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Charles Willson Peale at Belfield

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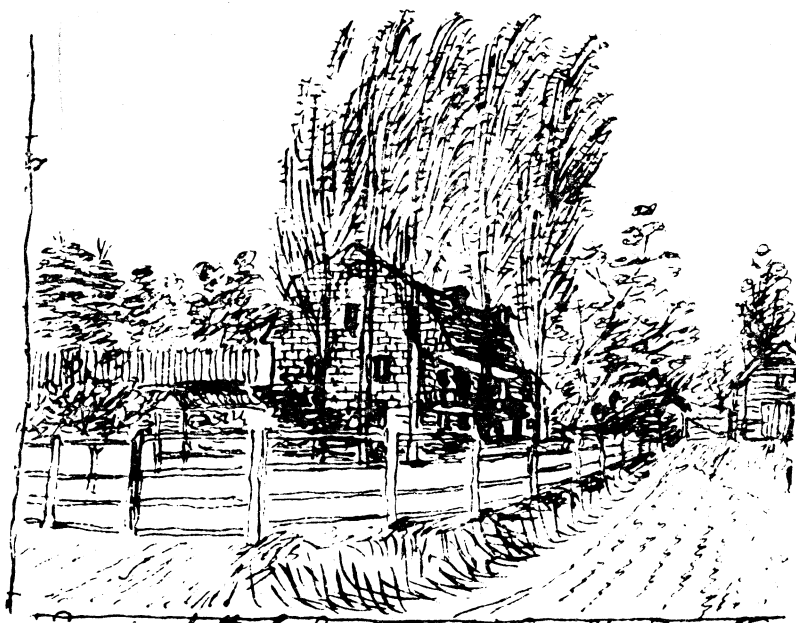
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Belfield Mansion. Garden fence at left.
LETTER BOOK, July 22, 1810

CHARLES WILLSON PEALE AT BELFIELD

A selection of the works of Charles Willson Peale
executed between 1810 and 1821 while in residence
at Belfield Farm

THE PRESIDENTIAL SUITE
LA SALLE COLLEGE
PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA

OCTOBER 1971

Open daily 11:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.

INTRODUCTION

Thomas M. Ridington

LA SALLE COLLEGE takes pleasure in presenting this sampling of the paintings and sketches of Charles Willson Peale, executed between 1810 and 1821, to acquaint its students and friends with the rich heritage which lies very near at hand. Peale created these works during the eleven years he lived at Belfield Farm, from which land for the present campus of La Salle College was purchased in 1926. Today, only Twentieth Street separates La Salle from Peale's former residence and the famous garden he created there, now the home of our gracious neighbors, Doctor and Mrs. Daniel Blain.

Peale was 69 years old when he purchased Belfield in 1810. He wished to give up control of the Museum we know so well from the self-portrait at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, although he continued to contribute paintings to its gallery of famous men and to help it in other ways. In fact, that self-portrait which shows Peale drawing aside a vast red curtain to reveal the collection in its installation on the second floor of Independence Hall was painted the year after the artist left Belfield, in 1822 when the artist was 81 years old.

Thus, the habit of an enormously active and inventive life proved too strong for Peale. Freed from his Museum duties, he devoted his energies to the pursuit of farming and ornamental gardening with such force that Belfield soon became a showplace that drew crowds of visitors from far and wide to taste its rare delights. Perhaps the best way to get the flavor of this remarkable garden is through a rather long passage which I am able to quote with the generous permission of its author, Charles Coleman Sellers, a direct descendant of Charles Willson Peale, and with the kind approval of the American Philosophical Society. Dr. Sellers has written the definitive biography of his ancestor and has catalogued his works. It is the entry describing the garden with its architectural and ornamental features from the Transactions of the American Philosophical Society, Volume 59, Part 3, 1969, that I wish to quote:

"On February 15, 1810, Peale bought a plantation of about 100 acres in Bristol Township near Germantown, planning, as he approached his seventieth year, to retire to a new life of rural productivity. He called the place at first 'Farm Persevere,' changing this after two years to 'Belfield.' The new choice is significant. What had been and remained, earnestly dedicated to the cause of scientific agriculture had become, in fact, a place of amusement, wonder, and beauty. Utility was never abandoned, yet admittedly never successful. The hillside garden, with its winding paths, herbs, and flowers everywhere, its fountains and monuments, its ornamented nook, dell and cave, and the old house overlooking all, was a delight to all and in this an unqualified success. As with the Museum, so with 'the Vaux Hall of Germantown' -- from the inspiration of Reason and Science had grown a creation of exciting and romantic charm.

'We can take 1813 as the date when artistry and utility joined hands, bearing in mind that agricultural and mechanical experiment, the cotton mill, wind mill and the rest, were all in full swing throughout the Belfield years, and that when Peale at last deplored the time lost of 'fripperies' he had the whole united effort in mind. From the first, he had recognized the slope of the south side of the house as the best place for a garden. For two seasons, he planted it with potatoes, a crop expected to prepare the soil for this other purpose. In the summer of 1813 it blossomed out as his 'hobby-horse' with all the time of one of his hired men assigned to it, and he and his sons shared the happy labor. A system of drains was built to protect it from erosion. The path from the front door out to the sun dial was extended into others winding downward among flower beds and fruit trees to summer houses, fountain and pool and all the rest.

