

THE REMARKABLE WISTERS AT BELFIELD

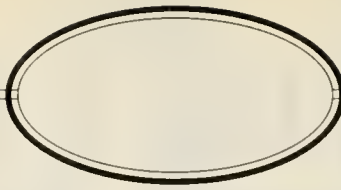
By James A. Butler, Ph.D., '67

La Salle's campus in the 19th century called itself home to Abolitionists, Civil War heroes, the Industrial Revolution and "The Virginian." Family members also helped to introduce the sport of cricket and the Philadelphia Orchestra to the United States



In the 19th century, a number of remarkable women were associated with the Peale House (above) on the Belfield estate. Today, a group of talented women, shown here with Brother President Joseph Burke, play key administrative roles at La Salle. They are (standing from left): Glenda Kubl, dean of continuing studies; Barbara Millard, dean of arts and sciences; Rose Lee Pauline, assistant vice president for business affairs, and Alice Hoersch, executive assistant to the president. Seated (from left): Gloria Donnelly, dean of nursing, and Joanne A. Jones Barnett, assistant provost.

It happened in the 1920s, before the Age of Consultants. La Salle's president, knowing that the college had outgrown its location at 1240 North Broad Street, asked the Christian Brothers to keep an eye out for a new campus site. Pushing their way through a high hedge, two Brothers out for a Saturday stroll saw the rolling fields at Twentieth and Olney. The land on which these Brothers trespassed was owned, at least in part, by descendants of the Wister Family;



Sarah Logan Fisher Wister, who came to Belfield in 1826, poses with her grandchildren at the Peale House (right) about 1888. Standing at right is Mary Channing Wister, who became a civic and educational leader and married novelist Owen Wister. Today the Peale House (far right) is the site of the President's Office at La Salle. Partly built in 1708, it is believed to be the nation's second oldest surviving campus building. William & Mary's Sir Christopher Wren Building was built in 1695.

(Photo at right courtesy of American Philosophical Society)



across it once strode some of Philadelphia's (and the nation's) most prominent writers, actors, civic leaders, industrialists, soldiers, and sports figures. The history of the nineteenth-century Wisters at Belfield encompasses three adjoining properties—and begins (perhaps appropriately for a future university campus) with a teenager who defied her father.

Early in the nineteenth century, three large estates touched near the present Ogontz and Olney avenues. The famous portrait painter Charles Willson Peale in 1810 bought a property of one hundred and four acres (much of it now La Salle's campus). Peale's house "Belfield," in part built in 1708, is now the President's House. On this property Peale painted and famed—and corresponded with Thomas Jefferson about their estates of Belfield and Monticello.

To the northeast of Olney and Ogontz was the second estate, "Butler Place" (the house stood near what is now Old York Road and Nedro street). It was home in the 1830s to the doomed marriage of English-born Fanny Kemble, then America's most famous actress and soon to become known as one of its most passionate abolitionists, and her husband Pierce Butler, slaveholder on his Georgia plantation and grandson of a signer of the Constitution. Strong-willed Fanny's discovery that stubborn Pierce took her promise to "obey" as absolute produced one of the nineteenth century's epic and best-documented battles of the sexes. Fanny, especially in her later years, was a regular visitor at Belfield; the park at Ogontz and Olney is now named for her.

William Logan Fisher brought the Industrial Revolution to

Germantown, and his woolen mills—along streams still flowing beneath present Ogontz and Belfield avenues—once produced nine-tenths of America's hosiery; his property "Wakefield" stood, until its 1985 destruction by fire, on property south of Ogontz and Olney. Fisher's wife has her maiden name preserved in the Lindley avenue which now forms La Salle's southern border.

Staunch Quaker William Logan Fisher was not pleased when his daughter Sarah in 1826 accepted the proposal of Germantown-born William Wister. Wister may have been somewhat more palatable than his Lutheran forebears, but he was still the son of a Quaker convert and thus a mere "Convinced Friend"—not a true "Birthright Friend." Sarah could not be married at Meeting (they disowned her for good measure), and her father would not hear of any Quaker using his beloved



“Wakefield” to marry some “world’s person” who did not even belong to Meeting. The groom’s uncle finally offered the Wisters’ ancestral home, “Grumblethorpe” on Germantown avenue, and there—in the parlor whose floor was allegedly stained since the Battle of Germantown with the blood of the dying British General Agnew—Sarah Logan Fisher defiantly married William Wister before a Justice of the Peace.

