

## Free Quaker Society Historian's Remarks – Annual Meeting – November 15, 2012

During this Bicentennial year of the War of 1812, some historians have published books and papers reexamining the conflict and questioning the causes, what it was about, and even who won. In our long ago school days we learned President Madison declared war for two reasons – British challenges to free trade and that nation's untenable practice of "impressing" American merchant seamen into service in the British Navy. Recently, historians have questioned these assumptions and put forth interesting arguments advancing differing viewpoints. What is relevant for us at this year's annual meeting of the Free Quaker Society is that the War of 1812 and what led to it had a profound effect on the business activities of Samuel Wetherill (1736-1816) and his son and namesake.

By 1789, Wetherill and his sons were in business at 65 North Front Street as "Druggists as well as Oil and Colour men."<sup>i</sup> Later, the business was reorganized and Samuel, father and son, formed a partnership. The textile business of the revolutionary period was phased out but a component of it, namely dyeing, suggested a new pursuit – the manufacture of pigments. Around the time the Free Quaker Meeting House opened for worship in 1784, the Wetherills were in the paint and hardware business offering a wide variety of goods for sale on a wholesale and retail basis. Inventory included red and white lead, paint, nails, hinges, saws, chisels, sail needles, glass, screws, and locks. The drugs and pharmaceuticals noted in an advertisement of 1785 were imported from London, as was dry white lead. At the turn of the 18<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> century, congress encouraged domestic manufacture and Samuel Wetherill drew upon his earlier experience as a promoter of domestic industry to foster the new endeavor, building a factory in 1804 for the manufacture of white lead. The factory was at the northwest corner of Broad and Chestnut Streets, a location, at that time, far outside the residential city that was clustered around the Delaware.<sup>ii</sup>

As the Wetherills were developing their business, Napoleon declared himself emperor of France, went to war with Great Britain, and marched his armies through the continent of Europe. After the 1805 defeat of the French at Trafalgar, Britain dominated the seas and Napoleon began a blockade. The Napoleonic wars ushered in a period of blockades and counter blockades that crippled trade and, after an initial boost to the American economy, stifled growth here too. Attacks on neutral ships increased and, finally, in December 1807, Jefferson's Embargo Act prohibiting all exports became law. The law was bitterly resented and proved to be a fiasco but it was not until May 1810 that another law passed removing all restrictions on commerce with Britain and France. Trade increased but Britain refused to modify its policies of boarding merchant ships and "impressing" sailors. In a disastrous series of moves and countermoves, Madison closed American ports to British ships, Britain stepped up restrictions, and Madison declared war. What did this mean for the Wetherills?

Procuring supplies for the hardware and drug store and raw materials for the factory was difficult and even shipments from New Orleans and other domestic ports were interrupted. In

addition, there was a prejudice against American made goods and “partiality for everything English” that stifled production<sup>iii</sup> and when combined with British concerns for their share of the American market made for a hostile business climate. The white lead works on Broad Street burned to the ground but not before the Wetherills decided in 1808 to relocate the factory to 12<sup>th</sup> and Cherry Streets. [*Wetherill & Brothers, White Lead Manufactory & Chemical Works...* William L. Breton, lithograph, 1831, The Library Company of Philadelphia] In a paper delivered in 1916 by Mrs. S.P.Wetherill, she quoted from a February 1828 letter from Samuel Wetherill, Jr. (1764-1829) in which he described the hardship and troubles of the period: “We commenced building a new factory in 1808 for white lead, red lead, litherage, etc., erecting it on a very extensive scale at the corner of Twelfth and Cherry Streets. While superintending this work my old friend P. repeatedly called to see the building and endeavored to dissuade me from progressing, advising me in most pressing terms to discontinue or, at least, if I persisted, to construct the factory so that it could be converted into a brewery. Finally, seeing we were determined to proceed on our own lines he told me that he was agent for one of the largest manufacturing houses in England and should be forced to undersell me in the articles, ask what price I pleased. He said he gave this information confidentially and from pure motives of friendship, and the first white lead we offered for sale my friend interfered with as he said he would.”<sup>iv</sup>

Fires at the Cherry Street factory disrupted business and military demands for pig lead had priority but domestic sources from Tennessee and Virginia kept the operation going. In October and November 1811, Samuel Wetherill, Jr. received patents for a new method of washing white lead and screening and separating metallic from corroded lead in the process of making red lead. His method was the first used by a domestic manufacturer for such a purpose and is the source of the Wetherill claim as “the first corrodors of white lead” in the country.

During the war, steady supplies of raw materials continued to be problematic and in 1813 Wetherill, Jr. purchased property on the Perkiomen Creek near the Schuylkill River. A lead mine was opened at Mill Grove Farm during the Revolution and it had been worked intermittently by various owners and lessees, including the father of naturalist J.J.Audubon. Wetherill had no experience in mining or smelting and undertook a search for someone with expert knowledge to manage what became known as the Perkiomen Lead Mine. Samuel’s son, John Price Wetherill (1794-1853), described the mine operation in a paper delivered in 1826 at the Academy of Natural Sciences. A smelting furnace was built at Mill Grove and, although the lead deposits were disappointing, some control of the supply chain was strategically important.

Samuel Wetherill, Jr. made another important decision when he diversified the factory output by adding two new units – a lead pipe factory and sulphuric acid works. Wetherill expanded the business purchased from his father in 1812 and set it on a course followed through three more generations until the business was sold to the National Lead Company in 1933. He was revered by his family and a measure of that esteem is seen in the portrait on display in the Meeting House. Wetherill sat for the Lancaster County portrait painter Jacob Eichholtz (1776-1842) in the early 1820’s. Eichholtz painted portraits of Charles Wetherill (1798-1838), Samuel’s son, and Charles’ wife (Margaretta Mayer, 1804-1882), whose family patronized

Eichholtz and commissioned portrait painter Thomas Sully (1783-1872) to make no fewer than four copies of her portrait. Dr. William Wetherill (1804-1872), youngest son of Samuel, followed suit, commissioning Sully to copy the Eichholtz portrait of his father in 1833, four years after the father's death.<sup>v</sup> It is this portrait that is on display today and offers us an opportunity to see what a champion of American enterprise and ingenuity looked like.<sup>vi</sup>

Maria M. Thompson

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<sup>i</sup> Samuel Wetherill & Sons to Brandram, Templeman & Jaques, London, June 3, 1789, Wetherill Papers, 1773-1899, Annenberg Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Van Pelt-Dietrich Library, University of Pennsylvania.

<sup>ii</sup> Miriam Hussey, *From Merchants to "Colour Men," Five Generations of Samuel Wetherill's White Lead Business* (Research Studies XXXIX, Industrial Research Department, Wharton School of Finance and Commerce, Univ. of PA, Univ. of PA Press: 1956), 6.

<sup>iii</sup> James Mease, *Picture of Philadelphia: giving an account of its origin...* Vol II (Philadelphia: Thomas Porter, 1831), 122-23.

<sup>iv</sup> Mrs. S.P. Wetherill, *Samuel Wetherill and the Early Paint Industry of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: City History Society, 1916), 12.

<sup>v</sup> The portrait was given to the Free Quaker Society by Mrs. William W. Lukens (Isabella Macomb Wetherill).

<sup>vi</sup> Samuel Wetherill [Jr] served as Clerk of the Free Quakers after his father's death in 1816 until his own in 1829, when he was succeeded by his son John Price Wetherill (1794-1853).