

COURTESY OF JOE MCGINN

Radnor Township has preserved the beauty of this country estate which is full of local history.

THE WILLOWS

elegance preserved



Driving along Darby-Paoli Road in Radnor Township one sees the remnants of a bygone era and way of life. The once elegant estates are now either gone or engulfed by developments. The Willows, however, is a rare exception to this, a result of thoughtful planning on the part of Radnor Township. Renamed by the Township simply for the abundance of Willow trees on the property, The Willows is now assured to forever remain 47 acres of quiet elegance and unsurpassed beauty for all to enjoy.

The Township did not buy The Willows with an immediate purpose in mind, except to spare the property from development. In fact, they first tried to sell the house along with a few acres of land with the rest to be used as a town park. Unsuccessful at selling the original house, the township could not overlook the fact that this three story, twenty-two room mansion with a spacious solarium overlooking a sweeping panorama of tall,

stately trees, flowering plants, and the picturesque lake, dotted with geese, was designed to entertain.

Up until 1972 The Willows was the country home to a line of successful Philadelphians whose lifestyles afforded them the opportunity to enjoy their estates, none more so than the Zantzingers. The Philadelphia Vassar Club compiled some early history on The Willows before the Zantzingers bought the estate.

The transition from farm land to a residential area began in the 1890s as Main Line real estate started to become a good investment. Herman Wendell discovered this in 1886 when he purchased 113 acres from Robert Paiste, a farmer during the late half of the nineteenth century, for \$28,000 and sold it four years later to E. Craig Biddle for \$40,000. In 1909, Biddle sold 47 acres of his property, the present day Willows, to John Sinnott, son of a successful distiller.

"Rose Garland" was the first house built on these 47 acres by Sinnott, in

a Spanish style of architecture designed by Charles Barton Keene. John Sinnott was married to a Californian, and perhaps it was Mrs. Sinnott's preference which dictated the choice of the original red-tiled roof, the smooth plastered walls, the balconies with wrought iron railings and the beamed ceiling in the library, all features which were popular at the time in Florida and California. In addition, the plans called for a 2½ acre lake on the front of the property to be viewed from the house.

In 1925 "Rose Garland" was sold to Clement A. Griscom, III and again in 1934 to Simon S. Neuman, Chairman of the Board of Publicker Industries. The Neumans modernized the kitchen and installed the basement bar. They lived in the house until Clarence H. Geist bought the property for his daughter, Mary, and her husband, Alfred Zantzinger. In 1937 they moved with their young son, Alfred, to "Maral Brook," naming the estate with a combination of the first

syllables of their first two names.

Alfred Zantzinger was vice-president of the Philadelphia Suburban Water Co. He and his wife Mary took much pleasure in "Maral Brook," according to Alfred's brother Clark, "they appreciated and enjoyed what they had." Clark Zantzinger recalls a lifestyle simplified because of the ability in those days to get inexpensive and willing help to maintain the estate. This made it possible for the Zantzingers, and many others of the period, who had wealth on the Main Line, to enjoy an easy, carefree life.

The Zantzingers made many improvements to the estate which made it all the more desirable for entertaining. In 1941 they built a swimming pool (now filled in) from which the guests could watch tennis matches. In 1947 the original red tile roof was replaced with Williamsburg tile. Perhaps the most notable change was the addition of the solarium, installed by Mr. Zantzinger's brother Clark, an architect, in 1959. The floor is original Italian marble terrazzo and the doors of the solarium open onto the terrace for guests to enjoy a breathtaking view of the estate.

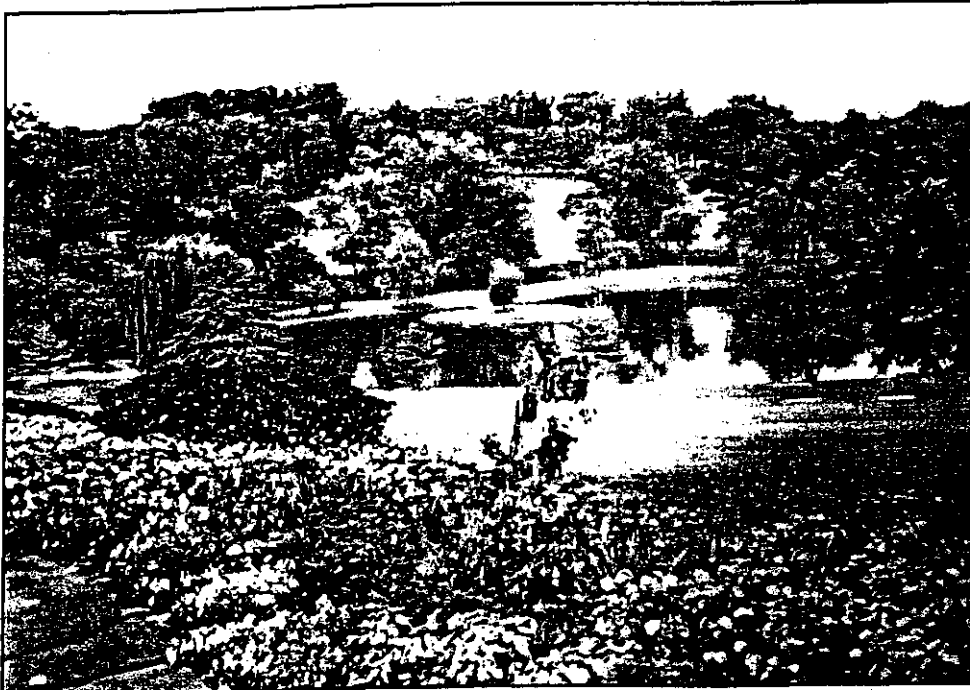
The Zantzingers took great care in the landscaping and grooming of the estate, which they loved to roam with