Sarah’s father refused to attend her wedding. He did, however, present her with part (the house and twelve acres) of the “Belfield” property that he had earlier in the year purchased from Charles Willson Peale; the rest of the land went to another of Fisher’s daughters. The division of Peale’s estate into what went to Sarah (land now west of Twentieth street and bought by La Salle from Wister descendants in 1984) and what is on

the east side (bought by us in 1926) splits the campus and bedevils La Salle to this day.

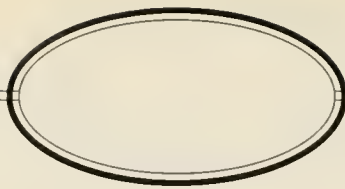
William Wister eventually regained the good graces of his father-in-law and operated for him a calico print mill on present-day Ogontz avenue just east of La Salle’s baseball field. Sarah remained a somewhat unconventional but still black-gowned Quaker, who (despite being readmitted to Meeting) defied her fellow religionists by such scandalous behavior as keeping a piano in the front parlor at Belfield. Looking from that parlor up the pathway toward what is now Wister street, she once exclaimed, “Children, I see Friend Eleanor Evans approaching. Put the screen in front of the piano!” That screen was only half as high as the upright piano, but it enabled Sarah and Eleanor to pretend to observe the Quaker proprieties. Sarah and William

Wister’s terrapin dinners—the hapless turtles raised to succulent maturity in the basement of Belfield—were famous throughout Germantown.

Sarah Logan Fisher and William Wister produced a sturdy brood of six boys (William Rotch, John, Langhorne, Jones, Francis, and Rodman), who—among their other achievements—helped to bring the sport of cricket to the United States. Indeed, one writer rhapsodized in 1910 about what is now La Salle’s property at Belfield:

“The memories of these days are precious, and it would seem that Providence had preserved this lovely spot intact for the sentimental old cricketers, as the Magna Charta and the Liberty Bell are preserved for the Anglo-Saxon race.”

One summer day in 1846, Jones Wister, rummaging through the attic at Belfield, found cricket



Tennis at the old Belfield Country Club, organized by the Wisters on the northwest corner of 20th st. and Olney ave. The clubhouse was located on what is now the site of the university's St. Albert and St. Cassian Residence Halls.

balls, bats, and stumps left behind by a visiting English soldier. Jones and his brothers drove the stumps into the ground just about where La Salle's tennis courts now stand. One of the early cricket balls hit in the United States smashed through the window of William Wister's (now Brother Joseph Burke's) office and whacked Wister's head. The exact words then spoken by William Wister have fortunately not survived, but his sons did move up the hill to where La Salle's first residence halls now stand and where the Belfield Country Club was founded and survived until the 1920s as a venue for ice skating, tennis, golf, and cricket.

The playing fields of Belfield soon gave way to other fields for the Wister boys: perhaps few Quaker families in the nation had six sons in uniform during the Civil War. Their mother, Sarah Logan Fisher Wister, continued to irritate her Quaker friends and relations by raising funds for the soldiers. Captain Francis

Wister fought at Gettysburg, and Langhorne Wister there commanded the 150th Pennsylvania Infantry; that regiment fought at the center of the Union lines facing Pickett's charge. In March 1891, before Brigadier General Langhorne Wister's flag-draped coffin in the Belfield parlor, his niece remembered that the assemblage sat in utter silence for over an hour at this incongruous Quaker service for a war hero.

The doctor who attended Langhorne Wister in his final illness was his cousin Dr. Owen Jones Wister, who had married actress Fanny Kemble's daughter Sarah. Dr. Owen and Sarah Butler Wister lived at "Butler Place," adjoining Belfield to the northeast. A writer herself, Sarah in 1872 was squired around Paris by American novelist Henry James; James greatly admired Fanny Kemble ("magnificent," he wrote, "and draped . . . in lavender satin lavishly *décolleté*") and found her daughter equally captivating. But James's mother, less sure about this married

woman—let alone Fanny's lavish *décolleté*—warned her son that Sarah was probably not "very dangerous. . . but beware!" No doubt James's mother was pleased when he wrote back that he "vaguely mistrusted" the "almost beautiful" Sarah. Henry James portrayed Sarah in his novel *Roderick Hudson* and in several short stories. The novelist and such other luminaries as English poet Matthew Arnold and American novelist William Dean Howells visited Butler Place; they may well have wandered over spots where their works are now studied at La Salle.

In April 1870, Sarah Butler Wister ordered her only child, then nine, to hike across the fields to Belfield to visit his newly-born cousin. The Clarkson avenue house that boy came to is now used by La Salle as its Fine Arts Studio (it was built in 1868 by William Rotch Wister, "the father of American cricket" and lawyer for the Stephen Girard Estate). This meeting of the nine-year old boy and the infant girl was memorable,

The Horror of the "Snake House"

The old mansion which currently houses La Salle's art classes hasn't always had the neutral name "Fine Arts Studio." In fact, until recently, this Clarkson street building (built for the William Rotch Wisters in 1868) was known by a rather intriguing name—"Snake House."

