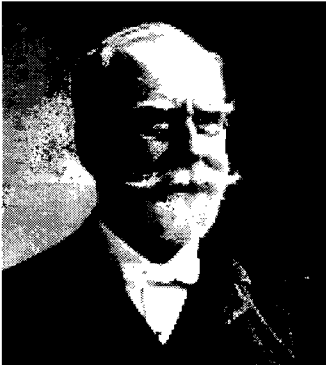


## The Sellers Family *By Doug Ewbank*



In an 1885 lecture at the Franklin Institute, Coleman Sellers commented that "America is adding many pages to the history of mechanics, but America will not receive her share of acknowledgment for work done, unless her sons take care to write the history and give to those who have done the work the credit that is their due." The Sellers family deserves a lot of credit for the success of industry in Philadelphia and America. The Sellers family was also an important part of Powelton's history.

The Sellers family came to America in 1682 and helped settle Millbourne and Upper Darby. They were prominent mill owners who also brought with them techniques for weaving wire. Intermarriages with other prominent families produced several generations of "mechanists" whose skills in harnessing energy and metal working put them at the heart of industrial development in the nineteenth century. In the 1820s, the family split into two branches. One branch centered around the Sellers Brothers (Samuel and Charles) company that made wire cloth and (David) Sellers & Pennock which had fire hose company with a factory near 39th and Powelton (now a parking lot). That branch tended to settle near 39th and Chestnut. The other branch tended to settle in Powelton.

John Sellers and Elizabeth Poole, the daughter of a Brandywine miller, had ten children. Their oldest daughter, Mary (1818-1894) married Edward Bancroft who was also from a prominent milling family. Bancroft went into business with Mary's brother William in Providence, R.I. to make machine tools. In 1848, they moved back to Philadelphia and set up shop near 30th and Chestnut. William's brother John Jr. (1826-1907) joined them in 1853. After Bancroft died suddenly in 1855, William and John moved their shop to 16th and Hamilton and renamed it William Sellers & Co. Later their second cousin, (Dr.) Coleman Sellers (1827-1907), and Mary's son, John Sellers Bancroft (1843-1919), joined them as partners. Under William Sellers's leadership, they invented much of the technology that allowed factories to be built around large steam engines and produced the machine tools needed for heavy industry such as lathes and drill presses. The firm received more than a hundred patents and their products won high honors at international exhibitions in Paris and Vienna. William Sellers was a major force behind standardization of machine parts. Previously, parts were individually crafted for each machine. Replacement parts had to be produced by a skilled artisan. Standardization reduced production costs and eased maintenance. Sellers even developed the standard design for screws that became the international standard. The magnitude of their products was apparent in 1890 when they installed two 100-ton, electric cranes that allowed Baldwin Locomotive workers to hoist the largest locomotives.

We first find the Sellers in Powelton in 1861 when John Sellers Jr. moves to a fine Italianate house at 3300 and Arch (now the volleyball court), where he lived for more than 30 years. His wife, Ann Keen, was raised at 32nd and Chestnut, which later became the site of the Drexel Institute. In 1866, John Jr. and William also bought investment properties in Powelton. An 1872 map shows they owned the north side of the 3400 block of Powelton Ave. and three-quarters of the 3300 block between Race and Powelton (both

areas now filled with fraternities), and the eastern half of the south side of the 3400 block of Baring. The Sellers were industrialists with a conscience. They were very interested in city planning and played an important role in the establishment of Fairmont Park. John led one of the largest citizens' protests of the post-Civil War era against industries that threatened water and air quality. William was a prominent member of the Park Commission. In 1874, they took the lead in a lawsuit to prevent the Pennsylvania Railroad from leasing out 21 acres between the Schuylkill and 30th St. for a stockyard and slaughterhouse. (They lost out to machine politics.)

Dr. Coleman Sellers moved to 3301 Baring St. (a large Italianate, now an apartment building) about 1865-66. He remained there until his death in 1907. His mother was Sophonisba Anguisciola Peale, the daughter of Charles Wilson Peale, the noted artist and naturalist. His father, an inventor and mechanic, died when Coleman was only 7. His mother decided he should be farmer, but made sure he had a good education in science. Dissatisfied with life on a farm in 1846 at age 19 he was allowed to join his older brothers, Charles and George Escol Sellers in Ohio where they ran a rolling mill. (George Escol was reputedly the model for Mark Twain's eccentric "Mulberry Sellers.") Coleman was immediately tasked with making drawings for the improvement of mill machinery. He soon became interested in the telegraph (which reached Cincinnati in 1847) and educated himself on electromagnetism. When his brothers became involved with the development of railroads, Coleman supervised the building of steam locomotives designed by his brothers for the Panama Railroad. He then went to work for a locomotive works in Cincinnati where he remained for five years.

