

Paladin Club

A History

By Roy Jackson



For over 150 years the historic site of Paladin Club has been a living landmark for the social and historical heritage of Edgemoor and New Castle County. As the home of William Sellers, one of America's greatest inventors and bridge builders, His life and land bring together a multitude of little-known New Castle County histories, the riverside lands of its first families, Wilmington's business district in the 19th century, Sellers Park the world's great bridges, the beginnings of Edgemoor, and the histories of Riverside Hospital and the Mount Pleasant School system.

PALADIN



CLUB



Beginnings

1854

On January 7, 1854, Zeba and Eliza M. Ferris, of Brandywine Hundred, New Castle County, Delaware, parents of Mary Ferris, who was married to William Sellers, distinguished Philadelphia engineer and inventor, purchased a tract of land from Henry G. and Priscilla Webster, containing "by computation Twenty six acres, three Roods and twenty seven perches of Land. They named it Clifton. In 1856 Ziba Ferris built his new home, on the Paladin Club site.

Ziba Ferris

Ziba Ferris was a Quaker silversmith and clockmaker who had opened his store at 87 Market Street in Wilmington in 1847. His family had come from England in about 1680 and settled in Wilmington in 1748, where it was active in colonial and Quaker affairs. He was the official regulator of the town clock and Treasurer of New Castle County. He died in 1875

William Sellers

In 1865, William Sellers converted the Ferris house into his 36-room mansion. By the year 1868 he and his family had taken up residence at Clifton and from then until his death, Sellers worked to improve his estate to a degree that made it a showplace in Brandywine Hundred. The mansion overlooked the meadows and marshes on which he built an enterprise famous all over the world for its vast output of bridges, structural iron, and high-pressure steam generators. "From the formal garden at Clifton with its magnificent English boxwoods and surrounding tree-lined stone wall he and his wife could view his empire as they enjoyed an evening stroll." Now residents of Paladin Club are working to preserve the stone structures and tree-filled open spaces that William Sellers created.

Rockhill

The oldest structure on the Paladin Club site was the home of the Thomas Dorman family. Their farm was where the First State Bowling Alleys are now located. As described by J. M. Brumbley, "The alleys are in the barn and barnyard which were built into the side of the hill and surrounded by a fifteen foot high stone wall. The seats and soda fountain are in the barn where the cattle stalls once were. The old farmhouse still stands at the fork of the roads leading to the bowling alley and to Clifton Park, now called the Paladin Club". In the previous century the David Beeson family lived there and farmed the land now occupied by Merchants Square. The first to farm this land was a Swede named Hans Peterson and it may well be that the Beeson house was built on the site of the Peterson residence." The c. 1813 stone house, "Rockhill", is number 4401 on Paladin Drive.

The property was bounded by "Old King's Road", John Stidham's land, Mulberry Lane, lands formerly belonging to the - "Heirs of Henry Beeson dec'd", and Shellpot Creek.

Source: *Where The Pigeons Slept: A History* by J. M. Brumbley, Sr.

Ziba's father, John Ferris, bequeathed \$84,000 in 1885 for a "Home of Refuge", now the Ferris Industrial School.



Garden areas in the background today



Rockhill

According to the Historic Review Board, "Rockhill" is a rare surviving stone house from about 1800 that may hold information about lifestyles at the turn of the 19th century.

The Sellers Estate

To build his large estate "Clifton", William Sellers acquired the land at Edge Moor previously owned by the Allmonds, Beesons, Weldins, and Websters, families linked to the history of New Castle County. It extended between Edgemoor Road and Shellpot Creek and between Philadelphia Pike and the P.R.R. Company tracks near the river, plus a triangle of about 30 acres east of the tracks and north of the creek that he acquired in payment for building a station house for the railroad at Ellerslie. Sellers bought another parcel in 1888 from the Philadelphia, Wilmington, and Baltimore Railroad Company, which later became the Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Washington Railroad Company. That deed was lost, and in 1946 the railroad company recorded a confirmatory deed to William Sellers granddaughter, Ann Sellers Cox. The total area was about 200 acres.