their dogs. The beautiful panorama of The Willows can be attributed to their love of "Maral Brook" and the work given to it by Mr. Paul Earle, caretaker, for well over 36 years. When the Zantzingers first introduced a pair of Canada geese to the estate, Mr. Earle clipped their wings so that they would not migrate, which accounts for the great flock today.

With the death of Mrs. Zantzinger in 1967 and Mr. Zantzinger in 1972, the estate was sold to real estate developers. Many of the area estates had done the same, finding it nearly impossible to maintain their estates as they had done in the past. Clark Zantzinger recalls, "at the time it seemed to have been the right thing to do," but now strongly believes his brother and wife would be happy to know that Radnor Township ultimately blocked the plans of the developer to buy and maintain the estate for its present day purposes.

As a rental facility The Willows most popular occasions are weddings along with rehearsal dinners, anniversary celebrations, art shows, corporate meetings and seminars, and much more. The Willows' beauty even attracted the likes of the Kennedys. Joseph Kennedy, who

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The 2½ acre lake has attracted Canada Geese for over twenty years.

M A R C H

pro Theatre, March 21-24

Ursinus College. The College's pro Theatre, under the direction of Joyce Henry, uses a blend of talented students, faculty members, and area residents to produce a variety of entertaining productions. The intimate surroundings of the campus playhouse create an excellent atmosphere. General Admission \$4; Seniors & Students \$3. 7:30 pm. Ritter Center, Collegeville. 489-4111, ext. 2309/489-4117.

Cooperative Lecture Series, March 22, April 5 & 19

The Scott Arboretum. Join us this spring for our "Gardening in Delaware County" lecture series sponsored in cooperation with the Delaware County Cooperative Extension, the Scott Arboretum and the Tyler Arboretum. This spring's lectures include: March 22, "Gourmet Bulbs" by Lee Radon, President of the American Rock Garden Society; "Low Maintenance Perennials" by Bob Hebb of the Lewis Ginter Botanical Gardens in Richmond, VA; April 19, "Summer Blooming Trees and Shrubs" by Judy Zuk, Director of the Scott Arboretum of Swarthmore College. FREE. 8 pm. Dupont Lecture Hall, Dupont Science Bldg., Swarthmore College, Swarthmore. 328-8025.

Rose Tree Pops, March 23

Delaware County Community College. Features Barbara Speare on French horn playing "Divertimento" by Paul Stouffer and members of the Orpheus Club of Philadelphia performing a variety of vocal selections. The Rose Tree Pops, a 50-member-plus orchestra, is well known at the Rose Tree Summer Festival. Adults \$5; Students & Seniors \$4. 8 pm. Main Auditorium, Rt. 252 & Media Line Rd., Media. 359-5075.

Paper Making Workshop, March 24

Community Arts Center. An opportunity to learn the art of making paper from a variety of materials. Pre-registration required; \$45/person. 10 am-4 pm. 414 Push Mill Rd., Wallingford. 566-1713.

"Downstairs, Downstairs"—

Murder Mystery, Dinner, March 24

Delaware County Community College. It's a birthday party! And nothing is too outrageous for the obnoxiously wealthy—but who hired the clown and what is he trying to hide? Over a special buffet dinner in our dining hall the mystery will unravel. Presented by Actor's Mystery Tour. \$20, includes dinner, non-alcoholic. No children. 5:30 pm. Main Auditorium, Rt. 252 & Media Line Rd., Media. 359-5075.

