

"Wister's Big House" (Grumblethorpe)  
526 Germantown Ave., Germantown,  
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

HABS No. 7-1  
HABS  
PA  
51-600M  
13-

*Reduced Copies of Measured Drawings*  
PHOTOGRAPHS  
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA  
District No. 7  
Eastern Pennsylvania

Historic American Buildings Survey  
E. Perot Bissell, District Officer  
1901 Architects Building  
Philadelphia, Penna.

ADDENDUM  
FOLLOWS...

PAGE  
16  
01. 3. 1936  
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WISTER'S BIG HOUSE  
or  
GRUMBLETHORPE at  
5261 Germantown Avenue  
Philadelphia, Philadelphia  
County  
Pennsylvania

Owner: Owen Wister, Charles J. Wister, Dr. James W. Wister.

Date of Erection: 1744.

Architect and Builder: No record.

Present Condition: Good.

Number of Stories: Two, and basement.

Materials of Construction: Stone.

Other Existing Records: See text.<sup>1</sup>

Additional Data: See following pages.

<sup>1</sup> Also see the following references:

Gardens of Colony and State, vol.1, 364, 369, 370.

Eberlein, H.D. and Lippincott, H.M., The Colonial Homes of Philadelphia and Its Neighborhood, 217-223.

Wescott, T., Historic Mansions of Philadelphia (1877).

Cousins and Riley, The Colonial Architecture of Philadelphia, 62, 63, 24.

The "Wister" House is referred to in the following:

Wallis, F.E., Old Colonial Architecture and Furniture, plates 8, 19, 47, 60.

Ware, W.R., The Georgian Period, IV, 155.

French, L., Jr., Colonial Interiors, plate 49.

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SI-GERM  
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"WISTER'S BIG HOUSE"  
526 1/2 Germantown Ave., Philadelphia, Penna.

The lot on which the house stands was purchased by John Wister in 1741. It originally belonged to John Bartholomew who purchased it from the Frankfort Land Company in 1683.

John Wister arrived in America in 1727. He prospered from the first, and in 1731 bought an extensive property on Market - formerly High - Street between Third and Fourth Streets.

Wister's Big House was built in 1744 to be used as a summer residence only and was a pioneer of its class, being the first house erected in Germantown for summer residency.

The stone for the walls was quarried from a hill at the east end of the property, and the oak joists, etc. came from Wister's woods, also on the property.

The dimensions so far exceeded its neighbors and it was in other respects so superior to the majority of buildings in the town that it acquired the title among the villagers of "Wister's Big House". Originally, the house had a pent roof at the second floor level with balconies at front and back. The street facade was of dressed stone with rubble work at ends and rear, this being typical of the houses of the period. On the front were two doors, one opening into the northwest parlor, the other into the hall. At each were stoops with seats, and the space in front was enclosed with a board fence painted red with openings at either end to allow pedestrians to pass. The fence was designed to prevent the cows that were then allowed the freedom of the highway from encroaching upon the pavement in their rambles.

In 1799, a story was added to the back buildings by William Wister, and the stable which had been built near the house was moved to its present site at the foot of the garden.

Extensive alterations were made in 1806 by Charles J. Wister, the elder. The pent roof, balconies and door stoops which had become dilapidated were removed. Upon their removal so many holes and inequalities were disclosed made by the projecting ends of joists, etc., that a coating of stucco was applied to the old weather-beaten face of the street facade. These changes destroyed a great deal of the charm and quaintness that had given the house distinction. Alterations also took place in

the interior. The fireplaces in parlors, library and kitchen which "had been capacious enough to seat the entire family surmounted with panel work and high mantel shelves were reduced to proportions better suited to modern style and the exigencies of modern times".

The piazza and ice house were added in 1809. The latter was the first to be built in the town.

A hundred years of successive whitewashing had formed an incrustation of lime 1/4" thick on the interior walls, and in 1835 all the rooms on the first floor, except the library, were plastered. One small circle, however, in the center of the ceiling of the northwest parlor was left to show the original whitewash finish.

Charles J. Wister had a taste for mechanics and in 1819, added a frame workshop. His interest in clocks and their adjustment rendered it desirable that he should possess the means of obtaining correct time, and in order to do this he, in 1834, erected the observatory on top of the smoke house furnishing it with a transit instrument and astronomical clock made and set up by his friend, Isaiah Lukens, and himself. This was a great curiosity and created much interest. In 1845, Lukens and Wister observed a transit of Mercury. These observations were reported and published in scientific journals as emanating from the Wister Observatory.

To the northeast of the house reaching back to the stable and barns was the box bordered garden, which originally had better claims to the title "orchard", for it was almost a forest of fruit trees. The present round and sugar pear trees are remnants of the old stock. Though neglected and overgrown, the plan is still decipherable.

Among the community of farm buildings was a fully equipped cider house.

When the British entered Germantown in the fall of 1777, the house was taken possession of by Brevet-Brigadier-General James Agnew, who was colonel of the forty-fourth regiment and commanded a brigade. The family had gone to Penllyn, Montgomery County, to escape possible annoyance. General Agnew was badly wounded at the Battle of Germantown, October 4th, and was carried back to the house "bleeding at every vein". He was laid on the floor of the northwest parlor and there he died. The floor boards were drenched with his blood and though some of these were cut out and replaced with new ones, the stains on the boards that were not removed can still be seen.

The house has long been referred to as "Grumblethorpe" - a name that was given it by the first Charles J. Wister, in a spirit of jest.

The property still belongs to the original family - the present owners are Owen Wister, Charles J. Wister and Dr. James W. Wister.

Architecturally, and on account of its historical associations, this house is one of the most important and valuable left to us, affording a very complete picture of a gentleman's country estate of the period. The house has been unoccupied since 1910 and has deteriorated to an alarming degree. The frame portion at the north end of the wing is practically a ruin, the smoke house has collapsed and the observatory now rests upon a shapeless pile of the materials that formed the smoke house walls.

The above description is taken from the "Memoirs of Charles J. Wister" by Charles J. Wister, Jr., 1855. See also "The Wister House, Germantown" in Thompson Westcott's "Historic Mansions of Philadelphia", 1877.

*E. Prot Bessell*

District Officer.

*Received 1936 - H.C.F.*

Grumblethorpe (Wister's Big House)  
5267 Germantown Avenue  
Philadelphia (Germantown)  
Philadelphia County  
Pennsylvania

HABS No. PA-7-1

Addendum to:

Wister's Big House ("Grumblethorpe")  
5261 Germantown Avenue  
Philadelphia  
Philadelphia County  
Pennsylvania

HABS  
VA  
5261 Germantown Ave  
A9-

PHOTOGRAPH