A Wakefield Bride Comes To Germantown

BY FRANCES ANNE WISTER

ON A September day in 1826, the 26th to be exact, preparations were to progress for a wedding in one of Germantown's best-known houses. There had been gossip and excitement about this event for sometime; for it was unusual for a young lady who was brought up elsewhere to be married in Germantown; or for a young lady not to be married in either her father's house, or in a Friends' Meeting House. It was doubly remarkable, because her father was such an important member of Meeting as William Logan Fisher of Wakefield, Bristol Township, Philadelphia County.

The bride was Sarah Logan Fisher. The bridegroom William Wister was the son of John Wister of "Vernon". Why, the gossips asked, could this marriage not take place at Vernon, known for its spacious rooms and carved mantelpieces? Could a more beautiful setting for a wedding have been found? Perhaps "settings for weddings" were too mundane to have even been thought of in 1826; also it would have been height of impropriety.

The gossips soon knew the answer, however. William Wister was not a member of Meeting! That precluded a wedding in Meeting. But why not, then, at Wakefield, the home of the bride? That thought was hastily abandoned because father interfered. No daughter of his who was committing the horrible mésalliance of marrying a "world's person", could be married in his house!

At that point, happily, the groom's uncle, Charles J. Wister, stepped into the picture and offered "Grumblethorpe". So there, under the circle in the ceiling of the northwest parlor, the young couple were wed by a Justice of the Peace. William Logan Fisher refused to attend.

What do we know about this daughter of Wakefield? What was the background that gave her determination to marry the man of her choice; and courage to go through with it no matter what lions were in the path?

That bride of Wakefield was of stalwart descent, to whom the prospect of being disowned by the Friends was a challenge. The Overseers had visited her and remonstrated violently, but to no avail. In May 1827 she was disowned by the Frankford Meeting. How came she by this determination? Was

New Bedford, Massachusetts, where she was born, or Wakefield responsible?

The Fisher Family

Sarah Logan Fisher¹ inherited traits of character from a number of distinguished ancestors. Among them was Thomas Fisher, 2nd, who built Wakefield.

Her emigrating Fisher ancestor was the Quaker John Fisher of Yorkshire, England who came over with William Penn in the "Welcome", in 1682. Housing shortages are not new. John Fisher discovered that when he and his wife and two children were obliged to spend their first winter in one of the caves on the banks of the Delaware. The original owner of that cave was Dr. Thomas Wynne, also a passenger on the "Welcome", and an ancestor of the Wister family.

After John came Thomas, who soon entered public life and held various offices. Among these were representative in the General Assembly, Justice of the Peace, and Judge in several Courts.

Thomas's son Joshua became important in 1756 owing to his "Chart of ye Bay of Delaware with all ye Sounds and Bearings, and such full Directions yt Strangers to ye Navigation of ye Bay, may by ye help of your Draft, bring ships into the River without a Pilot." This was the first such Chart, and remained the only one until the great Survey by the United States Government.

Joshua's house was at 110 South Front Street, and his country house was "The Cliff", still standing in Fairmount Park. He became a prominent merchant, and the firm of Joshua Fisher & Sons inaugurated the first regular line of packet ships between Philadelphia and London. The firm suffered much for their Quaker principles during the Revolution. Their stores of goods and records were confiscated and the doors and windows of their warehouse were boarded up.

Sarah Logan Fisher's New England Background

The bride was descended also, through her mother, from William Rotch of New Bedford, and Nantucket, Massachusetts. He is considered by authorities to have been the greatest whaling owner of his century. He, like the Fishers, suffered for his Quaker principles. His whaling fleet was destroyed during the Revolution; and he was tried for high treason. His

¹1806-1891.
²Quotation from a letter from the Governor of Pennsylvania.
daughter married Samuel Rodman of New Bedford, and his granddaughter, Mary Rodman, became Mrs. William Logan Fisher of Wakefield.