COURTESY OF THE WILLOWS

A Brief History Of The Jewel Of Radnor's Park System

BY RUTH TALLMADGE

The best man rises to toast the bride and groom as guests fill the Willows mansion for the reception. No one at the party realizes it, but the liquid in their glasses is the type of product that built the spacious house they are visiting.

Thousands of guests have been in the mansion since it was opened by Radnor township for rentals over three years ago. Many have expressed interest in the history of the building.

The Willows was built for the owner of a distillery, John Sinnott, of Philadelphia. The property had been one large piece with other land to the north, until 47.5 acres were sold to Sinnott on Jan. 29, 1919. Apparently at the time there were no structures on the land, which rose on both sides of the Little Darby Creek.

Sinnott's father, Joseph, was a partner in a Philadelphia firm, one of the largest distillers in the country. Joseph Sinnott may have set a precedent for his son when he built a large mansion that's now part of Rosemont College.

In 1904, John Sinnott was married in San Diego, California, to a judge's daughter, Mary Henrietta Luce.

The Sinnotts chose the "Spanish" style of the house, with many features then popular in Florida and California. Their architect was Charles Barton Keene. The original name of the house was "Rose Garland" and the construction bid was \$40,000. The garage, stable and pond were also constructed about the same time.

Prohibition must have hit the distillery hard, for the house was sold in 1924, with mortgages involved, and again in 1925. In 1925, the purchase price was \$175,000. The buyers during that period apparently did not regularly live in the house and it was rented to others.

Mr. and Mrs. Simon S. Neuman bought the property in 1934 and sold it in 1936, when they moved into "Inver House" across Darby-Paoli rd.

The 1936 purchase was probably the most significant in the history of the tract, for, like "Ravenscliff" to the west, a wealthy man chose it as a gift to his daughter.

Owner and operator of public utilities in many states, Clarence H. Geist merged a number of small companies into the Suburban Water Co. His youngest daughter, Mary Golden Geist, recipient of the mansion.

She had married Alfred Zantinger in 1933. The young couple and their son moved to "Maral Brook" in 1937. They imposed the name of the property from the first syllables of their names.

Plenty of servants, summers in Maine and winters in Florida, country clubs and the socialites' life characterized the family that lived in Maral Brook. They also made extensive changes to their home, inside and out.

Among the alterations: A one-car garage adjoining the house, fountain and block paving in the courtyard, a

solarium with flowing water, a third floor studio, larger windows and provisions for entertaining.

The nooks and crannies of the house have some intriguing vestiges of mansion living a generation or two ago.

Each cabinet door in the linen room listed its contents, "Pink guestroom linen," "doggie towels" and "doggies' large pillow for car."

The endless cellars include an unusual wine rack consisting of 468 hollow quarry tiles built into walls to hold wine bottles at the proper angle.

Huge fuse boxes, again fully labeled, are also in the cellar. Labels include one for a siren.

Fifteen rooms were hooked into a bell box in the kitchen area. Arrows on the bell box would show in which room a bell had been rung to summon servants.

OUTDOORS

Lawns had been maintained originally only to the extent that they could be kept mowed by a single horse pulling cutting reels. Most of the property then was untrimmed.

The landscaping, driveway locations and system for directing spring water to replenish the pond were all laid out in 1910.

The outdoors areas were in the loving hands of Paul S. Earle for almost 40 years until his retirement and death after the township had acquired the property. Caretaker Earle came from Haverford with the Zantingers and helped with added plantings and, with establishing an apple orchard in 1938. Trees were continually planted during those years. Poultry and sheep were raised on the tract and for a while horses were kept there.

The Canada geese, seen now in such great numbers, began with two pairs of geese the Zantingers bought from a wild game farm for \$75 a pair. Those first birds were flightless, but following generations were amply fed and thrived.

The terraces and gardens were rebuilt in 1965, and today's visitors relish the view.

RECENT HISTORY

When Radnor township bought the property in 1973 with open space funds, the major interest was the land, not the mansion. The big house was considered a liability, a burden upon an otherwise desirable park. Serious attempts were made to sell off the house and about 11 acres around it.

The purchase was made by the township after the property had been sold to a developer who presented a highly controversial plan for its eventual use.

The only prospect was a church, and the township agreed to sell the house and its acreage to its membership for \$361,001. The deal fell through when officials learned the church planned major construction of a large auditorium and parking lot. The township found those, and the expected level of traffic, to be unacceptable as neighbors of its adjacent open land.



WILLOWS SETTING. This aerial angle, looking northwest, reveals only the white chimneys of the Willows mansion at the edge of the trees (lower center) but clearly shows the meanderings of the Little Darby Creek and the expanse of the meadow that slopes up to Darby-Paoli rd.

