

[Home](#) | [Contact](#) | [Online Store](#)[About the Society](#) [Newtown Square](#) [Membership](#) [Paper Mill House Museum](#) [Historical Sit](#)[Home](#) > [About Newtown Square](#) > [People](#) > [Charles E. Ellis](#)

Charles E. Ellis: Charles E. Ellis School for Girls

Nestled within the rolling countryside of western Delaware County, Pennsylvania, sits an artistically landscaped campus that once was a registered arboretum and home to a private girls boarding school. Today, this campus serves as a business center to both the former ARC a Chemical Company, now known as Lyondell Chemical Company, and the North American headquarters of SAP America. As of 2006, it is currently being developed as a high-end retail and commercial location. It was the establishment of Girard College for Fatherless Boys that inspired Charles Ellis' dream of a school solely for fatherless white girls. The school would become known as the Charles E. Ellis School for Fatherless Girls.

Charles E. Ellis was born in Philadelphia on September 25, 1835 to early Quaker settlers. Charles' boyhood friends were P.A.B. Widener and W.L. Elkins, who would later become prominent Philadelphians. Although Stephen Girard had been dead for four years prior to Charles' birth, he nonetheless became Charles' idol. After attending the Friends Select School in Alexandria, Virginia, Charles returned to Philadelphia and entered the lumber business with his father, Amos. He soon became an expert in judging wood; however, he also became very interested in improving the transportation facilities within Philadelphia. Charles and his father organized the Citizens Railway Company in 1856, and soon Charles became president of the company.

Around 1894, Charles built a mansion at 1430 North Broad Street near his boyhood friends, Widener and Elkins. His mansion was burglarized of \$3000 worth of jewelry. After this episode, Charles began keeping three revolvers at hand. On April 6, 1909 while he was bedridden with rheumatism and tuberculosis of the glands, he was accidentally shot in the head from a revolver that he was examining. He reportedly died without regaining consciousness. Although many accounts state that it was an accident, no official record could be located to rule out a suicide. According to his funeral requests, he did not want a funeral, but rather to be buried in a pyramid shaped mausoleum in West Laurel Hill Cemetery. His second wife, her son and a daughter by his first wife survived him.

His will was probated on April 17, 1909. Although he provided for his survivors, left certain bequests for charities and scholarship funds; the bulk of his estate went towards fulfilling his dream. \$3,600,000 was left to establish the Charles E. Ellis School for the Education of Fatherless Girls but not without stipulations. He stated, "my intention, being to provide free education and maintenance for white fatherless girls and provide a gift to each girl upon leaving the institution and upon reaching her seventeenth year, if her conduct had been satisfactory to the principal, of \$50, which I hereby authorize. It is my Intention by the directions given in my will, vest In the trustees full power, authority and discretion in the management and the government of the college therein provided for. The principal should be invested until the income accumulated to \$100,000. The sum to be used to purchase real estate along a rail line leading to Philadelphia, for the purpose of establishing the school. Thereafter, the expense of operating the school is to come from income only and the principal is to remain intact. Any income not spent is to be added to the principal to provide additional Income for future expansion Girls are to be educated and maintained until age seventeen" It seemed as if Mr. Ellis did not want the school to be dominated by one religion He did want the girls to have religious instruction through the study of the Bible.

"Education shall be conducted upon non-sectarian principals, I direct that the reading and study of The

King James First English Bible shall be part of the daily Instruction." With the will now probated, the trustees set forth to declare a home for Charles' dream.

In 1921, two farms in Newtown Square, Delaware County, were purchased. The first was the 137 acre Siter property, which included several existing buildings and a brick swimming pool. Conflicting reports show a second property purchased with 111 acres. Some sources show the property belonging to the Taylors while others show it belonging to the Haines'. The total land purchased was 248 acres.

In 1923, enrollment quickly rose to 60 girls, ranging in ages from 5 to 13. A portion of the acreage was used to raise corn, wheat, beans, tomatoes and other perishables that were to be used for resident consumption as well as any surplus being used for the home economics classes.

Students reaching the seventh grade would continue their education in Philadelphia, since the school did not provide for girls over the age of thirteen. During 1924-25, social agencies in Philadelphia contested the will of Charles Ellis implying that "the girls were better off in foster homes rather than being in a boarding school." This court action resulted in a delay of construction at the Ellis School for nearly 6-7 years. During the late 20's, while the trustees battled with the social agencies, Mendelson Meehan was hired as a horticulturist. It was under Mr. Meehan that the school took on its beauty that is still preserved today. The grounds were transformed into a campus with over 600 varieties of trees which Mendelson labeled. In 1936, the Charles E. Ellis School for Fatherless Girls became a registered arboretum.

