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## John Caspar Wister (1887-1982)

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

## John Caspar Wister

By: Andy Gwiazda

John Caspar Wister, who was, as the *Philadelphia Inquirer* so aptly described him, the "dean of horticulturists" in the United States, was born on March 19, 1887, to William Rotch Wister and Mary Rebecca Eustis in the Germantown section of Philadelphia. John was the youngest of five children, being the brother of Mary Channing Wister, who would go on to marry her cousin Owen Wister, the author of *The Virginian*.

John Caspar's horticultural legacy began when he was a small boy in Germantown. John's interest in the flowers, trees, fruits, vegetables, and greenhouses at Belfield and Wister influenced his career as a horticulturist. A family friend once told Laura Belman, Wister's great-niece, that she remembered seeing Jack as a young boy, "standing rigid, looking up into a tulip poplar tree, utterly absorbed." That tulip poplar can still be seen today in front of the Peale House on the campus of La Salle University. Wister would spend his time following the gardener around the property trying to learn anything and everything he could about plants. In an interview with the *Inquirer* shortly before his death, Wister recalled that, "I found you planted peas early and corn late. When I studied them later, I was ahead of the rest of the boys on those plants" (*Inquirer*, Dec. 29, 1982). He was undoubtedly fascinated with plant life because for him, "things keep coming along, they never seem to end and new varieties develop constantly. These are sometimes started by people who do not know anything [about gardening] . . . and then come up with the finest plants imaginable" (*Chester Times*, July 16, 1951).

Wister attended Harvard University and graduated in 1909. He then went on to continue his studies at Harvard's School of Landscape Architecture and supplemented that program with courses taken at the New Jersey Agricultural College. His education took him to landscape architecture offices in both New York and Philadelphia until he enlisted on July 10, 1917, as a private in World War I. According to letters he wrote to his family during the war, Wister served most of his time in France in various ordnance departments, being promoted to Sergeant of Ordnance in November of 1917. Wister never strayed too far from plants and flowers, taking advantage of his leave time by visiting the gardens of Europe. He would often send plants back to his friends, the Arthur Hoyt Scotts, noted garden enthusiasts whom he met in 1915.

After being honorably discharged from the Army on May 10, 1919, John Caspar Wister began a horticultural legacy which would span the next 70 years as a landscape architect in both the United States and in England. His research in cross-breeding produced hundreds of new, hybrid species of common plants and flowers. In addition to the scientific research he performed on plants, he devoted a great deal of his time to sharing his knowledge of plants and the beauty he found in them with those around him. One of his many contributions to local Philadelphia horticulture was the campus of Swarthmore College, where he worked for more than 50 years. In order to recognize the work of Wister's good friends, the Arthur Hoyt Scotts, Swarthmore established the Arthur Hoyt Scott Horticultural Foundation and named Wister the foundation's first director in 1930. The Foundation's 240 acre public garden, with its 5,000 species of trees and shrubs adorns the Swarthmore campus, 40 acres of which were landscaped by Wister himself. He grouped plant families together within the garden to establish a more practical plan. Joan Lee Faust has written in the *New York Times* that his goal was to "seek out hardy plants that could be grown without special care in eastern gardens" (*New York Times*, Dec. 28, 1982).

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Swarthmore College awarded Wister an honorary doctor of science degree in 1942 for his work with the college. Wister also operated a landscape architecture business out of the now-gone house, "Wister," just off of La Salle University's campus at the corner of Wister Street and Clarkson Avenue.

In 1946, Wister became the first director of the 600 acre John J. Tyler Arboretum in Lima, PA, serving as president of both the arboretum and bird sanctuary until 1968. In addition to this organization, he was active in most major scientific and conservation groups and was a member of about 50 horticultural societies and 30 scientific organizations. He served as secretary of the American Rose Society, president and founder of the American Iris Society, and secretary for 24 years of the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society. He was also intimately connected with the John Bartram Association in Philadelphia.