(horizontally at upper center). At the top center is Inver House, formerly "Laurento," built by Craig Biddle before the Willows land was sold off. (Dave Hickey photo)

Fruitless efforts continued to sell for residential use.

In February, 1976, with no buyers and after considerable discussion by the Board of Commissioners, a decision was made to have a six-month trial period for rentals of the mansion. A fee schedule was established after checks were made of comparable buildings elsewhere. The success of the rental system was confirmed by the end of 1976, especially by the

ability of the income to support maintenance and repairs.

Since the first event, an estimated 60,000 guests have been entertained in the house. Approximately 130 events are held per year, with an average attendance of 150, according to the township park department. Park and recreation officials supervise the land and the mansion.

Another building is rented as a residence and the former owners have

used as park headquarters and shelter for equipment. There is an apartment in the mansion occupied by a tenant responsible for maintenance and security.

The house is spacious, comfortable and welcoming, rather than overly ornate or pretentious. Inside and out, guests respond to the motto on the gate in the brick wall at the west end of the building: "Please used per favor. Esta es su casa." The motto is

"Please come in. This is your house." Inquiries about use of the park or the mansion can be made by phoning 688-5600.

(Ed. Note: This history of the Willows mansion is based partly on research by Phyllis C. Maler, of Villanova, who prepared material in 1973 for the Vassar Club Designers Show House held in the building. Mrs. Maler has graciously permitted her

Highlights of "THE WILLOWS" History

"The Willows" built at an altitude of about 400 feet, overlooks the lawns and meadows below, where Paiste's Run joins Little Darby Creek and where a 2½ acre lake has been attracting wild duck and Canada geese for many years.

Paiste's Run undoubtedly was named for the farmer, Robert Paiste, who owned the land in the second half of the 19th century. In the 1890's the transition from farmland to a residential area was underway, and successful Philadelphians were beginning to acquire country homes. Main Line real estate became a good investment, as Herman Wendell found. He purchased the 113 acres containing this property from Robert Paiste in 1896 for \$28,000, selling it four years later to E. Craig Biddle for \$40,000.

By 1909 Biddle sold the 47½ acres on the south side of Darby and Paoli Road to John Sinnott, son of Joseph Sinnott, a successful distiller. John Sinnott was married to a Californian, and perhaps it was Mrs. Sinnott's preference which dictated the choice of the original red-tiled roof, the smooth plastered walls, the balconies with wrought iron railings and the beamed ceiling in the library, all features which were popular at the time in Florida and California. Charles Barton Keene, a popular domestic architect, was engaged to design "Rose Garland" as the house was first called. A notice appearing in the March 9, 1910, issue of *Real Estate Record and Builders' Guide* stated that Mr. Keene had completed plans for a "3-story stone and plaster-finished residence and a 2-story garage . . . They will be in the Spanish style of architecture." In addition, the lake was dug and other plans were made for the grounds which are still in use 60 years later.

In 1925 "Rose Garland" was sold to Clement A. Griscom, III, who evidently lived in New York and rented the house. In 1934 the property was sold again to Simon S. Neuman, Chairman of the Board of Publicker Industries. The Neumans' modernized the kitchen and installed the basement bar. They lived in the house until Clarence H. Geist bought the property for Mary (his daughter) and her husband Alfred Zantzingler. In 1937 they moved with their young son, Alfred, to "Maral Brook" naming the estate with a combination of the first syllables of their first two names. Alfred Zantzingler retired as a vice-president of the Philadelphia Suburban Water Co. in 1967. Mrs. Zantzingler died in 1969 and Mr. Zantzingler died in December, 1972. Their son, Alfred G. Zantzingler, now lives in Devault, Pennsylvania.

In 1959 Mr. Zantzingler's brother, C. Clark Zantzingler, of the architectural firm of Kneedler, Mirick and Zantzingler, installed the solarium. In 1947 many other changes had been made, including replacing the original red tile roof with Williamsburg tile. Wall spaces throughout the first floor provided handsome settings for the Zantzingler's notable collection of paintings.

Many improvements were executed by Mr. Paul Earle, who came to "Maral Brook" with the Zantzinglers and has now cared for the property for 36 years. At one time turkeys and chickens filled the barnyard, along with a flock of sheep pastured across the creek. The great flock of Canada geese was first introduced by the Zantzinglers, who acquired two pair from a wild game farm at Yardley, Pennsylvania for \$75 a pair.

The Philadelphia Vassar Club is greatly indebted to Mr. and Mrs. Norman Wolgin for their kindness in offering us the use of "The Willows" for our 1973 Designers' Show House. Mr. and Mrs. Wolgin purchased the house last July for possible real estate development. A more extensive history of "The Willows" is available at the entrance desk for perusal.