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Frances Anne Wister (1874-1956)

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The Life of Frances Anne Wister

By: Bob Delp

Frances Anne Wister was born on November 26th, 1874. Her place of birth is somewhat of a mystery. Records located in the Germantown Historical Society list her place of birth at Grumblethorpe, former house of John Wister, built in 1744, and located in historic Germantown (Obituary). However, her birth certificate lists her place of birth as being located at what is now the La Salle University Fine Arts Studio, on Clarkson Avenue.

Frances Anne was the third child of William Rotch Wister and Mary Eustis. They had a total of five children, one of whom, William, died in infancy. Her younger brother, who did survive, was named John Caspar Wister. Frances Anne also had two sisters, Mary Channing Wister, and Ella Wister Haines. Frances Anne Wister was named after the famous British actress, Frances Anne (Fanny) Kemble.

Much of what is known about Frances Anne’s younger years has been recorded in her sister’s, Ella’s, memoirs. She describes Frances as being the only one in the family to be born with curly hair. This caused her to be the envy of both her sisters. As children, Frances and Mary Channing did almost everything together. Even as children, they loved music. Frances had a talent for being able to play the violin. She started playing around age nine, and in 1893, had earned herself a solo at the Melody Club, located in Philadelphia. Mary Channing learned to play the piano as a young child. They often practiced together and entertained the local neighbors on Sunday evenings at their house. Here Frances developed her love for music, which grew and blossomed with her work later with the Philadelphia Orchestra.

As the years passed, Frances became involved in clubs and organizations located in and around Philadelphia. She was the president or vice-president of many clubs that promoted the well being of Philadelphia and its residents. She was a leader, an outspoken woman with a voice that was heard. People listened to her and her determination and will allowed her to accomplish many things. She had a way of persuading people towards her views and could convince many people to believe her ways of thinking. She was a remarkable woman.

One of the first leadership positions that Frances Anne held was as vice president of the Women’s Civic Club of Philadelphia (c. 1907). She served as vice president for the rest of her life, except for a period of seven years (1922-29), when she served as its president. It was her sister, Mary Channing Wister, who founded the Women’s Civic Club, but when she died, Frances Anne continued it and kept it running. The Civic Club was responsible for bringing about electric street lighting to the city of Philadelphia. It also was responsible for replacing older horse-drawn carriages with trolleys on some busy Philadelphia streets. The Women’s Civic Club is furthermore responsible for improving food-marketing conditions.

When Mary Channing Wister died, it was Frances Anne and her mother who took care of the children at Wister, just off of La Salle University. This was an added responsibility in addition to taking care of her mother, her interests in music, her work with the Civic Club, and her church duties. This burden was finally alleviated when Owen Wister, husband of the late Mary Channing Wister, bought a house in Bryn Mawr and took his children with him. Free from this burden, Frances Anne had the time to put more into her first love, music.

Frances Anne went on to become a Director of the Philadelphia Orchestra. She also became chairman of the Women's Committees of the Philadelphia Orchestra from 1910 until her death in 1956. This position took her traveling far and wide. She was the spokesperson and worked to drum up funds and interest for the orchestra. She was a woman of stern personality and her work with the orchestra made this come to life. There was a story that she once called Stokowski "out of order" for suggesting the removal of the concerts from the Academy of Music. In 1920, she was responsible for resisting efforts to turn the Academy of Music into a movie house. Her efforts are partly responsible for keeping the Philadelphia Orchestra at the Academy of Music to this day. Without a doubt, the orchestra was her greatest love. She led efforts to raise money for the orchestra during the depression. Her efforts are partly responsible for leading the orchestra to becoming one of the top orchestras in the world.

Her efforts and work with the orchestra did not go unnoticed. The orchestra loved her as well and celebrated her twenty-fifth and thirtieth anniversaries by presenting her with gifts. For her twenty-fifth anniversary, the Philadelphia Orchestra presented her with a brooch, and for her thirtieth anniversary the orchestra presented Frances Anne with an autographed picture. When Frances Anne passed away, she left one hundred thousand dollars in her name to the orchestra. The orchestra was her greatest love and she never tired of helping them to achieve perfection. A memorial concert is played each year by the Philadelphia Orchestra in her name.

Frances Anne Wister's time was not completely taken over by her work with the orchestra. She also spent her time doing public works of service by serving on a variety of committees and boards. One of her first public services was her position on the Philadelphia Board of Education (Obituary). She was responsible for including women on school boards. Furthermore, she was responsible for getting women paid the same as men when they did equal work. Her efforts helped lead to the downfall of the sexist inequality that existed between men and women teachers.

