

LYNNEWOOD HALL
920 Spring Avenue
Elkins Park
Montgomery County
Pennsylvania

HABS NO. PA-6146

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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

LYNNEWOOD HALL

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Location: 920 Spring Avenue, Elkins Park, Montgomery Co., Pennsylvania.

Significance: Lynnewood Hall, designed by famed Philadelphia architect Horace Trumbauer in 1898, survives as one of the finest country houses in the Philadelphia area. The 110-room mansion was built for street-car magnate P.A.B. Widener to house his growing family and art collection which would later become internationally renowned.¹ The vast scale and lavish interiors exemplify the remnants of an age when Philadelphia's self-made millionaire industrialists flourished and built their mansions in Cheltenham, apart from the Main Line's old society.

Description: Lynnewood Hall is a two-story, seventeen-bay Classical Revival mansion that overlooks a terraced lawn to the south. The house is constructed of limestone and is raised one-half story on a stone base that forms a terrace around the perimeter of the building. The mansion is a "T" plan with the front facade forming the cross arm of the "T". Enclosed semi-circular loggias extend from the east and west ends of the cross arm and a three-story wing forms the leg of the 'T' to the north. The most imposing exterior feature is the full-height, five-bay Corinthian portico with a stone staircase and a monumental pediment. The pediment contains a Classical figurative bas-relief and a circular window and is emphasized with modillions, dentils and egg-and-dart molding. Two-story, Corinthian pilasters are placed at two bay intervals around much of the building. Stone balustrades extend around the entire building at the raised terrace and the cornice line. The roof is flat and the cornice, like the pediment, is emphasized by modillions, dentils and egg-and-dart molding. The first floor windows are tall six-light casement windows with two-light transoms and bracketed crowns. The second floor windows are four-over-four-light, double-hung sash with stone surrounds. All of the windows within the central portico are four-over-four-light, double-hung sash with stone surrounds. Those on the first floor have bracketed crowns. The principal entrance is centered within the front facade and has a modillioned crown over the stone door surround. The circular loggias have Ionic columns, six-light French doors with semi-circular transoms, and cornice-line balustrades. The doors open out to a terrace that can also be accessed by a stone stairway.

¹ The family opened Lynnewood Hall to the public in the late teens, 1920s and into the 1930s; it was at this point that the scale and scope of the art collection gained international recognition.

LYNNEWOOD HALL
HABS NO. PA-6146 (page 2)

The north wing, or leg of the "T", consists of primarily the same Classical features as the cross arm. The west side includes a stone, one-story, three bay butler's entrance with Ionic columns and a balustrade. Originally there was a porte-cochere at the rear of the north wing. In 1910, however, the swimming pool north of the porte-cochere was enclosed with a squash court and changing rooms on the first floor and a gallery added above. The porte-cochere became an arched breezeway connecting the main house to the new addition. The breezeway--above which is the Bellini/Cellini Gallery--is covered with slate and is lit by a round dormer with a leaded spoke design. The first floor of the rear addition is rusticated, while the two-story upper section has stone pilasters and detailing that creates a false window or recessed panel appearance.

Lynnewood Hall is an immense structure that stretches approximately 365' east to west and contains roughly 110 rooms. The principal entrance leads into a two-story grand hall with a black and white checkered marble floor and a coffered ceiling which had a predominately yellow stained-glass panel at the center of the coffered cove. The opulent grand hall features full-height Composite pilasters flanked by large stone arches. A grand staircase with a decorative iron rail rises at the north end of the hall. Directly north of the staircase landing is a library (originally a tea room with French decoration including a mother-of-pearl-like elongated dome, centered in the ceiling), while to the east and west, the staircase splits to winding stairs which lead to the second floor balcony. The balcony overlooks the grand hall and contains a coffered ceiling and an elaborate iron rail.

