his children, he was as his daughter Ella states, generous and cheery. He often took the family to Maine, one of his favorite places, and took his children fishing. Fishing was a means of relaxing for William Rotch and he shared this activity with his children who all enjoyed spending time with their father and helping to supply the trout, and occasionally flounder when in Maine, for the family dinner. Ella notes in her memoirs that in 1886, William Rotch had a huge party at the Wister House for a Christmas play performance said to have been the most cheerful of occasions.

William Rotch held very liberal religious beliefs. Although the majority of the Wister family had Quaker roots, William Rotch did not engage in the rigid Quaker practices like the rest of his family. He liked to consider himself a hicksite, the moderate sect of Quakerism. However, William Rotch did regularly attend various religious functions. Moreover, William Rotch often visited churches of other denominations. When on vacation with his children, he would take them to any church in the area on Sunday be it Catholic, Methodist, or any at all. Thus William Rotch encouraged his children to be religious, but did not force them to practice a particular faith.

Towards his old age, William Rotch continued his duties as a lawyer. He also continued to show his love and affection for his family as best he could as well. Similarly, he held to the rigid principles of justice and equity that he had held all his life. On August 21, 1911, William Rotch Wister died at his cousin Owen's house in Saunderstown, Rhode Island. William Rotch had been battling pneumonia for some time and finally capitulated. Most of his family was at his side when he died, but ironically his cousin Owen, whose house William Rotch died in, was in Wyoming at the time. At the time of his death, William Rotch was the second oldest member of the Philadelphia Bar. His family's loving memories of him were forever immortalized by the William Rotch Wister Arboretum currently bounded by Wister, Belfield, Clarkson, and La

Salle's campus is memorial to his life and accomplishments in 1949. However, it is not as well maintained as it should be. Likewise, the La Salle Fine Arts Studio that William Rotch completed in 1868 also stands as a memorial to his achievements.

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