The Stone Retaining Wall

Along the drive into his estate, then called Farm Road, Sellers built a massive dry-laid stone wall to retain the steep hillside below the mansion, define the landscaping of his estate, and separate its farm land from its garden and residential areas. He also built classic stone steps leading to an English garden surrounded by other dry-laid stone walls, all built of local Brandywine blue granite and still standing. The retaining wall is a century-old and familiar visual feature that defines the unique country-estate character of Paladin Club, with its open spaces and large trees, a reminder that Sellers Park was part of the same estate. One key to the historical significance of the Sellers estate is its history as a farm on land farmed by the earliest Swedish and Dutch settlers along the Delaware River.



Trees and Open Spaces

The Talley and Weldin families had used much of the land for grazing their cattle, including the area where the Merchandise Mart is now located.



The Stones of Brandywine Blue Granite



The Classic Steps

William Sellers' attention to detail extended to every waking moment of his life and to every item of his surroundings, as testified by the highly skillful construction of the stone retaining wall on his estate.

The Historic Review Board found the wall to be in the tradition of English landscape pioneer Capability Brown's ha/ha walls, which were used to separate the residence and farm parts of large estates. At one time William Sellers kept 60 cows on his estate. The wall was functionally and structurally firmly in that 200-year-old English landscaping tradition.

The July 3, 2005 Travel Section of the New York Times mentioned Capability Brown's landscaping.

William Sellers, Builder of Bridges at Edge Moor

William Sellers, creator and resident of the Paladin Club site, with his brother John founded Edge Moor Iron Company and was its president. It was one of the largest railroad and highway bridge manufacturers in the United States. Located at Edge Moor on a square mile of land, with a mile frontage on the Delaware River, it built many of the world's great bridges, notably the highest railway bridge in the country over the Kentucky River and the entire superstructure of the Brooklyn Bridge connecting Manhattan and Brooklyn.



Brooklyn Bridge

Among the many other bridges his company built were the Susquehanna River Bridge on the Pennsylvania Railroad, then the longest double-track railway bridge in the world, the Sibley bridge over the Mississippi, a bridge over the Shoal Haven river in the colony of new South Wales, Australia and a swing bridge at Adelaide, Australia, .

The Beginnings of Edgemoor

A clipping from the Evening Journal for June 24, 1968, "Iron Mills Prospered in 1800s" reported that Mr. Sellers' Company built homes for employees in a village that became known as Edge Moor. Village. Married employees could rent the homes from the company at \$10 to \$15 a month. The firm also built an elementary school for the children of the workers and the Edge Moor Methodist Episcopal Church. Many of the residents lived here for 25 years or more

In a sad reflection on the times, the village, church and school were demolished in 1935 after the area was purchased by the Ludlow Manufacturing Company. In 1956, "when infants who were in their cradles when Edge Moor Village vanished into history in 1935 had attained their majority," former residents of the old community gathered on Saturday, July 14 in Brandywine Park for basket lunches. With some bitterness, they recalled the sad day when they were told that all 48 houses had to be vacated within a month..

The Brandywine blue granite used in many early homes and mills in the area. was used for walls and buildings on the Sellers estate. It apparently came from a granite quarry opened in 1885 by Philip P. Tyre on Shellpot Creek, where the Philadelphia Pike crosses the creek. It produced blocks of stone four feet in thickness. The Petrillo family operated the historic quarry from 1915 to 1967. when it was closed..

Ellerslie

In the last century, the Paladin Club site overlooked a mansion at the river called Ellerslie that carries remarkable historical associations. It stood on what may have been the first patent grant of land by England in Delaware Valley, made on June 15, 1664. William Sellers his brother John purchased it in 1867 as their summer home in what was then a popular resort area along the river. Later, the Sellers family rented it out to managers of the Edge Moor Iron Company, and in 1927 to F. Scott Fitzgerald and his family. the Fitzgeralds stayed for two years, a period apparently not noted in biographies of Fitzgerald.