The vast wings that comprise the cross arm of the "T" extend east and west from the grand hall. The east wing included a reception room to the south, a gallery to the north, and a hall leading from the grand hall to the ballroom and attached porch. The west wing consisted of a smoking room to the south, a pantry to the north and a hall leading to the dining room and attached breakfast room, safe and enclosed porch. The east wing's second floor was primarily bedrooms and private living space for Widener's elder son George and his wife Nellie and their children Harry, George and Eleanor. The west wing's second floor contained the living quarters of the master, his son Joseph and his wife Ella and their children Peter A.B., II, and Fifi.

The ballroom is an elaborate space measuring 2550 square feet. The walnut-panelled walls are decorated with Composite fluted columns and pilasters embellished with gold leaf. The lavish ceiling contains filigree plaster and leaf work, relief angelic figures within the cove, and bands of floral motif molding, all accented with gold leaf. The most imposing feature, however, is

the large circular painting in the center framed by an elaborate plaster molding covered with gold leaf designs and flanked by eight smaller paintings, also framed by ornate plaster moldings with gold leaf highlights. The gallery next to the ballroom has been significantly altered, yet it still features a beautiful polychrome wood beamed and panelled ceiling.²

The north wing contained the library, Widener's office and servants' areas on the first floor, while the second floor contained the guest bedrooms, the tea room and the art galleries. There was also an indoor swimming pool, a squash court and a large art gallery, known as the Van Dyck Gallery, in the rear addition.

The grounds were originally heavily terraced with elaborate gardens. In 1920, Jacques Greber, the French landscape architect who had redesigned the suburbs of Paris and laid out Benjamin Franklin Parkway in Philadelphia, was hired to redesign the landscape of Lynnewood Hall. Greber laid out a rose garden along the west side and a formal garden with a fountain along the east side. He also included parterre gardens, large trees and other tall plantings along the east drive court as a screen for the galleries. An intricate drive wound throughout the estate, passing many spectacular fountains, said to have rivaled those at Versailles.

The interior and grounds of Lynnewood Hall have been significantly altered and are in great need of repair and restoration. Several rooms including the ballroom, reception room, smoking room and breakfast room retain significant architectural elements, however, due to very limited access, most of the building could not be documented.

History: In 1898, Peter Arrell Brown Widener (more commonly referred to as P.A.B.) commissioned Horace Trumbauer, a 29-year old architect from Jenkintown, to design a new country home. Lynnewood Hall, the home that Trumbauer is believed to have designed after a manor house at Prior Park in Bath, England, was said to have cost eight million dollars, but many believe this figure to be high unless it included the furnishings.

Widener grew up in Philadelphia, the son of a German bricklayer. He was apprenticed to a butcher and learned the business so well that he went into business for himself. He opened a stall in the old Spring Garden Market and soon opened other shops around the

² The fireplace was removed and given to the National Gallery of Art by the Widener family.

city. The butcher's stall in the market became a gathering place for politicians and local ward workers, and within a short time Widener became the Republican leader of the 20th Ward. This position enabled him to obtain a contract to supply mutton to all the Union Troops within a ten-mile radius of Philadelphia during the Civil War.

Widener earned \$50,000 from the mutton contract and, after the war, he invested in horse-car companies and streetcar railways. Widener remained involved in politics, and in 1873, he was appointed city treasurer of Philadelphia. At this time, the position was considered the most lucrative political office in the city because the treasurer accrued all interest from city deposits as legitimate spoils of office.

In 1875, Widener and William Luken Elkins pooled their money and began operating streetcar lines in Philadelphia. They also invested in franchises. Widener and Elkins quickly purchased many small competing lines and formed the Philadelphia Traction Company. By 1883 they owned all of the City's streetcar lines. In 1884, they merged with New York operators to form the Widener-Elkins-Trimble Traction Company. The rapidly growing company expanded to Chicago, Pittsburgh and Baltimore, thereby owning and operating over 500 miles of tracks. During this time, Widener expanded his investments, becoming one of the original organizers of the U.S. Steel Corporation, the American Tobacco Company and the International Mercantile Marine Company.