If this name stirs images of reptile exhibits from past excursions to the zoo or stop-overs at a circus side show, perhaps they aren't too far off the mark.

According to the October 16, 1985, *Collegian*, "The house, which had been abandoned for 2 or 3 years before La Salle decided to purchase it, is said to have been so named because of the tenants of the house. Years ago, two Russian sisters lived in the house. One of the sisters was a Doctor of Pharmacy and she owned many snakes because of the research she did on snake venom."

Thomas McCarthy, Psychology Department, explained that Dr. Daniel Blain, the famous psychiatrist who had owned the Peale Estate, had used the house for medical residents. Among these residents were the pharmacist and her sister.

The two sisters supposedly hung a sign in one of the windows: "BEWARE OF SNAKES." John McCloskey, formerly vice president of public affairs, explained, "I remember the sign was put up to keep people away."

According to Dr. McCarthy, "Before La Salle purchased the house, students had no involvement on this part of campus. The farm had been there."

Of course, despite La Salle's lack of involvement on Clarkson street, the legend of the "Snake Lady," as she was called, managed to spread in the fashion of whisper-down-the-lane. One source recalled hearing that the "Snake Lady" would stand at the window with a snake around her neck, watching the students as they passed by. Another remembered hearing that she had closets filled with jars of reptile specimens.

Although rumors of the "Snake Lady" were widespread, documented facts about her and the house are sparse. Dominic Marino, the contractor who renovated part of the building, recalled nothing unusual or reptilian.

George Skinner, who worked for Maintenance at the time, explained, "When La Salle took over, I worked in the 'Snake House' and I knew that the lady who lived there had kept some snakes, but I never saw any."

Like the legend of the "Snake Lady," the name of the building has begun to fade. However, it's quite a story, no matter how much of it is true, that among the many people who lived in the old William Rotch Wister house on Clarkson street, was a mysterious woman who slithered in and out of La Salle's past, leaving only the name "Snake House" behind.

This information originally appeared in the "Duffy Tells All" column, written by Kathryn J. Duffy, '94, in the university's weekly newspaper, the *Collegian*.



The author (right) and James Lang, assistant professor of art, stand in front of the university's Fine Arts Studio which was built in 1868 for William Rotch Wister, "the father of American cricket" and lawyer for the Stephen Girard Estate. Owen Wister and Mary Channing Wister met at this Clarkson avenue house. Next October the university will christen this house the "Mary and Frances Wister Studio."

and not only because the two married; he (Owen Wister, named for his father) wrote a novel estimated a half century after its publication to have been read by more living Americans than any other work of fiction; she (Mary Channing Wister) became a civic and educational leader about whom the Philadelphia *Public Ledger* reported "There is no woman in the city more widely known and respected throughout the country in every walk of life than Mrs. Wister."

The novelist Owen Wister left Butler Place as a child to be educated in Switzerland and in England. At Harvard, Owen first saw Theodore Roosevelt get his

Home Where The Mansion Was

The Wister Family owned four homes on the Belfield estate. Two buildings survive: Belfield—or Peale House—itsself, and the Fine Arts Studio (built by the William Rotch Wisters in 1868). The William Rotch Wisters' stunning second house, "Wister," was built in 1876 on the side of Clarkson Avenue opposite from the Arts Studio; "Wister" was donated to Fairmount Park in 1949 and demolished in 1956. La Salle used the fourth building, a spooky and gabled edifice in the high Victorian style, to house about ten seniors per year from the early 1960s to 1968. Some awed La Salle student (or some publicity-conscious administrator) called it "The Mansion," and the name stuck.



"The Mansion," built about 1885, was once lived in by Sarah Logan Wister Starr (this Sarah was the granddaughter of the first Sarah Wister to come to Belfield in 1826). The house faced now-gone Cottage Lane, which ran from Germantown Hospital to Twentieth and Olney, dividing properties where La Salle has now built Hayman Hall and the St. Mignel Town Houses. Another one of those prominent Wister women, Dr. Sarah Logan Wister Starr served

as President of the Women's Medical College (now Medical College of Pennsylvania); she and Margaret Lennon, who served for many years as the college's registrar, were sometimes the only women to march in La Salle's graduation processions. The college strained Dr. Starr's neighborly impulses when it added lights to McCarthy Stadium for night football during the 1930s.