**Wakefield**

But to return to Wakefield and its owners, the mansion was built and occupied by Thomas Fisher, 2nd, son of Joshua and Sarah Rowland Fisher, about 1798. The land was a part of the original grant by William Penn to James Logan¹ of five hundred acres in Bristol Township, Philadelphia County, called by him “Stenton”. Wakefield on the original property was on ground high above the East Branch of the Wingoehocking Creek, and stretched to the Old York Road on the east across rolling fields, there being no streets at that time to mar the natural beauty of the place. The western boundary was about where 20th Street is now located, and the southern line touched the West Branch of the Wingoehocking.

Thomas Fisher, 2nd (1741–1810) married Sarah Logan, granddaughter of James Logan in 1772. The bride, who was the daughter of William Logan and Hannah Emlen, drew this portion of Stenton by lot in 1781. They called the estate “Wakefield” after Wakefield, England, the native place of Margery Maud, grandmother of Thomas Fisher, 2nd. The Fisher city residence was on Second Street below the bridge (over Dock Creek) and near the Governor’s mansion. Thomas Fisher was well-educated, and had travelled abroad. He became head of the firm of Joshua Fisher and Sons, occupied a prominent place in the city, and joined actively in the life of the time. He is described as a “handsome man of easy manners and very choice and elegant in his attire”, who was “worthy of the respect and love which were bestowed upon him by his family and by the community.” He was one of the “Exiles in Virginia” in 1777, in company with many other members of the Society of Friends, who suffered severely for their principles during the American Revolution. Through this period he remained a loyalist.

Sarah Logan, Mrs. Thomas Fisher, was a cultivated woman, who had made the most of her opportunities in her grandfather James Logan’s library, at Stenton. Contrary to the custom of the Society of Friends, she dressed herself, and her children richly in the prevailing fashion.

During the yellow fever epidemic in 1797, Thomas and Sarah Fisher, with their five children, hastily took refuge at Wakefield, living during the building of the house, in the small cottage that still stands on the estate. Mrs. Thomas Fisher died in 1796, before the completion of the mansion.

¹At 16th Street and Lindley Avenue.

²James Logan, who was of Scotch descent, was born at Lurgan, County Armagh, Ireland, in 1674. He was Secretary to William Penn and at various times held the positions of President of the Provincial Council of Pennsylvania, Commissioner of Property, Receiver-General of the Province, Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, and Mayor of Philadelphia. After his retirement from public office, he spent his declining years at Stenton, devoting himself to his estate and to his flower garden, as well as to reading, and scientific experiments, until his death in 1751.

**William Logan Fisher (1781-1863)**

After the death of Thomas Fisher, the property descended to his son, William Logan Fisher (1781–1862) who married first, Mary Rodman of New Bedford, Massachusetts, and second, Sarah Lindley of New Garden, Chester County, Pennsylvania. These two mistresses of Wakefield made it famous for hospitality. New England relatives, as well as members of the Society of Friends during their visitations, found a warm welcome within those doors. William Logan Fisher was an independent thinker, and a voluminous writer of books and tracts. He was a Charter Member of Frankford Monthly Meeting until 1827, when he joined the Hicksite Friends, and was disowned by the Orthodox Meeting. His portrait, a copy of the original owned by the Fox family, hangs at Wakefield.

Elizabeth Rodman Fisher (1810–1875) was the last member of the family bearing the Fisher name to live at Wakefield, William Logan Fisher having bequeathed the house and about forty acres to his unmarried daughter. She was “endowed with fine powers of mind, with a remarkable strength of character, and a kindness and generosity of heart.” She is still remembered as one who made the “beautiful ancestral home the centre of delightful hospitality, and of gentle charities.” Miss Fisher was the virtual head of the family, and brothers, sisters, nephews and nieces turned to her for advice and help. Her death after a lingering illness left a void in the family circle which was never filled.

Wakefield then passed by purchase in 1876 to Mary Rodman Fisher, youngest daughter of William Logan Fisher, and wife of Samuel Fox. On her death in 1903 the property was inherited by her two surviving children, Hannah Fox and Joseph Mickle Fox. He and his family occupied the house from 1892 until his death in 1918.

Throughout the occupancy of the Fisher family, Wakefield was a place of beauty, and famous for the charm of the mansion and its grounds. Special features were its splendid forest trees, its garden and greenhouses, and charming “Sunny Side Farm”, without which no country estate could maintain life.