'A spring was discovered in the course of this work and, digging back into the hillside and covering it over with an arch of stone, a romantic cave produced, from which the water flowed out into the garden pool. The cave proved too warm for the winter storage of vegetables, but this gave him the idea of a greenhouse above it, warmed by an opening down into the cave, and this worked so well that the greenhouse grew its flowers all year round. There was a drop of 15 feet from the farm's spring house and fish pond to the garden pool, and in 1813 he and Franklin completed a fountain in the pool, fed from the higher source. It was almost two fountains in one, for it could throw a jet of water 13 feet in air, or be made to hold a gilded ball 5 feet aloft upon the flashing water. Peale wrote to Angelica, August 2, 1813:

'We are now beginning to ornament about the house. Our garden is much admired. Franklin is beginning to show his taste in neat workmanship. He has built an elegant summer house on that commanding spot which you may remember being pointed out to you. It is a hexagon base with 6 well-turned pillars supporting a circular top and dome on which is placed a bust of Genl. Washington. It would have been more appropriate to have had 13 pillars, but I did not want so large a building, and it was work enough for Franklin to turn those 6 pillars.'

'Whether the bust of Washington was Peale's own..., or, perhaps, a William Rush carving, cannot be determined.

'And to Angelica again, November 12, 1813, 'I have made an Obelisk to terminate a walk in the Garden. Read in Dictionary of Arts for a description of them.'

This was surely George Gregory's Dictionary of Arts and Sciences, which tells us:

'OBELISK, a truncated quadrangular, and slender pyramid, raised as an ornament, and frequently charged either with inscriptions or hieroglyphics.

'Obelisks appear to be of very great antiquity, and to be first raised to transmit to posterity precepts of philosophy, which were cut in hieroglyphical characters; afterwards they were used to immortalize the great actions of heroes, and the memory of persons beloved. . . .

'The proportions in the height and thickness are nearly the same in all obelisks; their height being nine or nine and a half, and sometimes ten times their thickness; and their diameter at the top never less than half, and never greater than three-fourths of that at the bottom.'

'This one perpetuated moral precepts, some of them selected from Nathan Bailey's Universal Etymological English Dictionary. There was one on each of the four sides:

'Never return an injury. It is a noble triumph to overcome evil by good.
Labour while you are able. It will give health to the body, and peaceful content to the Mind!
He that will live in peace and rest,
Must hear and see and say the best.
Oy, voy, & te tas, si tu veux, vivre en paix.
Neglect no duty.'

He made these momentos to remind him of his duties, as he would often see them in his walks for exercise or amusement, and having made them he declares that he considered them as sacred Laws to govern himself thereby. (A.)

∟ C.W. Peale's manuscript Autobiography.∟

Years later, January 14, 1824, he wrote of his wish to be buried at the foot of the obelisk. 'This had been my determination ever since I painted those inscriptions.'

"In addition to Franklin's summer house there was another, halfway down the hill, wholly his own creation. It was in 'the Chinese taste,' simply a wide flat roof for shade, supported on thin posts with arched brackets, and with comfortable seats at back and sides. 'The proprietor made summer houses (so called), roofs to ward off the Sunbeams with seats of rest. One made of the Chinese taste, dedicated to meditation, with the following sentiments round within it:' (A.)

'∟ On the left as entering ∟

Meditate on the Creation of Worlds, which perform their evolutions in prescribed periods!

'∟ At center ∟

On the changes and revolutions of the Globe which we inhabit: on the wonderful variety of animals inhabiting the Earth, the air and the waters: their immense number and diversity; their beauty and delicacy of structure; some emmencely large, and others gradually descending into a minuteness almost eluding our sight, even when aided by the Microscope! All all have ample support:--

'∟ At right ∟

Then let me ask myself, Why am I here? Am I blessed with more profound reason than other

Animals? If so, Let me be thankful:
let me meditate on the past, on the
present and on the future.'

'The garden having progressed thus far, few major improvements were made until the summer of 1819, when the Tool Box and the Pedestal of Memorable Events were built and painted. 'From time to time,' he tells us in the Autobiography, 'he found some new object of conveniency in his improvements of the Garden, and with every conveniency he always wished to combine with it some moral sentiment to augment the utility.' So it was with these two new features:

'He wanted a place to keep the garden seeds & Tools, and in a part of the Garden where a seat in the shade was often wanted, he built a shed or small room, and to hide that salt like box, and to try his art of Painting, he made the front like gate way with a step to form a seat, and above, steps painted as representing a passage through an arch beyond which was represented a western sky, and to ornament the upper part over the arch, he painted several figures on boards cut to the outlines of said figures as representing statues in scupture. And that his design of those figures might be fully understood by visitors he painted two pedestals ornamented with a ball to crown each.' (A.)

'On the two pedestals he painted inscriptions explaining the figures above. It is difficult to reconstruct the figures from the description of their creator's old age, but there was apparently a central group, with large separate figure at each end, as follows: Center: A bee hive and children (Industry and Increase) flanked by Truth and Temperance on one side and Industry ('with her distaff resting on the

cornucopia") on the other. At one side: America holding an evenly-balanced scale ('as justifying her acts') and with the Fasces ('emblematical of the several states') held together by the Rattlesnake ('innocent if not meddled with, but terrible if molested'). The Fasces, representing Congress, were 'placed upright as that body ought to be,' and an owl, at their base, represented wisdom. At opposite side: Mars. Under the central figure appeared a statement that 'A wise policy will do away with wars. Hence Mars is fallen.'

'The figure of Mars was made on the end of the shed roof to hide it. The making of this is rather of the Political cast, yet he had long given over being active in Politicks, but choose by it to shew his dislike of war.' (A.)