La Salle about 1961 leased "The Mansion" from Dr. Sarah Starr's daughter, Sarah Logan Starr Blain, then living at Belfield. Don McAvoy, '64, remembers life at the Mansion, isolated from the rest of La Salle and surrounded by Belfield's farm animals (chickens, roosters, ducks, and the one cow). The late Brother Gavin Paul, vice president for student affairs, lived in an apartment in The Mansion, but the residents still enjoyed extraordinary freedom compared to the usual 1960s dorm regulations.

But "The Mansion" came more and more to resemble "The Hovel." After La Salle purchased the property, it and next-door twin house "Shaw Manor" fell in 1968 to one of the most pressing of university needs: parking. Those few students who lived in The Mansion belong to one of the most exclusive of La Salle's clubs.

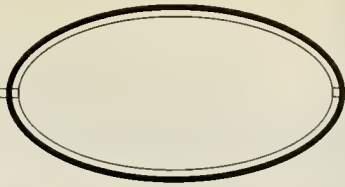
—JAB

Residents of The Mansion who would like to share memories are invited to contact James A. Butler, Department of English (215-951-1145).

nose bloodied in a boxing match and then acquired a lifelong friend. But Wister, the archetypal Philadelphia gentleman from a talented and distinguished family, had nervous difficulties when faced with the choice of a career. His doctor prescribed a trip West and in the process changed American cultural history.

In Wyoming, Owen Wister found a landscape and the "cowboys" that he blended with saloons and shootouts (and a maudlin love story involving the perky schoolmarm) to set the pattern for subsequent "Westerns." His *The Virginian* (1902) has sold nearly two million copies and was a hit television series of the 1960s. Four movie versions have been made, and one featured Gary Cooper in his first "talkie." And when Cooper spoke, he poked his pistol into the insulting villain's stomach and delivered Wister's immortal line that summed up the bully politics of the early twentieth century: "When you call me that, *smile!*"

The woman Owen Wister first met in La Salle's Fine Arts Studio and later married made her reputation by harnessing women's energies to political, social, and educational reform. President of Philadelphia's Equal Franchise Society, Mary Channing Wister fought for votes for women. As founder of the nation's first women's civic club, she set the model for a national reform movement. At the age of twenty-seven, she served on the Philadelphia School Board and became (as the Governor of Pennsylvania later said) "a great leader of educational thought and accomplishment." A California newspaper called her death in childbirth in 1913 "a national bereavement." Theodore Roosevelt, whom the Wisters visited in the White House, sent a handwritten note of condolence to Owen Wister: "Be brave . . . face the darkness fearlessly . . . you must bear yourself well in the Great Adventure."



*Philadelphia gentleman and novelist Owen Wister assumes his western attire and attitude in this early 1890s portrait at Yellowstone. His novel, *The Virginian*, is believed to have been read by more Americans in the first half of the 20th century than any other work of fiction.*

(Photo courtesy of American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming)



La Salle's Fine Arts Studio was also the birthplace of Mary's sister, Frances Anne (named after Fanny Kemble). Frances Anne was one of the founders of the Philadelphia Orchestra, served on its board of directors for half a century, and wrote its first history. Shyness was not Frances Anne's problem, and she once ruled the great (and imperious) conductor Leopold Stokowski "out of order" for suggesting that the Orchestra move from the Academy of Music to a new hall. Her Gimbel Award as the Outstanding Woman of Philadelphia honored her work with the orchestra, as well as her founding of the Society for the Preservation of Landmarks (to which Philadelphia owes the survival of part of its architectural heritage).

Two other children in this remarkable family of Wisters were born after 1876, when the William Rotch Wisters moved across Clarkson

avenue to a newly-built house named "Wister." (It was at "Wister," within a frisbee's toss of where they met, that Owen Wister and Mary Channing Wister married on April 21, 1898. That house, demolished in 1956, stood opposite what is now "Building Blocks," La Salle's child care center.) The William Rotch Wisters' next daughter, Ella Wister Haines, wrote detective thrillers and directed public relations for Philadelphia Electric. The one son, John Casper Wister, became one of America's most prominent horticulturists.

Wister Hall, Wister Woods, Wister Street: Wister is inextricably woven into La Salle's consciousness.

On October 1, 1994, Wister family descendants and friends will gather at La Salle University to celebrate the 250th birthday of their ancestral Philadelphia home, "Grumblethorpe." Once again, then, will merge the history of this family and the university built where so many remarkable Wisters lived.

*Dr. Butler, who is professor and chair of the university's English Department, recently had his edition of Wordsworth's and Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads* published by Cornell University Press.*