1931-1932 saw new buildings constructed. Camp Tonawanda was also founded on 100 wooded acres and included 16 cabins, central lodge, infirmary, modern lavatories, and counselor lodges. The camp was completed by the natural stream and new play areas. The girls were able to stay here during the summer rather than returning home. Although the camp was only eight weeks long, it allowed the girls to experience life outside of the city setting.

During this time, the first senior class graduated from the Ellis School. Prior to this, all girls had attended schools within the city and graduated from those schools instead. By 1935, the Pennsylvania Department of Public Instruction approved the Senior High School but it wasn't until 1936 that the Middle States Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools accredited the school. The original trust nearly doubled by 1946, (37 years after the school opened its doors), and 150 girls were enrolled.

As 1948 rolled around, the trustees saw the need to expand the school once again. Sixty six acres of the DuPont tract (Boot Road to Newtown Street Road to West Chester Pike) were purchased bringing the school's acreage up to 314. This acquisition enabled the property lines to be straightened out. The trustees also saw the need to admit tuition students. In 1949, the school purchased another 25 acres, this time on Bishop Hollow Road. This land would house a school for girls' grades 6 to 8. (Many years later, this school would become home to the Garrett-Williamson Lodge.)

The 50's saw a great many challenges to overcome but also great advancement as well. February 20, 1950, a fire tore through the Ellis Hall causing an estimated \$500,000 damage. Ellis Hall was nearly destroyed and most of the school's early records were lost. Expedient work, however, enabled two wings to be restored and the school re-opened in September 1950. The school again grew, with Ellis Hall adding classrooms, a library, art studio, and science labs. Ten sound proofed music and practice rooms were added as well as faculty offices. Shower facilities, lockers, a student store, rec center, and dark room completed this spacious building.

A separate auditorium-gymnasium was established, complete with a regulation size basketball court, two junior courts, four volleyball and badminton courts as well as individual lockers and showers. An unusually large stage for dramatics and pageants, a large floor for school dances and social occasions, and an auditorium with a seating capacity of 1000 highlighted its many uses. To complete this multi-used building

was its spacious lobby, organ loft, motion picture projection room with modern amplification and a well equipped kitchen.

The Commons, which served as a 300 seat capacity dining room, was completed. This building also served as the home economics lab as well as the central heating plant for several of the buildings. Both the students and faculty enjoyed the campus landscaping through the Views afforded them by the vast picture windows that surrounded the building. These buildings were dedicated on November 1, 1951. By 1959, scholarship student enrollment went beyond Philadelphia to Chester and Delaware Counties and by 1969, all other counties in Pennsylvania were eligible for scholarships.

The school seemed to be suffering financial difficulties by the early 1970's. By 1971, the Philadelphia residency requirement was lifted for scholarship students and they were now available to any United States qualified female resident. The trustees built a new art and dance studio, however, financial concerns forced them to forego the repairs needed on the swimming pool and the pool closed down. Unfortunately, in 1974, the financial woes forced a court battle to close the school. As a last attempt to save the failing establishment, the enrollment was extended to other than fatherless girls. The attempt failed and on July 1, 1977, by the orders of Judge Charles Klein, President of the Philadelphia Orphan's Court, the Charles E. Ellis School for Fatherless Girls closed its doors for the last time. The end result was devastating to the 1458 alumni. The original plans had anticipated the construction of 18 cottages and an enrollment of 250 students. Sadly, that goal was never reached. The enrollment fell short by only 35 students.

In 1978, Atlantic Richfield purchased the Ellis property for \$6.1 million and constructed a two story, 600,000 square foot research and engineering center. This property became ARCO Chemical Company World Headquarters. Atlantic Richfield made every attempt to retain the beauty of the Ellis grounds by using as many of the existing buildings as possible. Atlantic Richfield made the needed repairs to the John West House and Tavern that borders the property at Goshen and Newtown Street Roads. Today, ARCO Chemical Company still maintains the building; however, the Newtown Square Historical Society preserves its history through tours and lectures.

1997 was a phenomenal year. On November 19, SAP America, a German computer software company, purchased close to 182 acres to make Newtown Square their North American Headquarters. After spending 20 years in Newtown Square, ARCO Chemical was purchased in 1998 by Lyondell Chemical Company, (Houston, Texas).

Written and Researched by Gailynne M. Ferguson

Learn more at:

Charles E. Ellis, forgotten Philanthropist, and his School for Girls. 2007, by Tom DiFilippo (11 MB) 

<http://www.wwscholars.org/ellis/>

<http://www.ellisathleticcenter.com>

© Copyright 2006-2011 Newtown Square Historical Society
P.O. Box 3; Newtown Square, PA 19073 | Email