"At the end of another of the garden walks one came upon the Pedestal of Memorable Events, designed as 'a refreshment to the memories of visitors to the Garden' (A).. On it were inscribed the ninety memorable events of North America, from the first discoveries to the Battle of New Orleans, with a space left for the first crossing of the Atlantic by steam.

"He dwelt upon the garden in his Autobiography, willing to condemn, eager to condone. 'As the object of this work is to make the portrait of the man, it is proper to give all his firperies, follies more properly.' All this labor in wood and paint, he admitted, would soon pass away.

'Yet the labour gave health and happiness is the result of constant employment. His inventions pleased himself, and they gave pleasure to others, and they offended none, being perfectly innocent. But the economist

will say that time, money and labour was mispent. He answers, that happiness is worth millions.'

"Belfield and its garden still survive, the winding walks and even that summer house 'in the Chinese taste,' still giving rest and happiness as the city crowds around."

Not counting sketches, Peale painted well over a dozen views of Belfield. This exhibit contains almost all of these which are now known. Of these, BELFIELD GARDEN (Sellers no. 108) affords the best view of the garden just described. Because the area depicted has remained virtually unchanged since Peale's time, it is very easy to locate each of the wonders portrayed. In the same manner, the other views of Belfield seem familiar to us, even if we have driven along Belfield Avenue only a few times. The sketches in the LETTER BOOK (Sellers no. 136) have a remarkable immediacy about them that brings that period very close to us.

Before the development of carbon paper, the sender would have to rewrite his letter if he wished to retain a copy of it. Peale's LETTER BOOK shows that he copied his sketches as well. These on display were in a letter to his son Rembrandt Peale, then studying in Paris. The date was July 22, 1810, and he was describing his new property to his son.

Although these sketches seem very clear and easy to read for us on this side of the Impressionist Movement, the trend in Peale's day was to take great care with all the visible details. In fact, in portraiture, Peale and his sons made use of a device which produced a drawing called a Physiognotrace. This device allowed the artist literally to trace the outline of the person he was portraying on to the paper. It is likely that Peale used a similar device to locate the major forms in landscapes; and for that reason, many of these landscapes are the same size, 11 by 16 inches. He relates in a letter to Rembrandt of December 27 "...I mean to paint

some other views 21 Ins. by 15 Ins. for accomplishing of which I have made a Machine to take drawings of this size." (Sellers, Supplement, p. 41.) The sketches are very free and would represent only the first step in the preparation of a painting, the location of the major forms. We do not have here any of the carefully measured and detailed drawings that would come before the finished oil paintings you see about you. Likewise, the careful rendering of the leaves in the foliage in the oil paintings reveals the technique that was respected in Peale's time. In fact, this respect for almost photographic reality is an American characteristic and has strong adherents even today.

Thus Peale's art has a strong appeal for us because they are so filled with realistic details. Nowhere is this more apparent than in his portraits. The ones in this exhibit were all destined for the gallery of famous men in the Museum where they would be enshrined in their gilded oval frames row upon row high above the other exhibits in the long room of the Museum. (See Jessie J. Poesch, 'A Precise View of Peale's Museum, Antiques, Volume 78, 1960, pp. 343-345.)

Our selection affords some interesting comparisons. Two of our company, HERNANDO CORTEZ (Sellers no. 157) and AMERIGO VESPUCCI (Sellers no. 888) are, of course, imaginary likenesses which he based on copies of paintings in Italy. Like most copies they suffer in comparison with the portraits taken from live subjects. The comparison is an instructive one, for it reveals Peale's strengths and his weaknesses.

Other comparisons that illuminate his art are that these are all variations upon the bust portrait type, that they portray young and old persons, persons he knew well and persons he hoped to know. One may even judge the effects of age upon paintings that had been cared for differently in this array.

I think it is most revealing in the face of these portraits to repeat the passage quoted by Dr. Sellers in the list of Peale's portraits (Transactions, Volume 42, Part 1, page 12) from his Autobiography in which he tells about the painting of portraits.

'The art of painting portraits cannot be attained without a vast deal of practice. The artist must love the art, or he will not succeed to perfection. It is not like the painting of still life, the painting of objects that have no motion, which any person of tolerable genius with some application may acquire. To paint from the life, first the general proportions of the features and other parts of the head should be exact, the general tone of the coloring be conceived. This may be called the great outline. Next comes the true forming of each feature. But before all this is done, at the first sketching of the work, it must be determined what shall be the expression, and in this must every feature accord, a unity of the whole to give good effect, for if there is a smile in the mouth, the eyes, the nose, the cheeks and even the forehead must have its share. Also in some emotions the coloring comes in for a part of the expression. Therefore expression may be considered the most difficult part of the art, and in a portrait it must be difficult to keep the person who is sitting for the likeness-to-be detained for a few moments in the expression of love, of pleasure, of feeling benevolence. And, without the model before the artist, how can he make a true imitation? Therefore he must also possess the qualifications of agreeable conversation, judgment how best to engage the attention of his sitter and a good memory and store of anecdotes as may keep up the ideas of the subject to be expressed. And lastly he ought to know what the effect of time will have on the colors he makes use of, and the manner of laying them on in the picture.

