

III. SUMMARY HISTORY OF CAMP WRIGHT

The following discussion presents the historic context of Camp Wright. The presented information includes the results of background research conducted by both the 2006 Cultural Resources Survey and the 2007 supplemental research efforts for the 2007 recordation of Camp Wright.

A. Historic Overview of Camp Wright

The concept of Camp Wright began in 1889 with the Committee on Summer Work (Committee). There were two distinct activities planned by the Committee: a field trip and Vacation School. On June 25, 1889, the Committee took 175 women and children to Birmingham Park for a day of relaxation and clean air. With the assistance of donations, the Vacation School opened. The Committee was totally unprepared for the unprecedented attendance and need of the program. After initial estimates of thirty to fifty children, the opening day attendance was eighty-five and children were turned away for the first week. By the end of the fourth week, the average attendance was 132 children. The program was geared for boys and girls from ages eight to sixteen. However, children from two to five years old were also accepted. The program had numerous activities for the children, including sewing, clay modeling, and scraps booking. Physical activities were also stressed. The total expenses for Vacation School in 1889 were \$64.25 (Associated Charities 1889).

The success of this endeavor stimulated Associated Charities to start Country Week. Country Week obtained housing for women and children at local farms for one week during the summer. The goals and reasons for Country Week can best be summed up by a quote from Mary A. T. Clark in the Tenth Annual Report of the Associated Charities of Wilmington Delaware:

“There were many families who had not been reached during the winter through the Relief and Employment Bureaus, whose struggle for independence had been so long and hard, that little energy was left to battle with the burden during the excessive hot weather. The continued daily drudgery and privation, with large families, limited space, and no prospect of a better condition have a demoralizing tendency; the weary wife and mother has almost lost interest in life and her duties are performed mechanically.

It is then that our Country Week comes in so fittingly, and gives a change and rest from cramped apartments and scant provision, to broad fields and comfortable homes where pure air and sunshine with plenty of wholesome

food, for a week or fortnight, give new life to the tired mother and her little ones.” (Associated Charities 1895).

In 1894, Country Week started on July 1 and ran for two months. Country Week helped one hundred mothers and children and sent them to places such as Gordon Heights (DE) and Chester County (PA). The budget does not mention Country Week; however, there is notation of a Fresh Air Fund. Donations to the Fresh Air Fund were \$191.97 and expenses were \$285.28, which left a balance of \$8.79 (Associated Charities 1895).

In 1898, the Fresh Air Fund and Country Week seemed to be interchangeable. The Fresh Air Fund sent ninety-seven individuals to the country. Country Week provided for ninety-seven women and children in the same year. The people were sent to farms in Chester County, Pennsylvania; Brandywine Hundred, Delaware; and Faulkland, Delaware. Two groups were also sent to Birmingham Park. Country Week had a balance on hand of \$112.77. Donations of \$137.00 and expenditures of \$177.18, for an ending balance of \$72.59 (Associated Charities 1898, 1934; Hoffecker 1974; Munroe 1984).

In 1916, the Children’s Camp Committee rented a farm in Beaver Valley in northern Delaware. This rental was the official start of Children’s Camp. However, in 1919, a piece of property in Hockessin became available for purchase (Associated Charities 1934; Reed 1947). Through the efforts of Emily Bissell, the property in Hockessin was acquired for use as a camp (Historical Society of Delaware, Bill Frank Collection). The property was purchased from Edna S. Wilson (Widow) by Associated Charities of Wilmington on February 2, 1920 for \$8,000.00 and was subject to the payment of a \$4,000.00 mortgage (New Castle County Deed Record F, Volume 29, Page 167). The Children’s Camp was named after Peter T. Wright (Associated Charities 1934).

The Wilmington Flower Market was founded by Mrs. A. Felix Du Pont to fund two local charities. One of those charities was Camp Wright. In 1921, over \$1,500.00 was raised for the two charities (www.wilmingtonflowermarket.org/html/history.html; Historical Society of Delaware, Bill Frank Collection; Associated Charities 1934). The first building on Camp Wright was built with the money donated from the Wilmington Flower Market (Historical Society of Delaware, Bill Frank Collection; Associated Charities 1934). Camp Wright opened the summer of 1921 (Associated Charities 1934; Family Society 1946, 1951, 1952, 1953, 1954).

