

Our du Ponts: The Men Behind the Museums

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Maggie Lidz surveys the vistas of fields and flower beds that seem to blend seamlessly into the surrounding hills. "What an amazing way to use your money," she says. Lidz is the estate historian for Winterthur Museum, Garden & Library, the former home of Henry Francis du Pont, great-grandson of the DuPont Company founder. Du Pont—the man—had time, money and a passion for collecting, whether it was plants, furnishings, or the woodwork from old houses. And who can argue with that when the result is an institution that attracts 100,000 visitors a year? But he is not the only du Pont to have a family penchant for collecting, nor is he the only du Pont to have a museum created around his collection. Irénée du Pont, another great grandson of the company founder, collected crystals and ores that gave the University of Delaware Mineralogical Museum its start. John du Pont, the founder's great-great grandson, was a natural history buff whose legacy is the Delaware Museum of Natural History, across the road from Winterthur. These are the stories of the men behind the museums.

By Josephine Eccel



Henry Francis and Ruth du Pont in 1916 in the garden at Florham, the New Jersey estate of Florence Vanderbilt and her husband, Hamilton Twombly.



HENRY FRANCIS DU PONT

When Henry Francis du Pont—Harry to his family—died in 1969, he left behind one of the world's great gardens and a home filled with an eminent collection of American decorative arts. His horticultural accolades were many, but as a furniture collector, his celebrity was assured in 1961, when First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy chose him to head the committee advising her on redecorating the White House.

In her book "Henry F. du Pont and Winterthur, A Daughter's Portrait," the late Ruth Lord describes her father as having a most unpromising beginning. As a youth, he was shy, awkward, "inhibited" and, possibly, "borderline dyslexic." Much to the disappointment of his West Point-educated father, Harry preferred piano lessons to horseback riding.

Harry's school marks were poor, even in French, the language spoken at home. He once admitted to his father that he thought himself "stupid." At Harvard he took the few horticultural courses offered and, following the death of his beloved mother, the young college graduate assumed management of Winterthur.

In her research, Lord counted no fewer than 150 letters to Brooks Brothers in New York, inquiring about minutiae related to the staff wardrobe. Harry du Pont

applied the same attention to detail when choosing fringe for curtains or planning a dinner party. Yet in his lifetime, Lord writes, he never packed a suitcase or visited a post office. He was almost refused entry to the White House because he lacked identification. He was saved only by the monogram on his billfold.

At its peak in the mid-1920s, the self-sufficient fiefdom of Winterthur encompassed 20 working farms, residences for a staff of more than 200 (including 12 gardeners), a golf course, tennis court, swimming pool, a railroad station and a post office on 2,500 acres. It required a network of 97 telephones for communication between buildings and rooms.

Together, Harry and his father had expanded the house and gardens. On his own, Harry experimented with new and exotic varieties of plants, employing a wild-garden style of landscaping. He pursued scientific breeding of Holstein cattle

to achieve prize stock. He boasted that the butterfat in Winterthur milk was the highest "of any breed or any age in any country through time," and he had the records to prove it. In the county directory, his occupation was listed simply as "farmer."

His accomplishments were a testament to his determination and desire to learn. "He was not egotistical about using experts," Lidz says. "He sought them out, he paid for their advice, and then he took it. He was interested in learning—and learning from the best."

On a trip to Shelburne, Vt., in 1923 to inspect a herd of Holsteins, Harry experienced what museum administrator Tom Savage calls "a Saul-to-Paul conversion." He was struck by the sight of a Colonial pine cupboard containing pink-and-white Staffordshire china. From that moment on, he was an unstoppable collector of Americana. Using an alias, as he often did, he once outbid newspaper magnate

Henry Francis du Pont

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OPPOSITE PAGE: The Port Royal Parlor; (portrait) Henry with daughter Pauline Louise and Ruth with Ruth Ellen.

CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Ruth and Henry fool with friends at Longwood, owned by Henry's cousin, Pierre du Pont; Henry and his sister, Louise du Pont Crowninshield; the Montmorenci Stair; the Chinese Parlor in Winterthur Museum; Henry.

William Randolph Hearst, paying \$44,000 for a Philadelphia-made high-boy. His purchases included not only furniture, but interiors and exterior woodwork, textiles, china, and silver—anything made or used in America between about 1650 and 1860.

Life changed after World War II. Large estates like Winterthur began to disappear en masse, Lidz says, so Harry began to consider preserving his vast

collection by creating a house museum. Even before it opened in 1951, plans were in the works for a University of Delaware collaborative graduate program in American arts and cultural history. Touring the museum today is like visiting the du Ponts. Gone is the label "period rooms." There are electric lamps, ashtrays and family photographs on the tables. It's how Harry would have wanted it, writes Lord.