"After what has been said, some would suppose nothing further was necessary to form a good portrait painter. No, he must know the best means to produce a fine effect in the construction of the background

of his picture, for however so well the head and other parts of the picture is painted, yet if the background is not fully adapted to give relief and effect to the whole, the picture may appear dull or feeble. One other, yet not the least to produce a fine picture, is the attitude. The lines must have grace, not affected, but natural. And the action, if in a picture in a size to show the person, should be appropriate to the expression intended. And even in a head-size canvas, the air of the head is all-important.

"If a painter possesses all these qualifications and paints a portrait in such perfection as to produce a perfect illusion of sight, in such perfection that the spectator believes the real person is there, that happy painter will deserve to be caressed by the greatest of mortal beings."

Peale was himself a very lively man, and it was this quality, more than any other, I believe, that transmits itself through the gloom of age in these portraits. The pose may be stilted and stiff for our taste and the coloring too low-keyed; but even in the least favored of them, there is life. The vision is spare, there is economy in the application of paint and thrift in the use of canvas, but a living presence looks back at us out of the bare niche that encloses him.

These reflect admired qualities of the age, qualities that ring around practicality which was at the very heart of America in that Age of Reason. We see it reflected in the wise sayings of Benjamin Franklin, in the determination of the men who brought law and order out of the chaos of Revolution, in the doggedness of the men who stamped their image on the wilderness and in the plain grace of those few buildings left to us from the Philadelphia of James Logan, of William Wister or Charles Willson Peale.

As the time for the bicentennial celebration approaches, we honor the great heritage represented by these paintings. By so doing and by acquainting our family of friends, neighbors, alumni, students and faculty with it, we also become a part of that heritage and are the richer for it.

THE CATALOGUE

A catalogue raisonné of Charles Willson Peale's work has been compiled by Charles Coleman Sellers and is to be found in two volumes of the Transactions of the American Philosophical Society:

Portraits and Miniatures by Charles Willson Peale,
Volume 43, Part 1, 1952.

Charles Willson Peale with Patron and Populace,
Volume 59, Part 3, 1969.

Both the author and the Society have given their kind permission to use and to quote the material in these volumes. I wish to take this opportunity to thank Dr. Sellers for his good advice and encouragement in this undertaking. Without his active participation we would not have been able to secure many of these paintings for the exhibition.

I would like to give recognition to Timothy E. Osborne, a student of mine at La Salle College. His research to augment the portrait listings and his development of a slide lecture introducing this exhibit are in partial fulfillment of his course work in art history.

Most of all, I want to thank the several private individuals and the institutions named herein for their friendly cooperation. All of them went far beyond what might be expected of lenders in accommodating themselves to our needs. Their interest, patience and generosity warrants our deep respect and sincere gratitude.

Thomas M. Ridington
Assistant Professor &
Curator, Study Collection of Art

PEN AND INK SKETCHES

THE LETTER BOOK (Sellers no. 136)

These volumes contain copies of letters Peale wrote between 1772 and 1826 and include 154 sketches. The sketches we have on view come from a letter to Rembrandt Peale dated July 22, 1810 and are titled and numbered by Dr. Sellers as follows:

- 25 Map of Belfield Farm
- 26 Belfield, "Just within the gate leading to Germantown."
- 27 Belfield, a nearer view of the tenant house.
- 28 Tenant house, with roof of the mansion seen over the garden fence.
- 29 Belfield mansion. Garden fence at left.
- 30 Front view of Belfield mansion.
- 31 Belfield mansion and barns.
- 32 Belfield, view from the barn door.

Many other sketches relating to the farm appear in these letters, but they are mostly of special farm implements. There is a view of the Obelisk in a letter of November 12, 1813, to Angelica Peal Robinson, and two more views sent to her November 22, 1815.

Lent by the American Philosophical Society,
Philadelphia

LANDSCAPE PAINTING

BELFIELD GARDEN, dated 1816, oil on canvas, 28 1/4" x 36 1/4".
(Sellers no. 108)

This painting is mentioned twice in Peale's letters. He notes that it is near completion November 22, 1815, in a letter to Angelica Peale Robinson; however, as he wrote his son, Rembrandt, on August 14, 1816, the growth of the plants have made changes necessary and the painting is not finished.

Peale was concerned with the linear perspective in this painting because the view is up hill. As anyone who has used a camera knows, buildings and large vertical objects like trees become distorted, appearing narrower at their tops than is normal, when the camera is tilted up at an angle. A person looking straight ahead at such a hillside would have to raise his head to see the tops of the trees, yet Peale is able to locate the crest of the hill in the center of his canvas and place the tops of the trees well within the upper border of the composition without giving the impression of optical distortion.

It is remarkable that the garden area has changed so little. With this painting and the sketches in the LETTER BOOK, Belfield Gardens could easily be restored to the form it had in 1816.

Private Collection

BELFIELD AND GERMANTOWN, originally fourteen paintings (Sellers no. 109)

Between August 1816, and February 1817, painted fourteen views of Belfield and Germantown on canvases 11" x 16" of which only five had been located. Four of these (Sellers nos. 109 - 2 to 5) are displayed here. BELFIELD (Sellers no. 109 - 1) is in the collection of the Detroit Institute of Art.

Since Dr. Sellers' listing, another canvas 11" x 16" obviously a part of this series, has made its appearance and will be listed here as number six.

Three of these views depict Belfield Farm.

BELFIELD GATE (Sellers 109 - 3)

Shows again the kind of improvement, in woodwork, that helped make Peale's farm so remarkable. The finial on the arch seems to be in the shape of a pineapple, thought of as a symbol of hospitality and for that reason often represented in colonial homes, especially in dining rooms. Again Peale shows interest in the perspective. The land seems to slope away from the viewer and most of the tree tops are in the lower half of the canvas.