In 1919 Wakefield, with a few of its remaining acres, was purchased by the City of Philadelphia,
and is now in the custody of the Commissioners of Fairmount Park.

Miss Hannah Fox's devotion to her family inspired her to establish a Trust Fund in 1927, "to assist in the upkeep of Wakefield for so long a time as such dwelling shall be occupied without rent for educational, civic or similar uses which are of public benefit." She died in 1933, happy in the thought that Wakefield, beloved homestead of the Fisher family, would be forever safe from despoiling hands.

In 1925 the Commissioners granted the use of Wakefield to Chapter II, Philadelphia, Colonial Dames of America. Now under the terms of the Hannah Fox Trust, and with the aid of the income derived therefrom, the Chapter assumes the care of the house which is used as headquarters for the Society.

The Bride

We have no means of knowing what the emotions of the bride were on that September day in 1826. During her girlhood, Wakefield was so remote that she was obliged to spend the school week in Germantown, returning home for Sundays only. So at the age of twenty it was still a long trip for her to make to reach Germantown on her wedding day. It was a longer trip to New Bedford by carriage, on the wedding journey. They were accompanied by the groom's sister, Miss Anne, of Vernon, and his cousin, Mary Ruschenberger. It was considered unsuitable for a young married couple to travel unchaperoned.

On their return William and Sarah Wister made their home at Belfield, Germantown, and she lived up to her ancestral heritage during a long life, as a charitable and hospitable member of the community, beloved by all.

Belfield was the scene of a golden wedding in 1876. It was also the scene of numberless hospitable gatherings which included many relatives and friends. Also the six Wister sons, and their wives and children, who were devoted to "Sarah Logan Wister, née Fisher," (as she always signed her name)—the Wakefield Bride who came to Germantown.

Frances Anne Wister was born in Germantown and is devoted to the place of her birth. She was a founder of the Society for the Preservation of Landmarks in 1931.

To this Soc. we owe the fact that the Powel House in Philadelphia is still standing and also "Grumblethorpe" in Germantown. Another old landmark which Miss Wister is active in preserving is "Upsala," where she is Chairman of the Trustees.

Recipient of the Gimbel Award 1936 and designated Distinguished Daughter of Pennsylvania 1949, her greatest work for our city has been in the Women's Committee for the Philadelphia Orchestra. Her 50 years as a member of that Committee was celebrated this spring. For 42 years she has been its president, and in June 1954 she will complete 49 years' service on the Orchestra Association's Board of Directors.

Miss Wister is a trustee of the First Unitarian Church of Phila., Vice-President of the Civic Club since 1907, except for 7 years when she was its president; and member of Colonial Dames of America, Chapter II Philadelphia, which has its headquarters at Wakefield.

She received the Chapter's Elise Willing Balch gold medal in 1933.

The Legend of the Thirteen Families

USUALLY stress has been laid upon the "thirteen Crefeld families" as founders of Germantown. The legend of the thirteen families takes no account of Pastorius, the leader of the community, and the group of perhaps a dozen persons who came with him, all of whom joined in the founding of Germantown.

The understanding that there were thirteen Crefeld families comes from the fact that on the ship's list of the Concord, on which they came to America, thirteen "heads of families" were named. But all these "heads of families" were not married men. Unmarried male adults were set down as "heads of families."

From the fact that thirty-three "freights" were registered for the group, it has been assumed that there were thirty-three persons in the Crefeld party. However, children under the age of 12 years were counted as a half "freight," and infants less than one year old were not counted at all. So it is certain there were more than thirty-three persons.

The monument, which the German-American Alliance erected in Vernon Park, Germantown, with the help of an appropriation from Congress, bears names of the thirteen "heads of families" from Crefeld, and also that of Pastorius, but no mention is made of the settlers who came with Pastorius and landed on August 20.

One distinction may be made between the two groups of pioneers which perhaps has helped to concentrate the glory of their united achievement upon the heads of the Crefelders. Pastorius and his group had been engaged by the Frankford land purchasers, and therefore came to Pennsylvania as employees of those purchasers, usually called the Frankford Company. The Crefelders came upon their own initiative to found a new settlement.