Widener's affluence enabled him to purchase a Victorian brownstone mansion on Broad Street just above Girard Avenue. It also enabled him to start an art collection of fine paintings and Chinese porcelain. Upon returning from a European shopping trip, Widener realized that the walls of his house were too crowded for his new acquisitions. He thus decided to buy a large Victorian country estate, Linwood Hall, to house his art and to serve as his country residence.³ He later, in 1900, gave the Philadelphia house to the Philadelphia Free Library and it became the H. Josephine Widener Memorial Library. Linwood Hall was located on a 300-acre tract of land between Spring and Ashbourne Roads in Cheltenham Township. At this time, the Main Line attracted the old, established wealthy Philadelphia families, while Cheltenham became the center for the entrepreneurial men who had made their fortunes in the rags-to-riches tradition. Beginning in the 1880s, men such as Jay Cooke, John B. Stetson,

³ William L. Elkins and P.A.B. Widener bought a pair of stone Victorian houses across the street from one another; Elkins called his The Needles and Widener, Linwood.

LYNNEWOOD HALL
HABS NO. PA-6146 (page 5)

Henry W. Breyer, William Welsh Harrison, Joseph Wharton, John Wanamaker, Edward T. Stokesbury, Cyrus H.K. Curtis, Abraham Barker and Joseph Wharton Lippencott all built country estates in Cheltenham. Their mansions, many modeled after European designs, were built with mostly tax-free money acquired from sales of products such as hats, ice cream, sugar, department store merchandise, magazines, gas meters, iron, leather goods, and meat products. To make this area even more desirable and accessible, Widener and Elkins routed streetcar lines out to Cheltenham in the late 1890s. Ease of transportation would then make it possible for these individuals to erect permanent residences on grand scale, and to give up their in-town residences.

In 1890, Widener hired Angus Wade, a well-known architect who came to Philadelphia ca. 1883 and worked in the office of Willis G. Hale, to make extensive additions and alterations to Linwood Hall. Widener and his family used this house for several years, but eventually outgrew it. Thus, in 1898, he commissioned Horace Trumbauer to design a new, larger mansion and several dependencies. The mansion, which he named Lynnewood Hall, was built as an opulent showplace for his art and home for his family.

Widener's estate was virtually self-sustaining. On the south side of Asbourne Road, originally Cheltenham Avenue, Widener had a 117-acre farm, now an apartment complex named Lynnewood Gardens. The farm contained chicken houses, stock barns, greenhouses, a half-mile race track with a polo field in the middle and stables for raising thoroughbred horses. In addition to the farm, the estate had its own power plant, water pumps, laundry, carpentry shop, and bakery. Widener was so concerned about a fire destroying his art collection that he had a hot air heating system installed at the farm and piped the heat approximately fifteen hundred feet to the house. Thirty-seven full-time servants were employed plus extra help was called in frequently for lavish parties or to perform special maintenance jobs.

Widener was a self-taught art collector who, with his son Joseph, amassed an internationally renowned collection that was estimated to be worth fifty million dollars in 1940. Originally the paintings were hung in the Victorian fashion, frame to frame, floor to ceiling. Many of the classic masters, including El Greco, Titian, Frans Hals, Vermeer, Veronese, Corot, Rubens, Gainsborough, Reynolds and Manet were represented. There were fourteen Rembrants, including The Mill which caused an uproar when Widener purchased it for \$400,000. The British did not want it to leave England, but nobody would match the offer and Widener brought it to the United States. There was a gallery dedicated to the works of Bellini that included jeweled creations by Benvenuto

Cellini. The gallery next to the ballroom was often referred to as the Raphael Room because it is said to have housed Raphael's acclaimed painting The Little Cowper Madonna. In addition, at the end of the north wing, there was a rectangular gallery specifically designed for displaying the paintings by Van Dyck. In 1903, John Singer Sargent was commissioned to paint P.A.B. Widener and several members of his family. In 1940, Joseph Widener gave the collection to the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.