BELFIELD LAND (S 109 - 2) and COUNTRY LANE AT BELFIELD (no. 6).

These seem to be related views of the same lane. There are some who see in the coloring of these landscapes the hand of James Peale, also an artist and the brother of Charles Willson. Fourteen canvases more or less being worked on at the same time and the close family ties Charles Willson tried to maintain make it possible that other hands helped in the production of these canvases. However, Peale's letters to his son Rembrandt, also a painter and then recently returned from study in France, disclose that the elder Peale was experimenting anew in color upon his son's instruction. Perhaps having these works before us will help solve the problem. Dr. Sellers directs us to an article by Jessie J. Poesch (Antiques 78, 1960, p. 345) where the attribution to Charles Willson is reaffirmed.

MILL NEAR GERMANTOWN (Sellers no. 190 - 4 and 5)

This is the title given to both these canvases. Many mills had sprung up in the neighborhood, and it may be presumed the one seen here in two views is nearby. Again Peale has taken great care with his perspective so that we can gauge both the relative positions of the buildings and the angle and elevation from which they are viewed.

All together, these comprise a remarkably clear documentation of the Belfield area before the advent of photography. This is not to say that Peale did not alter details for reason of compositional balance; but to suggest that for an artist trained in the 18th century, Peale was uncommonly concerned with landscape as documentation. Who of us do not have photographs of places we have lived or visited? Thus, in so many ways, Peale is close to us in the 20th century; nowhere more so than here.

Private Collections

BELFIELD FROM THE ROAD TO GERMANTOWN, October 1818, oil on canvas, 14 1/2" x 20 1/2" (Sellers no. 110)

This further view of Belfield is just under the larger canvas-size mentioned earlier in a reference to a device to provide the artist a quick and accurate outline of a subject. In any event, this painting completes our series and may be viewed as a continuation of Peale's careful process in which we see particularized nature observed.

Lent by Mrs. Jessie Sellers Walton

PORTRAITS

All of these portraits show only the head and shoulders -- or bust view -- of the sitter, although slight changes in the angle of the three-quarter view provides variety. Moreover, all of these were intended for display in the gallery of famous men in the Museum where they would be ranked side by side. Most were provided with a gilded oval mat which had the effect of concentrating the attention of the viewer on the face of the subject.

The paintings are listed alphabetically. The first five have been lent by the Independence National Historical Park and the last two by the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

JAMES BIDDLE (1783-1848) oil on canvas, 29 x 24 inches, 1816
(Sellers no. 46)

Charles Willson Peale was wary of painting war heroes for the gallery of his "Great School of Nature." However, he was impressed by James Biddle who was a man of great literary tastes. Peale's adulation for explorers may have influenced him, for Captain Biddle left soon thereafter to explore the Columbia River.

James Biddle was a Quaker born in Philadelphia. By his seventeenth birthday he had become a midshipman in the small American Navy. He served in the Barbary Wars aboard the "Philadelphia" in 1803. On October 31, 1803, the "Philadelphia" was grounded near Tripoli and he was imprisoned for nineteen months. He also saw action in the War of 1812 and in 1813 he commanded the American ship "Hornet." It was his distinction to capture the last British warship, the "Penguin." Still active after the War, he negotiated the first treaty between the United States and China.

HERNANDO CORTEZ (1485-1547) oil on canvas, 24 x 20 inches, 1816
(Sellers no. 157)

The portrait of Cortez is included in the group of "noted voyagers" which Peale copied from the Barlow collection for his Museum gallery. In his correspondence with Mrs. Joel Barlow he mentions his discontent with the original works and his attempts to improve the quality in his copies. Also included in this collection, which was done in the spring of 1816, are Columbus and Magellan. The original works which served as the models for Peale's portraits, the work of anonymous artists, are in the Gallery of Famous Men in the Uffizi Gallery, Florence.

JOSEPH HIESTER (1752-1832) oil on canvas, 24 x 20 inches, 1821
(Sellers no. 379)

Joseph Hiester won the governorship in Pennsylvania in 1820. Peale wanted to represent the governors of the state in his gallery and so he wrote Hiester for a sitting. He was not without hope, however, of Hiester being favorably disposed towards the Museum.

Hiester was born of poor German parents in Berks County, Pennsylvania. In 1771, he married his employer's daughter and became partners in a general store. A Whig in the Revolution, he was an organizer of troops for Washington. He was captured by the British in 1776 and served three months aboard the infamous prisonship, "New Jersey." He later saw action in the battle of Germantown where he was slightly wounded. After the war, Hiester was an assemblyman in Pennsylvania and a United States Congressman. In 1820, he was elected governor over William Findley by a scant 1605 votes. True to his political outlook, he refused to stand for re-election.

STEPHEN H. LONG (1784-1864) oil on canvas, 24 1/2 x 20 1/4 inches, 1819 (Sellers no. 492).

In 1819 Stephen H. Long headed an expedition to the Rocky Mountains. The exploration excited Peale's imagination and he painted portraits of the prominent members of the group including his son, Titian. Titian Peale was an assistant naturalist on the team of explorers and his father sought to capture the daring of its leader, Major Long.

A scholarly man, Long served two years at West Point as an assistant mathematics teacher. After his successful exploration of the Rocky Mountains he became a member of the Civil Engineers. In 1827 he served as a consultant for the B & O Railroad and in 1836, he was awarded a patent for a new way of bracing wooden bridges.

