

Wistar Descendant Contacts Sierra Madre, Corrects Nearly 20-Year Old Error

By Bill Coburn (with the help of Debbie Henderson)

Any time you have an event of the scope of the Wistaria Festival, there are going to be interesting side-stories that come with it. One such story is how the internet age brought one of the descendants of Caspar Wistar in touch with Sierra Madre, where the largest example of the vine that was named for Wistar is located.

Several years ago, I added a web page to my SierraMadreNews.Net website to help promote the Wistaria Festival. I gathered information from the Chamber of Commerce, which puts on the festival, and photos from events that I had taken, and put together a page that had information about the upcoming year's event, some history and facts about the vine, and the photos. In 2002, I bought the name SierraMadreWistariaFestival.com and began using that address in various online directories and the like. Today, it has grown and includes photo and video archives going back to 1999. If you go there today looking for the 2008 Festival information, you'll find that the entertainment lineup has links to audio and/or video by many of the musical acts appearing at the Festival. There's a Sierra Madre dining guide, featuring menus for many of the downtown restaurants. There's a complete list of the artisans, vendors, non-profits and kids attractions that will be participating this year. Information about lodging and the weather forecast can be found there, as well as links to the Chamber of Commerce website where one can purchase tickets for the shuttle. And much of the press and advertising that has been done this year can be found there as well.

What does this have to do with the story? Well, thanks to the longevity of the site, the voluminous Wistaria information available there, the listings on the online directories, and a little Search Engine Optimization tweaking that I did to the site, when one goes to the number one search engine in the world, Google, and types in the word Wistaria, out of more than 150,000 results, my web page shows up number 2, behind only Wikipedia. Another major search engine, Yahoo, returns my web page in the number 7 position, out of more than 350,000 results. And it is presumably through one of these search engines that more than 110 years after Sierra Madre's famous vine was planted, a descendant of Caspar Wistar, for whom Wistaria is named, became aware of our vine and contacted me to discuss an error on my web page.

In September of 2006, I received an e-mail from a gentleman named Harry Armstrong. In it, he said: "Hi: I am the son of Marjorie WISTAR Armstrong. Our relative, CASPAR WISTAR, lived in Philadelphia and the Wistar Institute, the first medical institute in the United States, was named after him by his uncle, Isaac Jones Wistar. Your articles on the Wistaria vine states the vine was named after Henry Wistar, a physician in Philadelphia. The attached article definitely states the vine was named after CASPAR WISTAR. I have seen an article in an older edition of the World Book Encyclopedia stating the same thing. I am sure you have researched your data about Henry Armstrong having the vine named after him. I would be interested in seeing such information. The Wistar family tree does not show a HENRY WISTAR in those generations, if at all. I can supply a tree published many years ago, if you wish. I hope you will accept this correction and change your data base. The attachment takes a minute or two to come up. I thank you for your attention."

Naturally, this concerned me, so I forwarded it to the City Manager, John Gillison. He forwarded the information to the town archivist, Debbie Henderson, at the Library, and she did the research, and here's what she responded to Mr. Armstrong in November of that same year: "Dear Mr. Armstrong, Your inquiry was forwarded to the Sierra Madre City Manager and then brought to my attention. After carefully reviewing local history materials regarding the Wistaria vine, I have found that most materials in (1937-1985) in our holdings mention Caspar Wistar as the person for whom the vine was named."

She continued: "You are indeed correct. The Wistaria Vine was named for Caspar Wistar. The source of your online reference is not clear to me (a student paper?) but I found an entry for Caspar Wistar and Wistaria in the "Encyclopedia Americana" (1998). As I understand it, botanist Thomas Nuttall named the vine in honor of one of his former professors, Caspar Wistar, in his publication "The Genera of North American Plants" (1818). FYI, another article mentioned that the change of the vowel from an "a" to an

"e" (wistaria to wisteria) has caused some to question whether Nuttall actually derived the name from his friend Charles Wister. You will be pleased to know that Sierra Madre strictly upholds keeping the Wistaria spelling. I have tried to pinpoint where the information here went awry and "Henry Wistar" became the namesake. I found an article by Jan Maddox from 1987 that mentions Henry Wistar. I believe what happened is that the author confused the owner of the property (Henry Fennell) in 1925 with Caspar Wistar, and unwittingly substituted the first name. This article became a reference for future articles and the incorrect information was perpetuated even in the 1994 materials (the Centennial of the vine) - yikes! Thank you for bringing this significant error to our attention. I will be sure to alert the folks at other City Departments, the Chamber of Commerce, and news agencies to correct their information. Please let me know if I may be of further assistance."

A grateful Mr. Armstrong responded to Henderson: "Thank you so much for your attention to my memo. My mother used to write every publisher who spelled it Wisteria rather than Wistaria. I have sort of given up on that effort, but I thought your article was significant enough to write. Thank you again."

In 2006, I was not involved with the Chamber of Commerce, but this year I am. Remembering that this correspondence had taken place, I contacted the Chamber to make sure that its information had been corrected, and that docents wouldn't again be continuing the dispelling of the misinformation that had found its way into the lore of the vine. I found that the docents' information had been updated with the correct information, but there was still some literature that needed to be updated.

When I contacted town historian Phyllis Chapman, to discuss the error, her response was "Bill, I have been telling people about that and trying to get it corrected for years, but I hadn't been able to get anyone to correct it. It's been so frustrating. You know this isn't rocket science, it's right there in the encyclopedia...You can look it up."

Well, Phyllis, no worries. Thanks to the internet, and a descendant who wanted to protect the family name, and the diligent research work of town archivist Debbie Henderson, the information that is going to be given to Vine visitors now correctly cites Caspar, and not Henry.