In the early 1930s, Frances Anne became interested in the preservation of historic houses. In 1931, she founded the Society for the Preservation of Landmarks. She also served as its first president. Landmarks was the first preservation society of its kind. One of the houses that it saved from demolition was the Powel house, home of the former mayor of Philadelphia, who passed away during the yellow fever epidemic in the 1790s. Through the efforts of Frances Anne, she was able to save the Powel house from becoming an open-air garage.

Another house that Landmarks preserved was the historic house of Grumblethorpe. Built by John Wister in 1744, this house was up for demolition. Frances Anne aroused public interest to ensure the preservation of the house and its garden. She also helped raise the money that was necessary in order to restore the historic house to the colonial exterior that it possessed when it was first constructed in 1744. Grumblethorpe, located in historic Germantown, is now a museum open to the public. The other two houses that Landmarks owned and operated were the Waynesborough house and the Physick House, which were other houses that have been preserved in their colonial style.

Her sister Ella wrote in her Reminiscences of Frances Anne, "Visiting old places is all but a mania with her. She never takes time out to have a good time as the rest of us know it. Her days are spent in hard toil, from early morning to midnight. I think she is the strongest woman ever born!" Frances Anne was seventy-nine when this was written of her.

Frances Anne did have some time for recreation, although it was not exactly the same kind of recreation that all at the time would have enjoyed. In fact, her forms of recreation took up a lot of her time, and she rarely seemed to have time for herself. She was a woman that was always on the go. On Sunday evenings she entertained family and friends at "Wister" with dinner. She

also went to numerous concerts for the Philadelphia Orchestra at the Academy of Music. Furthermore, she was a delightful speaker on historical subjects on which she had extensive knowledge. She was deeply interested in Germantown, past and present.

Throughout her lifetime, Frances Anne held many leadership positions and received much recognition for her efforts and work with the community at large. In 1933 she won the Elise Willing Balch Memorial medal of the Colonial Danes, for her restoration work with the houses owned by Landmarks. She was recognized as a Prominent Woman of Pennsylvania when she won a meritorious service medal of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania in 1935. In 1936, she received what was probably her most important award, the Gimbel award, which she received for being an outstanding woman of Philadelphia, for her work with the orchestra and with Landmarks. Frances Anne also served as chairman of the Grumblethorpe Committee, which helped in the effort to raise money to restore Grumblethorpe. She was also recognized as a Designated Distinguished Daughter of Pennsylvania in 1949.

Frances Anne was elected as the Director to the Pennsylvania Parks Association Board. In 1949, she turned over "Wister" and seven and one-third acres of land to the Fairmount Park Commission. This later became part of the Wister Woods Park. Frances Anne was called the Patroness of the Orchestra and Parks. She later became chairman of a group to save Cobbs Creek Valley. When this proved successful, she was appointed by the court as chairman of Powder Mill Park. She also was member of the First Unitarian Church of Philadelphia, where she served as a member on the board of trustees.

One of the other organizations that Frances Anne founded and was a member of was the Octavia Hill Association for the Better Housing of the Poor. This organization sought to reduce smoke and noise in and around the city. It also sought to improve the water supply in the city, by making it more plentiful and cleaner for everyone to drink.

As if all of the service and positions that Frances Anne held were not enough to keep her busy, she spent some time pursuing another one of her hobbies, which was writing. She wrote numerous articles for the Germantown Crier. She wrote such articles as "A Wakefield Bride Comes to Germantown," "Fanny Kemble & Butler Place," "The Great Road to Germantown," and "The Army then Proceeded to that Unfortunate Place Called Germantown." She is also credited with writing the first ever history of the Philadelphia Orchestra, entitled Twenty Five Years of the Philadelphia Orchestra – 1900-1925.

Frances Anne Wister was a remarkable woman with many talents. She gave her time to help Philadelphia and the people who inhabit the city. The products of her work and efforts exist today. On March 17, 1956, after a brief illness, Frances Anne Wister passed away at Hahnemann Hospital. She was eighty-one at the time of her death. When she died, her estate was estimated to be valued at \$210,000 dollars. The money in her will was donated to the Philadelphia orchestra, the Civic Club, to her nieces and nephews, as well as to other organizations to which she belonged. A remarkable woman who strived to make Philadelphia a better place for everyone, she touched the lives of everyone whom she came into contact with. Her efforts and work did not go unnoticed. She was a woman who put others before her and her well being. Frances Anne Wister was a woman with a big heart.

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