CHARLES THOMSON (1729-1824) oil on canvas, 24 x 20 inches, 1819 (Sellers no. 863).

Peale was an ardent admirer of Charles Thomson for his long-term service as secretary to the Continental Congress. Thomson as a scholar, teacher, and a member of the American Philosophical Society was twice honored by Peale's brush.

Charles Thomson was born in County Derry, Ireland, and came to America at the age of ten. An avid student, he was, by 1750 a tutor at the Philadelphia Academy instituted by Benjamin Franklin. He was later a master at the William Penn Charter School.

In 1760 he gave up teaching and quickly became prosperous as a respected merchant. His honesty was well known and in 1757 he kept the records of the Indian treaty at Eaton, Pennsylvania. He was adopted into the Delaware tribe as "The Man Who Tells the Truth." He later became an activist for the cause of freedom in America. He was chosen by the first Continental Congress as its secretary and served that post for fifteen years. In 1789, he retired to his estate at Harriton, Bryn Mawr, to write a scholarly translation of the Bible.

WILLIAM TILGHMAN (1756-1827) oil on canvas, 23 7/8 x 19 7/8 inches, 1816 (Sellers no. 874).

This portrait is rather difficult to date, but it is thought to have been done in 1816 when William Tilghman helped sponsor a movement to have Peale's Museum assume a permanent foundation with city support.

William Tilghman was born in Talbot County, Maryland and graduated from the University of Pennsylvania in 1772. During the Revolution he was a Loyalist, but afterwards he became a supporter of the Constitution. In 1806 he became Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania and president of the American Philosophical Society. Tilghman was a staunch supporter of American industry and for the last ten years of his life he wore only American made clothes.

AMERIGO VESPUCCI (1451-1512) oil on canvas, 23 1/4 x 19 1/4 inches, 1816 (Sellers no. 888).

In 1816 Peale was interested in copying portraits of famous explorers for his gallery. He began work on the painting of Vespucci first because as Peale wrote, "...it is the most faulty in the coloring, and the most difficult to make a decent picture of it. I flatter myself that I shall be able to make them more interesting by a more natural tone of tints and better drawing -- yet I shall strictly keep the character." (Sellers, Portraits, p. 214.) The original painting from which Peale made his copy is now in the Uffizi Gallery, Florence.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

For the convenience of those who would find a fuller account of Peale's sojourn at Belfield, the following short listing is offered:

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Charles Willson Peale (Charles Scribner's Sons, New York) 1969

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A Supplement to Portraits and Miniatures by Charles Willson Peale with a Survey of His Work in Other Genres, Transactions of the American Philosophical Society, Volume 59, Part 3, (Philadelphia) 1969

Articles by Jessie J. Poesch

'Mr. Peale's 'Farm Persevere': Some
Documentary Views,' Proceedings of the
American Philosophical Society, Volume 100,
Number 6, December, 1956, pp. 545-556.

'Germantown Landscapes,' Peale Family
Amusement,' Antiques, Volume 72,
November, 1957, pp. 434-439.

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SUPPLEMENT

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THE HOUSE ACROSS THE STREET

F. Lewis Donaghy, F.S.C.

In leaving the Twentieth Street side of the main campus of La Salle College, one notices an attractive gray and white colonial house set in almost rural surroundings behind a large, high wall. Even for historic Germantown, there is a special bearing about the house, the wooded fields around it, its fenced truck and formal gardens that suggest the past. And indeed the house, together with its surrounding land which at one time extended over 2000 acres, does have an interesting history, a history which La Salle College has now come to share. Today the College occupies several tracts of this land, acquired through the years since 1926 and originally all a part of an estate called Belfield, the center of which was the gambrel-roofed house across the street.

Actually, negotiations for the purchase of the land which makes up the present campus of the College were first begun in 1925. College administrators under the leadership of Brother Dorotheus Lewis, F.S.C. were interested in a ten-acre plot fronting on Olney Avenue and extending southward to Ellicot Road. James Starr, one of the heirs of the Belfield estate, owned nine-tenths of an acre where the elbow of College Hall stands today. When first approached about the sale of his land, he was reluctant to sell. The remaining ten acres desired by the College belonged to five heirs of the Fox estate, also part of original Belfield, who also seemed unwilling to sell because of the large income tax which would be incurred. In view of these difficulties, the College was fortunate in having the legal services of J. Burrwood Daly. An astute negotiator, Burrwood Daly, by April 20, 1926, had secured a tentative agreement of sale with negligible restrictions. It was agreed that the property would be used only to carry on the operations of the College, and that any necessary "garage, boilerhouse, power-house and kitchen" would be located at least one hundred feet

from all boundary lines. Three days after the tentative agreement was secured, the Board of Managers of La Salle College voted to purchase ten acres of the Fox estate for \$200,000 and the remaining fraction from James Starr for \$27,500. After further legal clarifications and understandings, title to ten and a fraction acres of Belfield was transferred to the College. On this historic land the present campus was initiated.

In earliest colonial times, the land in question was part of a grant made by William Penn to one Samuel Richardson. This grant is not to be confused with that made to Daniel Pastorius and his followers, which eventually became Germantown. Richardson's grant was within the territorial limits of Bristol Township, County of Philadelphia. Some years later, in 1696, Richardson gave 500 acres to his son Joseph, and it is believed that the original mansion on the Belfield property was built at that time. However, the house was much smaller than it is today. The estate remained in the Richardson family through 1726. Between that year and 1810, the land was possessed by the Keyzers, Funks, Neaves, Ecksteins, Correys, Smiths, and McShanes, names traditional to the environs of Germantown. Finally, in 1810, Belfield reverted to Charles Willson Peale, famous American artist.

