



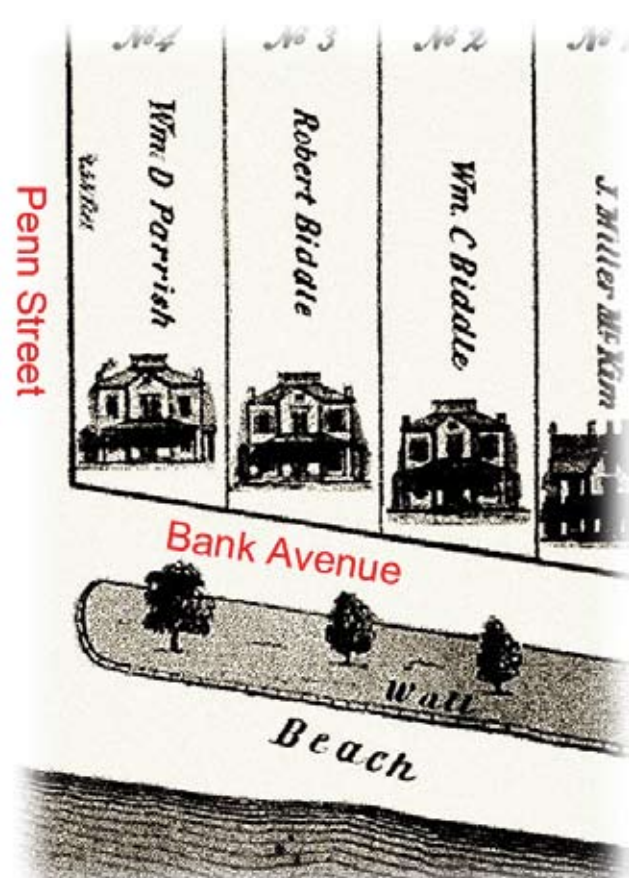
ROBERT AND ANNA MILLER BIDDLE



Of the ten Riverton founders, Robert Biddle outlived all the others by decades and resided in Riverton far longer. He was an abolitionist, a successful hardware merchant, and the long-time treasurer of Swarthmore College. This was his summer home.

The "Three Sisters" houses

The Riverton founders engaged Philadelphia architect Samuel Sloan to design them "villas." All were built in 1851, including this house for Robert and Anna Biddle.



Their house was the center of a trio of similar villas built for the families of three sisters. Left to right, William D. Parrish married Elizabeth Wright Miller, Robert Biddle married Anna Miller, and Robert's brother William Canby Biddle married Rachel Miller (home demolished in the 1980s).

Robert and Anna Biddle

Born to an old Quaker family in Philadelphia on August 10, 1814, Robert Biddle was of the sixth generation of his family in the New World. He was the son of Clement Cornell Biddle, a Philadelphia sugar refiner, and Mary Canby Biddle.

Anna Miller was also a Quaker, born in the area of Salem, New Jersey on August 2, 1822 to Daniel Leeds Miller, Sr. and Hannah Nicholson. Her father became a financier in Philadelphia and was the principal founder and long-time president of the Penn Mutual Life Insurance Company.

