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The Wells and Woodend

If you've ever visited Woodend, just off Jones Mill Road in Chevy Chase, you'll have noticed its forty natural aces, now a wildlife sanctuary, and the handsome brick mansion atop a hill. The land has a history dating back to colonial times, as we've seen in earlier articles. But the Woodend mansion, the most notable feature of the property, dates to the early part of this century.

Captain and Mrs. Chester Wells built the mansion, a beautiful example of Georgian Revival architecture, in the late 1920s. Woodend is now the headquarters of the Audbon Naturalist Society, a non-profit conservation and environmental education organization.

Captain Chester Wells was born in Wyalusing, Pennsylvania, in 1870. His father was Major Levi Wells, a prominent local official and Union officer during the civil War. Chester Wells also chose a military career. He graduated from the Naval Academy in 1893 and served with distinction in various military operations, including the Spanish-American War and World War I. During a naval posting to Sydney, Australia, he met Marion Lee Dixon, who would become his wife.

Marion Lee Dixon was the daughter of Sir Hugh Dixon, the founder of the British American Tobacco Company of Australia. Sir Hugh was very wealthy and built a lavish mansion for his large family. The Dixon's had 11 children.

The Dixon estate, Abergelde, was a model or source for the later Woodend. It featured: two music rooms, a billiard room, which was exactly reproduced at Woodend, and all the appurtenances of luxurious country living," as Irston Barnes recalls in "Welcome to Woodend: A Historical Tour." Abergelde also had large formal gardens and greenhouses, where Marion Dixon learned the love of flowers and gardens she brought to Woodend.

Marion Dixon became acquainted with Capt. Chester Wells around 1905. In 1907 they were married in London, England. The Wells' were stationed in Washington around 1909 and then decided that Washington would make a good permanent home.

From 1910 to 1929 the Wells' made numerous and extensive land acquisitions, they started with 10 acres and a farmhouse bought from Charles Barber, and lived in the farmhouse for some years. In 1916 they acquired the Clean Drinking property. By 1929 they had acquired some 80 acres of land.

Inspired by memories of her childhood home, Mrs. Wells oversaw the design and construction of Woodend, "striving to recapture the charm and spirit of Abergelde." In 1927 the Wells' commissioned the noted architect John Russell Pope to design Woodend. "Despite the illustrious reputation of Mr. Pope, Mrs. Wells, a strong minded woman, had him build the five-stall garage before she allowed him to proceed with the house," according to "The Audubon Naturalist Society and its Home, Woodend," a 1974 publication of the Montgomery County Historical Society.

John Russell Pope was known as a prominent eclectic classicist architect, he also designed the National Archives (1935), the National Gallery (1941), and the Jefferson Memorial (1943) – the latter two were completed after his death in 1937. Woodend was Georgian Revival in style, and "exemplifies his electric classicism in domestic architecture."

Mrs. Wells however, designed the gardens in remembrance of the gardens at Abergelde. According to Irston Barnes, "Mrs. Wells set about recreating the beauty and loveliness that had surrounding her in her girlhood home... Woodend became a center of friendly and hospitable social life.

The city grew around it, but Woodend remained an island of natural charm with its screening woodland and its fragrant, beautiful gardens.”

In coming years, however, the Wells’ estate shrank. The Depression and World War II had their impact, as did Captain Wells’ death in 1948.

After her husband’s death, Mrs. Wells considered leaving Woodend to the Audubon Naturalist Society. The Wells’ had already given away some of the land, now part of Rock Creek, to the Maryland Park System.

In 1953 Mrs. Wells became acquainted with Irston Barnes, then president of the Audubon Naturalist Society. She was interested in the Society’s philosophy and activities, and sounded out Barnes on how a property bequest would be used by the society. In “Welcome to Woodend: A Historical Tour,” Irston Barnes reminisces about his friendship with Mrs. Wells, saying “her friendship was a most enjoyable privilege, for she remained a lively, spirited and gracious lady all her days.”

Mrs. Wells died in 1967. In her will she left Woodend to the Audubon Naturalist Society to preserve the remaining property as a wildlife sanctuary. Her plans to leave Woodend to the Society had been completed in the late 1950s, but she has said according to Irston Barnes, “she would not care to have the Society begin using Woodend during her lifetime.” Founded in 1897 as the Audubon Society of the District of Columbia, ANS moved its headquarters to Woodend in 1969.

Woodend has since been named to the National Register of Historic Places, and so listed on Montgomery County’s Master Plan of Historical Preservation.

One of these days, try a visit to Woodend, off Jones Mill Road in Chevy Chase. You’ll admire the gracious brick mansion with its dramatic semicircular Greek portico. If you look inside, you’ll find portraits of Captain and Mrs. Chester Wells on the stairway. The library, or Bird Room is a reproduction of a room in Abergelde. You’ll also learn about the numerous activities and programs the Audubon Society has to offer.

-Sara Phang

(I’d like to thank the Audubon Naturalist Society for the use of its publication “Welcome to Woodend: A Historical Tour” in this article. For more information concerning the Audubon Naturalist Society, call 652-9188.)