

2015

## 10 The "Four Sisters"

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### Recommended Citation

Jones, J. (2015). 10 The "Four Sisters". Retrieved from [http://digitalcommons.wcupa.edu/hist\\_wchest/54](http://digitalcommons.wcupa.edu/hist_wchest/54)

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# ***The "Four Sisters"***

By Jim Jones

It is no surprise to hear someone say that West Chester's architecture is special. Just watch the groups taking walking tours through our neighborhoods throughout the year, or Google "West Chester" and "architecture" to see what comes up. From institutional buildings like those at the Courthouse and University, to commercial structures like the F&M Building in the town center and the churches along S. High Street, there are lots of examples of buildings that do more than just keep out the weather.

There are also plenty of impressive private homes in the Borough, although to see the best of them, you have to travel north of Marshall Street. One set of four located along W. Virginia Avenue even has its own name -- the "Four Sisters" -- and distinctive look, since all were designed by the same architect and built from green serpentine stone on sites equipped with broad front lawns.

The "Sisters" were designed by Addison Hutton and built in 1872 on parcels sold by John Rutter. Rutter was a farmer who came to West Chester from Delaware County around 1829 and became a lawyer. Besides serving on Borough Council in the 1840s and on the board of the West Chester & Philadelphia Railroad in the 1850s, he invested in land for orchards including farm that stretched north from Chestnut Street up to what is now the West Chester Golf & Country Club.

Hutton was born in western Pennsylvania and studied architecture in Philadelphia. His career began to take off after the Civil War and by the time it ended, he had designed major buildings as far away as North Carolina. In this area, his work included numerous buildings at Swarthmore, Haverford and Bryn Mawr Colleges, a number of banks and office buildings in Philadelphia, the George School in Newtown, the main building at Westtown School, the Germantown Friends Meeting House, several buildings at Lehigh University, and many more. In 1870, Hutton was hired to design "Main Hall," the first structure of the West Chester State Normal School. Completed in 1871, the four-story serpentine structure so impressed the local folks that Hutton received commissions to build a half dozen private homes including the "Sisters."



**(L-R) 101, 121, 205 & 221 W. Virginia Ave.**

Who lives in houses like these? Not ordinary people, to be sure, since it takes a lot of money to buy one and more to maintain it, as well as hired help to dust all the chandeliers and maintain the

landscaping (one is over 100,000 square feet while the other three are all around 48,000 square feet).

The first house is located at the northwest corner of Church Street and Virginia Avenue. Nowadays it is distinguished by the security fence that surrounds the property, but in 1872, it was a country estate owned by Thomas Marshall, the president of the National Bank of Chester County and the West Chester Golf & Country Club, as well as a member of assorted other boards like the First Presbyterian Church of West Chester and the "State Hospital for the Insane at Norristown."

The next house was somewhat more modest, situated on a lot that was only half the size of its predecessor, at the northeast corner of Darlington and Virginia. It was constructed for Samuel Parker, the owner of one of West Chester's premier stores at the turn of the century. He and his partner, Joseph Barnard, opened a store on W. Market Street before the Civil War where they manufactured and sold men's shirts. Barnard eventually moved on, but Parker continued to operate a dry goods store at different locations along Gay Street until his death in 1909. In 1872, he purchased a lot from Rutter and had Hutton design the house at 121 W. Virginia Avenue. His family kept the house until 1919 when Parker's daughter Elizabeth sold it for \$14,000.

The house at the northwest corner of Darlington and W. Virginia was constructed for Robert T. Cornwell. Born in rural New York state, Cornwell came to Pennsylvania to teach in the "Normal School" that opened in Millersville in 1854 and received a commission as captain of company I of the 67th Regiment of the Pennsylvania Volunteers during the Civil War. After the war, he came to West Chester and studied law with William B. Waddell, who built the last of the four Sisters next door to Cornwell. Cornwell lived to be 92, and besides working as a lawyer in West Chester for more than fifty years, he served a quarter century on the West Chester School Board and even longer as a trustee of the West Chester State Normal School. He also spent a year on Borough Council in 1878, ran for district attorney in 1879, and received appointments to numerous positions like that of the board of the Philadelphia House of Refuge and the Chester County Hospital. After his death in 1927, the house was owned by a succession of Hemphills -- Cornwell's youngest daughter married into the family -- while Cornwell's grandson Gibbons went on to become the president of the Denny Tag Co. and chief burgess of West Chester from 1950-1953.

The last house was built on the northeast corner of New and Virginia for William B. Waddell. Like his neighbor, Waddell was a lawyer, but he started his practice in West Chester before the Civil War. He too received an officer's commission during the Civil War, although he never saw battle. Instead, he served in the Pennsylvania State Assembly from 1864 to 1866 before returning to his law practice in West Chester, although he filled out the remainder of Henry Evans' state senate term after Evans died in 1872. Waddell also served on Borough Council from 1856 to 1861, including four years as the chief burgess (mayor) in 1859 and 1860, and later in life became the President Judge of the Courts of Chester County. By then, Waddell no longer lived on Virginia Avenue however -- the 1896 Borough directory lists him at the home of his son Robert Waddell (also a lawyer) at 310 N. High street. Like the rest of the men of his class and generation, Waddell also held numerous appointments of which the most unusual was as a

founder and officer of the Brandywine Base Ball Club.

With the exception of Waddell, the other "first families" stayed in their houses for at least two generations, but as they died out, the people who bought them often "outsiders" like Everett Smith of New York City, who bought the Parker house, Roland Dunn of Thornbury (Delaware County) who bought the Cornwell/Hemphill house, and John Bleecker of Washington DC (by way of Boston and Philadelphia) who bought the Waddell house.

Although the "Sisters" raise questions about the role of class and wealth in West Chester, for those with an interest in the Borough's history, the preservation of these houses was a good thing. It is made more remarkable by the fact that serpentine is a poor building material because it is soft and crumbles easily as a result of freezing and thawing. The survival of all four is a tribute to the efforts of their owners, as well as to the culture of West Chester which attracted such people to invest in them.

**NOTE:** Two other residences designed by Addison Hutton still stand in the Borough. One is "Cedarcroft," which was built for Robert Monaghan at 413 W. Miner Street in 1872 and now serves as an apartment house. The other was built in 1872 for Joshua Hartshorne, an iron merchant, and currently serves as the headquarters of John Milner Associates, an architectural and planning firm.