The Children’s Camp opened on June 30, 1923 and closed August 30, 1923. During the summer 125 children, twenty-five at a time, were treated to ten days at Camp Wright. Activities included playground, baseball, picnics, and swimming. Staff consisted of one cook and two playground monitors. Two structures at the camp consisted of a bunkhouse and a kitchen /dining room. The bunkhouse had an eighty-foot screened-in porch, and the kitchen/dining room was also screened. During the year, receipts for the Children’s Camp were \$2,706.69 and expenses were \$3,310.29. The 1923 budget of the Associated Charities stated a liability of \$4,000.00 on a farm near Mendenhall Mills, Delaware (Camp Wright); while funds for Children’s Camp were \$6,946.95. Interestingly, the Certified Public Accountant who certified the budget is Peter T. Wright (Associated Charities 1924).

In 1931, the Associated Charities changed its name to Family Society (www.cffde.org/history.htm; Historical Society of Delaware, Bill Frank Collection; Associated Charities 1934; New Castle County Deed Book C-86, Page 114).

In 1942, over 200 boys and girls attended camp (Family Society 1942).

As of 1946, the camp provided accommodations for fifty children. The children ranged in age from six to twelve. The camp season was eight weeks long. The children stayed for two-week periods, alternating between boys and girls. Each child was assigned camp duties at the start of camp. There was a free health examination for each child by the State Board of Health. Caseworkers provided a summary on each child selected for camp. The camp director then used this summary to select appropriate duties and activities for each child. After the child completed camp, a report was filed with the Family Society by the camp director. The Family Society then worked with the family of the child to help the child in future endeavors (Family Society 1946; Reed 1947).

Major renovations were finished on Camp Wright in 1950 so that the camp would meet the standards of the National Camping Association. The two old bunkhouses were remodeled. Each bunkhouse now had a central bathroom and a sleeping unit on each end. A new bunkhouse was built; it too had a central bathroom and sleeping unit on each end. Each of the six sleeping units could accommodate eight children. A new water system was put into operation. The water system, in addition to serving the new bathrooms in the bunkhouses, also supplied hot water, a playground drinking fountain, and kitchen improvements. In 1950, Camp Wright was used by 199 children, of which thirty-five were special needs children (Family Society 1951).

In 1951, the Family Society spent \$8,780.05 on operating expenses and \$3,472.36 on camp repairs. The camp generated \$1,226.14 in revenue in the form of fees and contributions. Children who attended the camp were from families who could not otherwise afford to send their children to a summer camp (Family Society 1952).

Children who could not go to other summer camps once again benefited from Camp Wright in 1952. That year, the operating expenses were \$14,298.19 while camp repairs were \$928.79. Camp fees and contributions generated \$1,938.99 in revenue (Family Society 1953).

Camp Wright produced \$1,423.02 in camp fees and contributions while spending \$13,061.40 in operating expenses in 1953 (Family Society 1954).

The Welfare Council approached the West End Neighborhood House in 1954, about having the Family Society transfer Camp Wright to the control of West End Neighborhood House. An agreement was reached between United Fund, Family Society, and West End Neighborhood House. A three-year lease was signed between West End Neighborhood House and Family Society. A joint committee was formed between members of both charities, with United Fund providing monetary support (Hulse 1983). In 1954, Camp Wright's revenue from camp fees and contributions was \$1,619.01. The operating expenses for Camp Wright were \$13,241.80 (Family Society 1954).

Family Society changed its name to the Family Service of Northern Delaware in 1955. There was a change in the ages of the children admitted to Camp Wright. Boys and girls age eight to twelve were accepted to the camp instead of six to twelve year olds. During that year, 196 children attended Camp Wright. In 1955, Family Service of Northern Delaware had no revenue from Camp Wright and only expended \$385.85 (Family Service of Northern Delaware 1955).

In 1957, the second three-year lease was signed between Family Service of Northern Delaware and West End Neighborhood House. However, in 1958 West End Neighborhood House requested, and received, a long-term lease for Camp Wright. According to Carl Mazzarelli, who worked at Camp Wright from 1952 until 1965, all of the present structures at Camp Wright were in place before the West End Neighborhood House took control of the camp (Mazzarelli 2006).

This was the start of the tenure of the West End Neighborhood House. On March 21, 1972, the West End Neighborhood House bought the property from Family Service of Northern Delaware (AKA Family Society, Associated Charities) for five dollars (New Castle County Deed Book C-86 Page 114).

During the 1950s and 1960s, the West End Neighborhood House primarily worked with Italian-Americans from the community that they serviced (Calistro 2006). The 1960s saw a change in the racial make up of their community and, in 1961, the West End Neighborhood House opened Camp Wright to African-Americans. From the start of the tenure of West End Neighborhood House control of Camp Wright, the camp was opened to children from throughout the city. However, children of their community were given priority. Camp fees were based on a complicated system that factored in the family income. No child was turned away for financial reasons (Hulse 1983).