Horace Trumbauer received his architectural training with the Philadelphia firm of George W. and William D. Hewitt, whom he joined in 1884 when he was sixteen years old. He established his own office in 1890 and completed a series of designs for the builders and developers Wendell & Smith. Grey Towers, a castle he designed for William Welsh Harrison in 1892, was his first major commission and its acclaim placed him in great demand among America's wealthy. Throughout his career, Trumbauer designed all types of buildings along the East coast, ranging from town and country houses to academic and religious structures. He emphasized French seventeenth and eighteenth-century designs, yet he was equally competent with Georgian and Tudor revivals. Trumbauer designed several mansions for his wealthy entrepreneurial clients in Cheltenham, including Estowe Park for William Lukens Elkins, Cheltenham House for George Elkins, Georgian Terrace for George F. Tyler, and in the mid 1920s, Ronedale for Eleanore Widener Dixon, granddaughter of P.A.B. Widener, and her husband Fitz Eugene Dixon. After 1902, his chief designer was Julian Abele, the first black graduate of the University of Pennsylvania's School of Architecture. Together they designed many celebrated buildings, including the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

Trumbauer was also hired to design a carriage house and a gate house at Lynnewood Hall. Both houses exhibit similar designs as the main house, though the carriage house, known as Conklin Hall, is said to feature elements from the Petite Trianon at Versailles Palace. In 1909-10, Trumbauer enclosed the swimming pool, added the Van Dyck gallery, placed a bas relief in the previously blank pediment, and enclosed the east and west porches to create loggias. P.A.B. Widener died in November 1916, however his family continued to live in Lynnewood Hall. In the 1920s, Trumbauer returned to Lynnewood Hall to redesign the carriage house to provide living quarters for Joseph's son Peter, Jr. and his family.

Members of the Widener family remained at Lynnewood family until 1941, when the house was vacated and left in the hands of one caretaker. In 1952, Lynnewood Hall was purchased by Faith Theological Seminary as living quarters, classrooms and a chapel.

LYNNEWOOD HALL
HABS NO. PA-6146 (page 7)

The building has been severely altered and neglected, and today is in a terrible state of disrepair. Most of the original 300-acre tract has been sold, and Lynnewood Hall now stands on an overgrown thirty-six-acre parcel of land. The fountains were all sold in 1989, and in 1993, the owners attempted to dismantle and sell many significant architectural components of the mansion. The sale was halted, but there is still great concern for the future of Lynnewood Hall.

Sources:

Deming, John H. "Lynnewood Hall: Estate of P.A.B. Widener, Esq." 1986. This is one in a series of booklets devoted to country estates in the Philadelphia area. Much of the information included in this HABS form, such as the dates of building construction and family history, came from this booklet.

Frank, Stephen Alexander. "Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission Inventory Form: Lynnewood Hall - ancestral Home of Peter Arrel Brown Widener." September 1978. This is a one-half-page form with very little information.

Tatman, Sandra L. and Roger W. Moss. Biographical Dictionary of Philadelphia Architects: 1700-1930. Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1985, p. 799-807 and 814-17.

John H. Deming of the Hawksmoor Group has done much research on Lynnewood Hall and generously provided an extensive annotated list of bibliography sources that are part of in his Hawks Moor Collection (those starred were used in this report). Many articles have been written in the past few years concerning the unsuccessful attempt by the Faith Theological Society to dismantle and sell off architectural components of the house. Only articles that include significant information about the house have been included.:

Life Magazine, 29 August 1938, p. 35. Exterior and Interior photos with color of selected paintings from the gallery.

"Paintings at Lynnewood Hall," prepared by Bernard Berenson, Hofstede de Groot, W. Roberts and W.R. Valentiner for Joseph Widener in 1923.