No, George Washington did not sleep here. Although Charles Willson Peale was commissioned by the Supreme Executive Council in 1779 to paint a portrait of Washington, it is obvious that Peale had not yet moved to Belfield, although he knew of the place from his visits to Washington's headquarters during the Battle of Germantown. No doubt the Washington portrait was painted in Peale's city residence. (The original portrait, incidentally, was destroyed by the British. Fortunately, Peale had made a mezzotint of the portrait and managed to preserve it for posterity.)

Actually, poor health and perhaps old age forced Peale to look for a country home. When he took over Belfield, it consisted of about 100 acres. He described it in a letter to his

son Rembrandt as follows:

. . . the situation is exactly equal between the Old York Turnpike & Germantown Turnpike, 1/2 mile distant each. Two streams run through it... These streams at present make a fine meadow... The mansion is old fashioned, with 10 or 12 rooms, a stone barn with stable room for 5 horses, and a wagon house, chaise house, smoke house, hen house, springhouse with a fine stream, 2 stories high, the upper to making cheese, a tolerable good house for the tenant, and sundry conveniences in the house way, with an excellent garden with respect to situation, good paling, and some good fruit.¹

He had paid \$9,500 for this prize.

Peale pursued the task of putting the property in good order with great energy. Repairing and enlarging the mansion took most of his time in 1810. This man of many talents, who had made a set of false teeth for George Washington and was America's first taxidermist, proved quite capable as carpenter, glazier, housepainter, and, in general, master-builder. With the mansion in satisfactory condition, Peale concentrated on beautifying his grounds and tilling the soil. For three years his son Rubens helped lay out a beautiful and intricate garden planted with a variety of exotic shrubs, trees, and plants. Peale's garden became one of the beauty spots of nineteenth-century Philadelphia, and it attracted hundreds of people when it was opened for inspection.

Although the formal gardens took much of Peale's time, he did not neglect the farm. He corresponded frequently with Thomas Jefferson seeking advice on his agricultural pursuits. It was Jefferson who taught Peale the secret of contour plowing, which was a boon to tilling the undulating hills of Belfield. Despite many arduous hours of planning and work, Peale's farm was not a financial success. Robert Morris, a neighboring farmer, came to his aid. Planting currants for wine making,

Morris felt, would end Peale's financial difficulties. At first, Peale hesitated because of his personal antipathy to the habit of drinking. But he overcame his doubts through some friendly persuasion and eventually realized a profit on the wine making. As one chronicler remarked, "The heady sweet wine of Belfield became, as years passed, famous among the connoisseurs of Philadelphia."

Considering the difficulties involved in making the farm pay, Peale probably felt that the name he gave his estate upon his arrival was fitting: Farm Persevere. However, his many friends thought the name was too forbidding, and they prevailed upon him to change it. In the summer of 1812 he agreed, and the present name, Belfield was chosen. He named it for Bellefield, the home of John Hesselius on the Severn River in Maryland, where Peale had received his first lessons in painting.

Despite the work required at Belfield, Peale never gave up his painting. During his short stay there, he is believed to have produced over one hundred pieces. A few time the garden at Belfield became the scene of public exhibitions of his works. Such events were received with much enthusiasm among the high society of Philadelphia and Germantown. In 1817, after a storm damaged part of the mansion, a new extension was built, with a special "painting" room over the kitchen. Peale had been planning just such a room for a long time. Unfortunately, the room would be used only a few years. Both Peale and his wife shortly thereafter were struck with serious illness, to which his wife finally succumbed in 1820.

A few months later, Peale moved back to the city and occupied himself with his first love, The Museum. Belfield was offered in exchange for a "suitable museum site" in the city, but there were no takers. In 1823, Belfield was put up for rent at a price that hardly paid the taxes. The following year the property was mortgaged. In the meantime, Linnaeus Peale moved to Belfield, but he did not have his father's energy, and the place "ran wild." finally, in January 1826, Belfield was sold to William Logan Fisher, whose Wakefield property adjoined Belfield. That same year, Fisher made a gift of it to his daughter Sarah upon her marriage to

William Wister.

William Wister was a descendant of John Wister, a Philadelphia wine merchant, whose famous summer house, Grumblethorpe, still stands on Germantown Avenue. John Wister's older brother, Caspar Wistar, father of the noted ^{anatomist} botanist Dr. Caspar Wistar, dealt in glass and buttons. (The difference in spelling of surnames is attributed to the mistake of a naturalization clerk. Genealogically, the Wistars and the Wisters are the same.)

Belfield under the Wisters continued to be a place of beauty and interest. William Wister, sometimes called "the father of American cricket," spent many hours at Belfield teaching the sport to his Germantown neighbors. In 1854, Belfield was used for the first home of the American Cricket Club, later called the Germantown Cricket Club. Waxing eloquent in 1910, George M. Newhall expressed the following sentiments about Belfield:

The memories of those 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. All cricketers and lovers of good sport should prize this scene, where American cricket had its birth and spent its childhood.²

However, these glories had in reality faded before the end of the century. Manheim, west of Germantown, became the home of the Germantown Cricket Club in 1889. It was composed of the merged members of the club founded at Belfield and the Young America Cricket Club founded in 1855. Part of the Belfield Country Club, which was located on the north side of Olney Avenue, remained in operation until 1920.