Camp Wright was still structured as a series of two-week summer camps for younger children from the 1970s until its eventual closure. The children were from the inner city and their ages ranged from seven to fourteen (Hulse 1983; Calistro 2006; Mazzarelli 2006). Camp Wright introduced numerous outdoor activities such as hiking, archery, camp craft, arts and crafts, swimming, softball, and other nature activities to young boys and girls. The camp also provided movies in the evening and a hayride (Hulse 1983; Mazzarelli 2006).

In 1975, with a grant from the United Way, a series of renovations and repairs were completed on Camp Wright (Hulse 1983).

Starting in the 1970s, there was a decline in the use of Camp Wright as a summer camp. Other programs that utilized Camp Wright during this time period were a Senior Citizens program and various overnight programs. Around 1980, the last of the summer camps was held at Camp Wright. However, this was not the end of the usefulness of Camp Wright. Senior Citizen programs to get seniors to the country for fresh air and relaxation were still very popular. During the 1980s, Camp Wright was used as a day camp and for retreats. Another popular activity was the annual Haunted House sponsored with the Wilmington Jaycees. This remained very popular until the onslaught of commercial Haunted Houses in the late 1990s (Calistro 2006).

The next major renovation at Camp Wright was around 1993. This is when some of the buildings were raised and placed on the current foundations. The interiors of the buildings were also renovated (Calistro 2006).

In 2000, the New Castle County Police Department used the camp for a program to have inner city youths meet and work with the police department. The same year an Eagle Scout project for the Boy Scouts of America renovated the bunkhouse on the top of the hill at Camp Wright (Calistro 2006).

B. Results of Supplemental Documentary Research

One of the primary objectives of the supplemental documentary research entailed an attempt to acquire archival construction plans of Camp Wright. While no such plans could be located, two possible collections of Camp Wright material warrant discussion. According to representatives of Children and Families First (formerly Associated Charities), this organization contains an unknown amount of material on the creation and early years of Camp Wright. The archives of the West End Neighborhood House also likely contains information about the final years of Camp Wright. Although neither the Children and Families First nor the West End Neighborhood House collections are catalogued, organization representatives believe that building plans do not exist in either collection.

Nonetheless, the supplemental research efforts did yield information of note. In July 2007, excerpts from the aforementioned status report on Camp Wright by a Committee in 1954 (West End Neighborhood House 1954) was faxed to McCormick Taylor, Inc. from the West End Neighborhood House. While this excerpt focuses on the overall history of Camp Wright, it did provide a few additional details. The following discussion presents a summary of the information therein.

Beaver Valley Farm was unsuited to the camp because of a serious transportation problem, part of the reason why the Wilson farm, two miles from Hockessin “on the trolley” was purchased in 1919. The camp, however, continued to operate at Beaver Valley until funds were available to repair the few buildings on the Wilson Farm.

The camp at the Wilson Farm opened in the summer of 1923. A report dated September 19, 1923 stated “Children came, with few exceptions, from families under active care with the Associated Charities. The majority came from homes where there were problems such as cancer, epilepsy, tuberculosis, insanity, sleeping sickness, and imprisonment”. The purpose of the camp, as stated in that year was “to teach children who have lived their short lives in dark rooming houses how to play”.

In 1932 the Children’s Camp took on its present name of Camp Wright, in honor of Peter T. Wright, a member of the Family Society Board of Directors who has been involved with the camp for some time.

As of 1953, part of the Wilson Farm owned by Associated Charities was sold off, leaving 11 acres to the camp. The camp, at that time, included a director’s cottage, three divided bunkhouses, a kitchen building, dining hall, cooks’ quarters, a craft shop, shower house and a

recreation hall. Counselor's quarters were provided for in the bunkhouses and each bunkhouse had its own bathroom.

The study used data from 1953 for its sample. In 1953, there were two, one-week encampments for boys and girls 6 to 8 ½ years old, two two-week encampments for boys 9 to 12 years old, and one, two-week encampment for girls 9 to 12 years old. These five encampments were attended by a total of 219 children. Children came from families living in central Wilmington and the suburbs with a concentration of Wilmington children coming from an area bounded by Pennsylvania Avenue, Greenhill Avenue, Lancaster Avenue, and West Street. Camp Wright, at this time, did not accept children of African/African-American descent. Of those families sending their children to Camp Wright, thirty-one percent had, at some time, used Family Society Services. Forty-eight percent of the children came from broken homes. A high percentage of families had male parent employed as a semi-skilled or skilled workman. Despite the number of children from broken homes, family life for many was stable. This fact is in keeping with the mission statement of 1923 – “to teach kids who have lived their short lives in dark rooming houses how to play”.