"Paintings and Sculpture from the Widener Collection," prepared by the National Gallery of Art in 1948. The National Gallery of Art also has a large collection of photographs of Lynnewood Hall. These focus on the art collection and galleries, but also include other views of the mansion, for art was hung throughout the building.*

The Mattie Hewitt photographic collection at the Pennsylvania State Archives. *

"The Gardens' Chronicle of America," February 1922, p. 431. This contains a pair of early photographs of the Greber gardens and a big fountain.

The Dallin Collection of aerial photographs at the Hagley Museum, some dated September 23, 1939. *

The New York Times, 8 April 1990. An article by Rita Reif on the Henri-Leon Greber sculpture on the estate.

The Philadelphia Inquirer Magazine, 15 May 1955. An article by Hugh Scott called "The Years of Leisure - Widener Recalls Vanished Era."

America' Gilded Age by Frederick Platt, p. 78, for chapter on Lynnewood Hall.

A series of photographs from the late 1980s taken of the garden statuary and fountains by Barry Bohnet.

A series of black and white photos from the Alfred S. Barnam, Jr. collection. They cover interior and exterior views and are the earliest photographs in the Hawks Moor collection as they are presumed to be prior to and not later than 1906.

Stately Homes in America, by Desmond and Crawley, c. 1906, with views of the house prior to the addition of the rear galleries and the squash court.

Plans of Lynnewood Hall located at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. *

A copy of the price list of Joe Widener for his art collection (said that he would not show it to Harrisburg when he received a tax subpoena).

The Sunday Bulletin, 9 June 1962, an article entitled "Widener had Lynnewood Hall Built to House Family, Collection of Art." *

An article of unknown origin and date, but probably c. 1918-20, titled "An American Rose Garden in the French Style, by Asa Steele. It covers the Lynnewood Hall rose garden and includes Jacques Greber's garden plan with a listing of the plantings.

American Homes and Gardens, August 1907, for photographs of the sculpture in the early/first gardens at Lynnewood Hall.

An advertisement from Jno. Williams Bronze Foundry & Works of New York which shows the front, bronze vestibule doors which they produced.

An advertisement by Julius Roehrs Company of Rutherford, NJ which mentions they were selling two "old Fellows," referring to two old bay trees from Lynnewood Hall.

New York Herald Tribune, Book Section, Sunday, November 24, 1949, for a review of Without Drums, a book written by Peter A. B. Widener, II, about his early years and the inner conflict he experienced during World War I when he saw how the less privileged lived. The review is titled, "Spoiled Brat Grew Up - An Autobiography." A millionaire horseman tells how he learned about democracy - and himself.

Golden Age of American Gardens, Griswold/Weller, p. 131, for mention of the house and gardens, including an aerial view of the Greber gardens with the house behind.

Notable Philadelphians, by Moses King, 1903. Includes photos of large homes in the Philadelphia area.*

Antiques, the magazine, January 1993, for the Elizabeth Street five page color advertisement for the sale of any and all of the architectural pieces of Lynnewood Hall.*

Times Chronicle, January 20, 1993 and January 27, 1993, for a two part article on the house and family using photos and information from the Hawksmoor files. It also includes information on the physical condition of the house and the post 1950 era. *

Historic Preservation News, March/April 1993 for an extensive article on the problems at Lynnewood Hall and several photographs, including one of the stripped dining room. *

A series of papers from "Lynnewood Hall" c. 1990-93 which deal with Faith Theological Seminary. Some of the papers refer to an attempted deal with Dr. Curry to sell the Van Dyck Gallery walls and fireplace to Southebys in New York. Many of the papers deal with the severe financial problems of Dr. Rev. Carl McIntyre.

Faith Theological Seminary catalog of 1979-81, which contains many photographs dating to the 1950s when they acquired the property. Pressed in this catalog are remnants of velvet maroon fabric from the art gallery and samples of trim fabric from the walls of the gallery.

Historian: Janet G. Blutstein, HABS Historian, 1994.