Another organization established at Belfield was The Civic Club of Philadelphia, founded on January 6, 1894 by Mrs. Cornelia Frothingham and Miss Mary Channing Wister. It became the parent organization of similar groups throughout the country.

With the passage of time, many new members of the Wister family came to share in the estate. Moreover, before his death in 1862, William Logan Fisher had sold several portions of Belfield. The remainder was willed to his daughters Sarah Logan Wister and Mary Rodman Fox. Fisher stipulated that the portion of Belfield containing the mansion should go to Sarah L. Wister, since she had spent considerable money in repairing and rebuilding the house. Upon her death in 1891, Sarah L. Wister willed her portion of Belfield to her four sons, William Rotch, John, Jones, and Rodman Wister. It was from these heirs and their descendants and those of Mary Rodman Fox that La Salle College purchased the original plot of its present main campus.

A little more than a decade after the first purchase at Belfield, Brother Edwin Anselm, F.S.C., then president of the College, saw that future needs of the institution would require additional land. A ten-acre tract on the eastern boundary of the campus was sought, the area where Leonard Hall, Benilde Hall, the Science Building, the baseball field, and parts of the Library and College Union are now located. But the land was already under option to the Philadelphia Board of Education. However, Add Anderson, Business Manager for the Philadelphia Board of Education, came forward with a solution which served the best interests of the College. He noted that it was the policy of the Board of Education never to stand in the way of progress of any educational institution, and wherever it could, the Board would advance the cause of education in Philadelphia on any level. Accordingly, arrangements were made to cede the right of option through Anderson's office, clearing the way for the purchase of the additional ten acres by the College. Negotiations were completed in 1937, and another segment of Belfield joined the La Salle College campus. One small triangular plot, approximately where the east wing of the Library now stands was not part of Belfield. It had belonged to one John Armstrong, but was later acquired by the Wisters.

La Salle, after World War II, was overwhelmed by the host of young men returning from the armed forces, eager for a college training. At that time, the College was under the presidential direction of Brother Gregorian Paul, F.S.C., who saw the implica-

tions from the influx of students. In addition to undertaking immediate expansion of the physical facilities, he looked beyond the postwar boom to a future America demanding more and more highly trained men. More recently, Brother Paul was in charge of the completion of Olney Hall, just opened, La Salle's newest classroom building, which was built at a cost of over four million dollars. To meet the needs of further expansion, two tracts of land were acquired in 1950 and shortly thereafter utilized for residence halls and needed parking facilities. Seven years later, three property purchases were made, one from the Einstein Medical Center. In 1961, the final addition to the main campus was made under the guidance of Brother Daniel Bernian, F.S.C., the president of the College. The last four plots acquired now accommodate additional student housing and student and faculty parking. All additions to the campus made since 1937 were at one time part of Belfield property.

At the present time, one hundred and thirty-seven years after the marriage of Sarah Fisher to William Wister, a descendant in the person of Mrs. Sarah Logan Starr Blain, great-great-granddaughter of William Wister, still occupies the well-kept Belfield mansion. If Charles Willson Peale, William Logan Fisher, or William Wister were to see Belfield today, they would be startled by many changes. Spacious, modern buildings, wide avenues, and thousands of young people going about the business of education would meet their unbelieving eyes. Gone are many of the out-buildings of Belfield; Peale Road, which would have cut a swath through Central High School, adjoining La Salle, and McCarthy Stadium, no longer exists; the Belfield Country Club has disappeared; and the original cricket field would be difficult to conjure up even for this imaginary visit. Yet, the true center of Belfield, the family mansion, that dignified, eloquent sentinel of the past, still stands as a monument to those who spent such rich and full lives within its shadows.

It would be incorrect to conclude that Belfield now rests in a shadow of the College. Actually, the two institutions complement each other. Belfield of yesterday established rich and fine traditions; La Salle today continues many of those traditions. Just as

Peale exhibited his works of art, many fine collections are made available to both students and the public today. The constant stream of well-known actors, playwrights, novelists, and musicians to La Salle recalls the visits of such persons as actress Fanny Kemble, a neighbor of the Wisters, to Belfield; or the long stays of Owen Wister, grandson of Fanny Kemble and author of The Virginian. No doubt the cricketers of 1854 would be pleased to know that the tradition of sport at Belfield is continued through a variety of sports in the College program. Finally, efforts are made today to maintain an attractive campus, surroundings proper and conducive to the pursuit of knowledge. Although the College does not have the services of such an artist as Rubens Peale in an advisory capacity, it does have Mr. James Hanes, resident artist, whose oil painting, Belfield, is a handsome part of the La Salle College Study Collection of Art, now housed in parlors of the Community House and in the College Art Gallery, located on the second floor of the Fine Arts Building, 2103 Clarkson Street.

It seems fitting that a college such as La Salle have the location it enjoys in a culturally historical place like Belfield. As time passes, Belfield adds to its long history, interpreted and extended through the day-to-day activities of the academic life. Truly, these acres comprise the La Salle College-Belfield Campus.

¹Charles Coleman Sellers, Charles Willson Peale: Later Life, 1790-1827 (Philadelphia. The American Philosophical Society, 1947), 220-221.

²Papers Read Before Site and Record Society of Germantown (Germantown, The Site and Record Society, 1910), 180.

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