Throughout his lifetime, Wister received numerous awards for his horticultural work. According to Faust, Wister was the first recipient of four major horticulture awards: the Liberty Hyde Bailey Medal, the Scott Garden and Horticultural Award, the A.P. Saunders Memorial Award from the American Peony Society, and the Honor and Achievement Award from the International Lilac Society. He was honored for his outstanding work with flowers at the centennial celebration of the founding of the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society. The Brooklyn Botanic Garden awarded Wister its Garden Medal for outstanding service in 1966, and in that same year, the Royal Horticultural Society dedicated its *Daffodil and Tulip Yearbook* to him, making Wister the first American gardener to receive this honor.

John Caspar Wister has been described as an "energetic and self-effacing man" by the *Chester Times*, and the *New York Times* once described him as "a man known for a rapier wit and an impish grin." He would often successfully confuse his interviewers by telling each one that he liked a different flower the best, but at age 93, Wister finally admitted that he liked all flowers and that his real favorite was "whatever was blooming, and that changes from day to day" (*Inquirer*, Dec. 29, 1982). He was interested in almost every flower, being particularly fascinated with irises, lilacs, tree peonies, rhododendrons, daffodils, and lilies. He admitted once that there was a time in his life when he "was crazier than usual and had over 600 varieties [of lilies]. . . . I had to clear them out. As I kept taking them out, I started to cry. They're wonderful things. It was heartbreaking to tear them up" (*Inquirer*, Dec. 29, 1982).

Wister was apparently well known for something other than just his flowers. Wister's great-niece, Laura Belman, during her remarks at the dedication of the Mary and Frances Wister Arts Studio at La Salle University in 1994, spoke about how everyone loved his sense of humor, recounting an anecdote of her uncle Jack. When in his nineties, Wister received a bill from the Harvard Club of New York for two hours of squash, which he immediately threw away. "Another [bill] came, and then a third. So he wrote them: 'There are at least two advantages to being over ninety. One is that I no longer have to play squash. The other is that I no longer have to go to New York City.'" The bills, evidently, stopped coming.

A man who was constantly absorbed in flowers and plants, Wister did not marry until the ripe, old age of 73, when he took Gertrude Smith as his wife, a woman who was herself a noted horticulturist according to the *Times*. Wister referred to marriage as "the fatal plunge" in one of his war-time letters, a description which could also explain why he waited so long before marrying. Belman explains her uncle's prolonged bachelorhood in her dedication remarks by saying that he took his time "because he wanted to be sure."

Wister shared his knowledge and love of flowers through numerous books and articles on plants and gardens. A few of his most notable works are *The Woman's Home Companion Garden Book* (1947), *Four Seasons in Your Garden* (1938), *Bulbs for American Gardens* (1930),

and *The Iris: A Treatise on the History, Development, and Culture of the Iris for the Amateur Gardener* (1930). According to a "Personality Sketch" in the *Chester Times* in 1951, Wister was the editor for two years of "Plants and Gardens," a magazine published by the Brooklyn Botanic Garden. Later in his life, Wister allowed his sister, Ella Eustis Wister Haines, to publish the letters that he wrote home to his family during his two years in the Army. They have been compiled in a book entitled *A Horticulturist in the A.E.F.: Letters from France from John C. Wister to Members of his Family, 1917-1919*. Published in 1950, the "book" is actually a bound typescript prepared for limited distributed, perhaps only to family members. The letters show, among other things, that even during war time, Wister furthered his interest in flowers by visiting the gardens of Europe.

America lost its dean of horticulturists on December 27, 1982 at his home in Swarthmore. At the time of his death, Wister was director emeritus of both the Arthur Hoyt Scott Horticultural Foundation and the John J. Tyler Arboretum in Lima, PA.

At Swarthmore, Wister left a legacy which can still be seen today in the acres of beautiful landscaped gardens that adorn the campus. Visitors from all over come each year to marvel at the pristine beauty of the campus, something which John Caspar Wister would be proud of knowing that people continue to appreciate all the beauty that flowers and trees have to offer. In an interview with the *Chester Times*, Wister said that, "Gardening is not for the few, but for all," and for seventy years he shared his love of flowers with the world.

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*of the Connelly Library*

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