Coleman returned to Philadelphia in 1856 to work for his cousins. He became the real inventive genius behind the success of William Sellers & Co. For 30 years, he developed new designs for machine tools, hydraulic machinery, cranes, pumps, injectors, railway turntables, and numerous other machines. But his inventive genius was wide ranging. For example, when he became interested in publicity and was soon dissatisfied with the drawings used in the firm's catalogues. This led him in 1858 to photography. He became an enthusiastic photographer and was one of the founders of the Philadelphia Photographic Society. He soon introduced the use of glycerin to keep photographic plates damp and devised a portable dark room to aid in changing plates. But even this was not enough. He wanted to show their machines in motion. In 1861 he was granted a patent for the "kinematoscope," the earliest machine for photographs depicting objects or people in motion. However, the practicality of the machine was limited by the limitations of the

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wet plate process. Coleman's wide ranging interests led him to the Franklin Institute where for 23 years he was a Professor of Mechanics in the Institute's technical school and he served as President in 1870-74.

Coleman Sellers retired from the company in 1886, but his crowning achievement lay ahead of him. In 1889, he was engaged by the Niagara Falls Power Co. to determine the feasibility of harnessing some of the power of Niagara Falls to generate electricity. He soon became Chief Engineer for the scheme. To get access to the best minds in the field, he formed an international commission headed by Lord Kelvin. The commission met in London. One of the problems they faced was the choice between alternating and direct current. Lord Kelvin (and, incidentally, Thomas Edison) advocated direct current. However, Sellers was fully informed about the advantages of alternating current from his friendship with George Westinghouse. After long disputes, it was up to Sellers to make the decision. He chose alternating current.

Coleman was not simply a visionary industrialist. His childhood on farms and, possibly the aura of his grandfather, made him a naturalist. For example, he carefully calculated that the

himself with the Lanston Monotype Machine Company. At that time, the monotype casting machine was frail, unreliable and difficult to construct. He superintended its redesign to facilitate its manufacture, made improvements and developed a system of manufacture that produced a thoroughly practicable, substantial machine

Mary Bancroft's daughter, Elizabeth (1849-1926), married Stephen Parrish, an artist. Their son, Frederick Maxfield Parrish (1870-1960), became America's most widely recognized artist of the early twentieth century known locally for his famous Dream Garden mosaic mural. They lived with Mary at 125 N 33rd for about seven years while he was a child. His early drawings often depicted nature but they also included elaborate, detailed drawings of machine parts. Those drawings reflect his childhood in Powelton near his uncles and cousins who were leaders of Philadelphia industry when it was at its peak.

*Note: I have numerous articles – both short and long – about various parts of the history of the Sellers family. If you would like additional information about anything in this piece or in the other pieces in this series, send me an e-mail at: [ewbank@pop.upenn.edu](mailto:ewbank@pop.upenn.edu).*



Niagara scheme would not draw off too much water to affect its natural beauty. He also became the force behind the establishment of a veterinary school at the University of Pennsylvania. About 1880, Coleman built two houses around the corner on 33rd for his sons: 410 for Coleman Jr. (who later became President of William Sellers & Co.) and 412 for John Bear. His oldest son, Horace Welles Sellers, worked closely with him and lived with him at 3301 Baring.

In the late 1860s, Mary Sellers Bancroft moved her family to 3300 Baring (currently the B&B) directly across the street from her cousin, Coleman. She owned both 3300 and 3302. Her son, John Sellers Bancroft, who lived with her in 1870, joined his uncle William's firm. In 1866, at the age of 23, he had worked his way up to become general foreman of the whole factory, including foundry and smith shop. (In 1866, he was listed at "33rd below Baring.") By 1880, Mary had moved to a handsome house at 125 N 33rd and John S. had moved to 210 N 33rd. In 1890 he lived at 3310 Arch. He was admitted to partnership in 1873 and in 1886 he was elected a director and general manager. His major contribution to the firm was the introduction to the US of an injector that could add water to a boiler continuously. He made major improvements on the design. In 1902 he resigned to associate