

William Marriott Canby: Businessman, philanthropist, botanist

By Susan Mulchahey Chase

From the Summer 2002 Newsletter

On a blustery December day in 1905, a "considerable" group of people gathered on the bluff behind Rockford Tower, where they dedicated as a memorial to William Marriott Canby a seven-foot granite bench. Ornamented with an egg-and-dart band along the back and scrolled arms ending in claw feet at the front, the seat bears the inscription "To the memory of William Marriott Canby First President of the Board of Park Commissioners of the City of Wilmington 1883-1904." It overlooks the Canby Vista because this vantage point offered a scenic view of the valley below, apparently one of Canby's favorites. Who was this William Marriott Canby that the Park Commissioners held in such esteem?

In addition to serving as president of the Board of Park Commissioners for twenty-one years, Canby was a successful businessman. From 1880 until he died, he was president of the Wilmington Savings Fund Society. He was also a trustee of the Union Bank, a director of the Delaware Fire Insurance Company, and a member of the Wilmington and Brandywine Cemetery board. He was among the founders of the Delaware Western Railroad, later part of the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad system, of which he was a director.

Canby was also a philanthropist. He served as an early director of the Wilmington Fountain Society, organized to erect fountains and troughs to provide water to humans, horses, and other animals. In 1872, he took office as president of the Wilmington Institute, precursor of the Wilmington Public Library, and in 1888, he was elected president of the city's Associated Charities.

As president of the Board of Park Commissioners, he provided essential guidance as the Commissioners assembled the initial parcels of city parkland. He had occasion to correspond to nationally renowned landscape designer Frederick Law Olmsted about park affairs, including Olmsted's recommendation of the purchase of land for Brandywine Park and work done by Olmsted's firm on the layout of Kentmere Parkway. The relationship between Olmsted and the Park Commissioners ended unhappily because of misunderstandings on both sides. In July 1893, when it was clear that all connections had been

severed, Canby wrote to the elderly and ailing designer. Displaying an admirable kindness, he told Olmsted "It is nothing to you that you have known me but it means a great deal to me that I have known you. . . . Long before you know of me you had my sincere homage and it is more full and sincere now than ever before."

Canby was also an avid botanist whose name was well known in botanical circles. At his death, the *Botanical Gazette* observed that his death would be "a personal loss to botanists throughout the country." He began collecting plants in the late 1850s and his interest took him far and wide as he traveled to find specimens. In 1882 and 1883, he was in charge of the Division of Economic Botany of the Northern Transcontinental Survey, a study of natural resources undertaken by the Northern Pacific Railway in the areas through which the railroad passed.

In 1898, he made an expedition to the Appalachian Mountains with John Muir [founder of the Sierra Club] and Charles Sprague Sargent [director of the Arnold Arboretum at Harvard]. Three years later he accompanied Muir on a trip to Alaska. Each trip produced additional plants for Canby's herbarium. His first herbarium numbered 30,000 specimens when he sold it in 1893 to the College of Pharmacy in New York. He immediately began a second herbarium that had 15,000 plants when he gave it to the Natural History Society of Delaware, of which he was the first president when it was formed in 1891.

Canby's botanical specialty was insectivorous plants, in particular the Venus flytrap, a topic on which he corresponded with Charles Darwin. Darwin had been working on a book about insectivorous plants when a mutual friend, Asa Gray [leading nineteenth-century botanist, professor of natural history at Harvard] forwarded to Darwin a letter Canby had written on the topic. Darwin declared that Canby's letter "fires me up" to finish the volume, which, when completed, included three references to Canby and his work. Canby kept Venus flytraps in his herbarium, feeding them a variety of foods, thus finding that cheese "disagreed with them horribly."

His interest in nature very likely prompted him to stand firm on preserving the natural topography and appearance of Rockford Park, against the apparent wishes of Frederick Law Olmsted who wanted a more controlled appearance for the park. When the Park Commissioners noted Canby's death, they remarked that "His appreciation of Nature, his botanical and general scientific knowledge, and his executive ability rendered him especially useful."

At the unveiling of the Canby memorial, Bishop Leighton Coleman dedicated the bench "in grateful recognition of his many and valued services in behalf of his fellow-citizens." Among those attending, in addition to local notables, were Canby's fellow botanists, Charles Sprague Sargent and John Muir, who came to pay their respects to their colleague and traveling companion.

A man who was generous with his time, his talent, and his kindness, William Marriott Canby is not forgotten nearly a century after his death. In 1919, the Park Commissioners named the pathway along the Brandywine between Market Street and Kentmere Parkway "Canby Walk." Eleven years later, they renamed Southwest Park as "Canby Park" in honor of William M. Canby and his son, Henry M. Canby, himself a Park Commissioner from 1913 to 1928. And in the larger world, people who have never heard of William Marriott Canby invoke his name when they refer to Canby paxistima [*Paxistima canbyi* A. Gray, a dwarf evergreen shrub] or to Canby blue grass [*Poa canbyi*] or to Canby oak [*Quercus canbyi*] or any of another dozen species bearing his name.