As told by J. M. Brumbley, as a boy he and his father spent Christmas in 1927 with the Fitzgeralds. He refers to a picture in a 1963 issue of Saturday Review of F. Scott Fitzgerald, his wife Zelda, and their daughter Scottie doing a dance step in front of that Christmas tree .



Ellerslie

After the death of William Sellers' son William F. Sellers, in June, 1933, his wife moved from Clifton to Ellerslie where she lived for about a year until she sold Ellerslie to DuPont.

Riverside Hospital

William Seller's mansion was occupied by the Coast Guard during World War II and was briefly used as part of the Mount Pleasant School system in 1948 while the school at 405 Brandywine Boulevard was being built. It became part of the historical heritage of Delaware in 1949 when it was converted into the 50-bed Mount Pleasant Osteopathic Hospital, the first hospital in Delaware of the Delaware Osteopathic Society. It was renamed Riverside Hospital and later relocated to its current site far from the river for which it was named. The renovated mansion-hospital was demolished later.

From Estate To Apartments To Condominiums

The Sellers estate became the site of the Paladin Club in 1946 when Mrs. Cox sold it to Edge Moor Realty Company for the development of the Clifton Park apartment complex. New Castle County Department of Land Use files show that the site then included the stone wall, the mansion, stables, the carriage house, and three other untitled structures (one being the existing stone c. 1813 structure). Particular care was taken to preserve Sellers' sensitive landscaping, by careful placing of the apartment buildings that became the Paladin Club condominium units on the hillside below and above the retaining wall. The Historic Review Board found that the Clifton Park apartment development was historically significant as representative of post-WWII GI family housing. .

The Remarkable Life of William Sellers

William Sellers was born in Upper Darby, Pa., on the family estate held under the original patent taken up by Samuel Sellers of Derbyshire, England, in 1682. After being educated in a private school maintained by his father, at fourteen he was apprenticed to his uncle, John Morton Poole of Wilmington to learn the machinist's trade. After seven years he took charge of the machine shop of Fairbanks, Bancroft & Company in Providence, R. I. Some three years later he established his own machine tools company in Philadelphia, where he was joined by Edward Bancroft of Providence, with whom he organized the firm of Bancroft & Sellers. Sellers was twice married, to Mary Ferris in 1849, by whom he had a daughter and two sons, one of whom died in infancy; and in 1873 to Amelia Haasz, by whom he had two sons and a daughter who died young. He died in his eighty-first year, survived by his wife and four children.

Sellers was elected a member of the Franklin Institute in 1847, served on the Board of Managers for 12 years, and was President from 1864 to 1867. He served continuously as a member of the board of trustees of the University of Pennsylvania from 1868 to the end of his life. He was a member of the National Academy of Sciences and of foremost engineering societies of the United States, Great Britain, and France. At the close of the Paris Exposition in 1889 he was made a *chevalier* of the Legion of Honor. He was the author of "Memoir of James Eads" (*Biographical Memoirs of the National Academy of Sciences*, vol. III, 1895); and of "Machinery Manufacturing Interests" in *One Hundred Years of American Commerce* (1895, vol. II), edited by Chauncey M. Depew.

- While a member of the Franklin Institute, Sellers read a paper on "A System of Screw Threads and Nuts" (*Journal of the Franklin Institute*, May 1864), in which he proposed a system of screw threads to supply the need for a generally accepted standard. The Sellers system was adopted by the United States in 1868, by the Pennsylvania Railroad in 1869, and soon thereafter became practically universal as "the Sellers or United States standard."



The Unified Development Code of New Castle County provides that a site is historically significant if it exemplifies the cultural, economic, social, and historical heritage of the community, or has significant character, interest, or value as an example of the development, heritage or cultural characteristics of the County, the State or the United States, or is associated with the lives of persons important to the County's past. William Sellers' career had significant character, interest, and value as an example of the development, heritage or cultural characteristics of the County, the State and the United States.