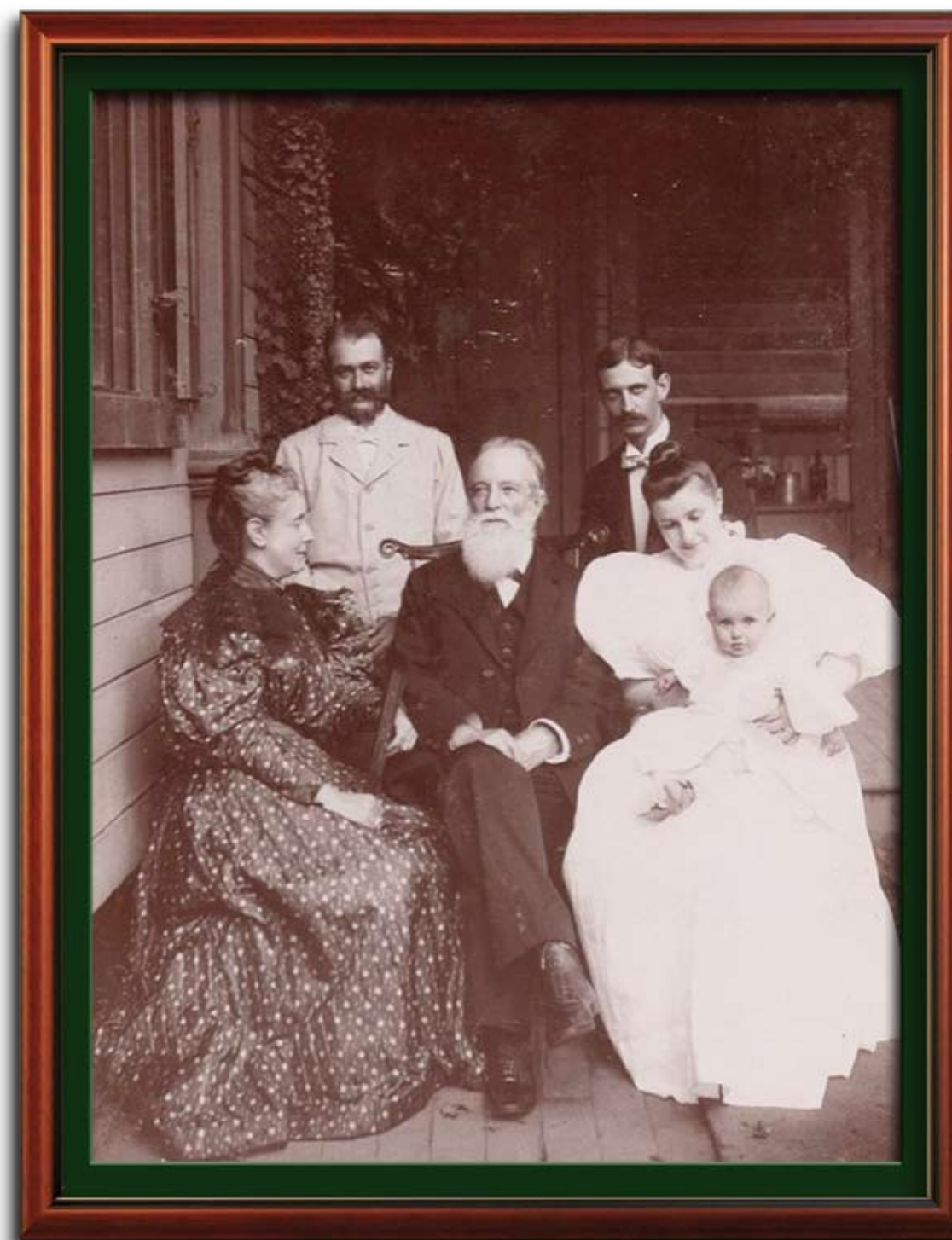
Robert and Anna married in 1842. They had six children, five of whom grew to adulthood.

Just as Robert and his brother married two sisters, two of Robert and Anna's sons also married sisters. Charles Miller Biddle married Hannah McIlvain and Henry Canby Biddle married Anna Mary McIlvaine ... and both of them also bought houses on the riverbank.

In another twist, daughter Elizabeth married tobacco merchant John Coffin Whitney Frishmuth, then, after her untimely death, Frishmuth married her sister Hannah. Two years later, they, too, bought yet another riverbank home (at the foot of Linden Avenue, now long gone).



Anna Miller Biddle



Robert Biddle on the back porch of this house in the summer of 1896, with some of the family of his son Charles Miller Biddle (upper left).

Like most other Riverton founders, Robert Biddle was active in the movement to abolish slavery. He was a good friend of Lucretia Mott, and, as early as 1837, he was a delegate to the national meeting of the American Anti-Slavery Society.

Robert and his brother William built a successful hardware business near the waterfront in Philadelphia. Biddle Hardware Company grew so well that they were able to retire in 1873 and let the next Biddle generation expand it further.



Robert then served as the Treasurer of Swarthmore College for the next 26 years. He and Anna also traveled extensively to improve her fragile health. After she died in 1891, Robert moved to this house year-round. He lived alone but for his unmarried daughter, Martha, and domestic staff. Nearby, though, were a wealth of children and grandchildren.

Robert died here in 1902 at age 88. Daughter Martha remained here until her death in 1916. Altogether, this was the family's home for 65 years.

Oliver and Margaret Fitler Willits

The next residents were noteworthy, though their stay here in the early 1920s was brief. Margaret Fitler was the youngest of a socially prominent Philadelphia family and had spent her childhood summers three houses away at 407 Bank Avenue. She married Oliver Willits, an up-and-coming young agricultural scientist working for the Campbell Soup Company.

They soon moved down the street the other way, to another riverbank home at 109 Bank Avenue.

He retired from Campbell's as Chairman of the Board, long after their Riverton years, just after guiding the old company as it wrestled with a response when an avant-garde artist named Andy Warhol created a new view of their most recognizable trademark.



Campbell's Soup Cans [detail] Andy Warhol (American, 1928-1987)

Apartments – and rebuilding

As the twentieth century wore on, other owners divided 309 Bank into more and more apartments. Ultimately it was foreclosed and purchased at Sheriff's Sale in 2012 by Mike and Mary Kate Kearney, who undertook extensive renovations and renamed it "Riverdance."

This interpretive sign was made possible by the Historical Society of Riverton and Mike and Mary Kate Kearney. February 2019

