

HUGH RODNEY SHARP – DELAWARE’S GREATEST PRESERVATIONIST

Only a few people are living who remember Gibraltar when it was at its prime. And very few people know the extent of H. Rodney Sharp's record of preservation in Delaware. Due to the gross neglect of the buildings by Gibraltar Preservation Group, LLC (Drake Cattermole and David Carpenter are principals), most neighbors only think of Gibraltar as dilapidated buildings. With this impression, few have any vision of what it could be if properly restored.

This post re-introduces the amazing story of Hugh Rodney Sharp, and makes the case for the importance of a preserving and restoring Gibraltar.

Ironically, Hugh Rodney Sharp, the Delawarean who restored, or played a key role in restoring so many historic buildings in Delaware isn't known for that, and his own residence has been a restoration failure.

Sharp was one of two Delawareans who were Founding Members of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, sharing that distinction with his good friend Louisa du Pont Crowninshield of Eleutherian Mills/Hagley.

Born in the small town of Seaford in downstate Delaware, at 16 years old, Sharp entered Delaware College, where he graduated with thirteen other students in 1900. His first job was as a teacher and principal in a three-room brick schoolhouse in Odessa.



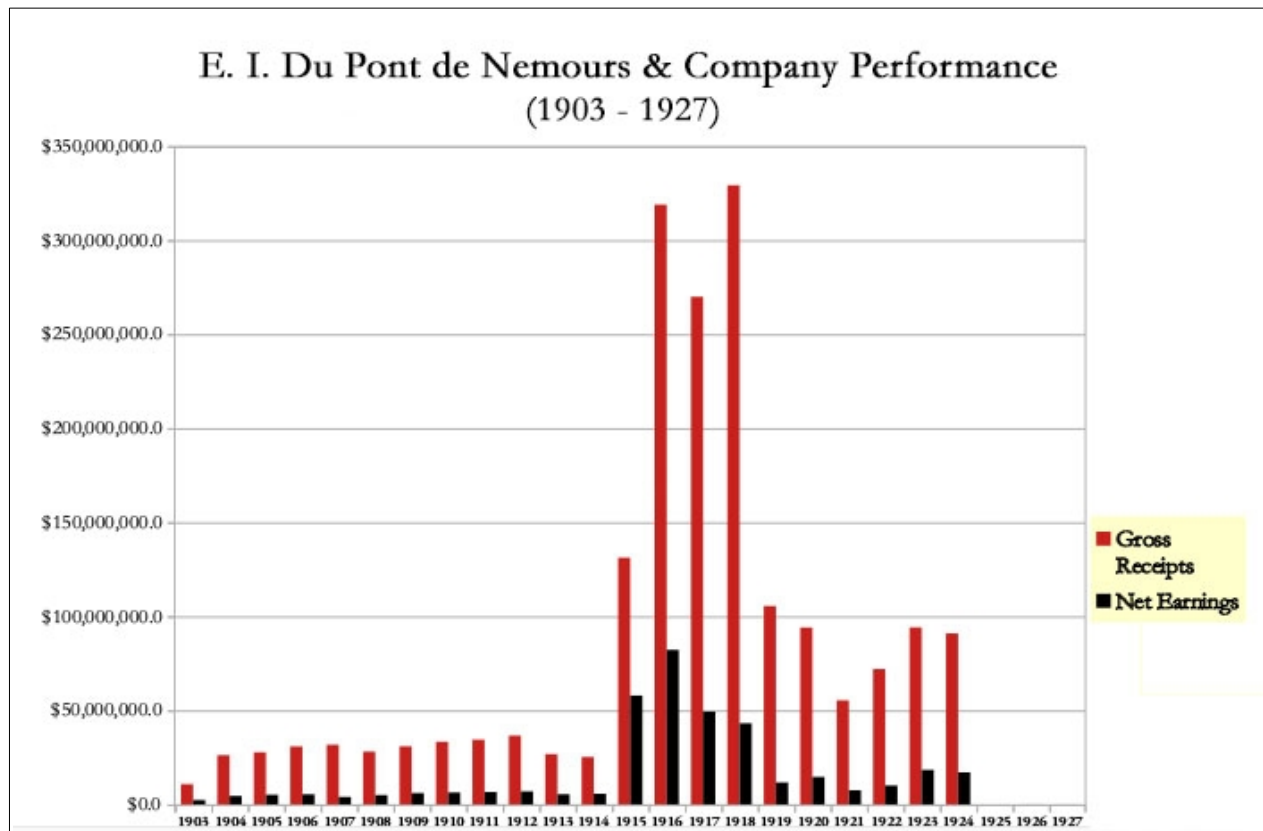
Gibraltar (1923).

In 1903, he moved north to Wilmington to work in the accounting department of E.I. du Pont de Nemours and Company. His new job placed him under Pierre S. du Pont. Pierre was a member of the executive committee with responsibility for setting up the Treasurer's office and for completing the arrangement of the financial reorganization of the company. (Source: Robert L. Raley, "H. Rodney Sharp, Biographical Note Marking the 100th Anniversary of His Birth," written for the Harry du Pont Winterthur Museum of Winterthur, Delaware (1980), p. 4.) Pierre took a liking to Rodney, and through Pierre, he met Pierre's younger sister Isabella Mathieu du Pont. They married in 1908 and, in 1909, purchased the Gibraltar estate from the Brinckle family.

Sharp joined du Pont just after the three cousins – T. Coleman du Pont, Alfred I. du Pont, and Pierre S. du Pont – had bought out other family members to save Du Pont from being sold to their primary rival in the explosives business, Lafflin & Rand of Newburgh, New York. (Source: David Farber, p. 47.) The three cousins - each with an MIT education - had done a brilliant leveraged buyout, acquiring the company, with \$12 million in assets, with *only \$2,100 in cash*. They relocated its headquarters from along the Brandywine to Market Street between 10th and 11th Streets. In 1903, they set a course for diversification into chemicals and away from strictly gunpowder by opening the 150-acre Du Pont Experimental Station on the northern bank of the Brandywine. one of the first industrial research laboratories in the U.S. DuPont Company began its second century with Gross Receipts in 1903 of \$10.7 Million and with \$2.27 Million in Net Income.

Overt the next 10 years, Revenues increased to \$26.7 Million, with Net Income reaching \$5.35 Million. In 1913, Pierre S. du Pont chose Sharp to be his personal secretary. This entailed work at Du Pont, Pierre's projects and Longwood, and being the frontman for Pierre on his philanthropic works, particularly with Delaware College, which became the University of Delaware in 1921.

Then two things happened: World War I and the growth of the automobile industry. On 28 July 1914, World War I breaks out in Europe. The DuPont Company made a fortune by supplying the European Allies and later the U.S. Army with high-powered explosives for artillery shells, manufacturing up to 40% of the munitions used by the Allies over the course of the war. DuPont's revenues from the sale of powder and explosives soared from \$25 million in 1914 to \$319 million by 1918, totaling an astonishing \$1.245 billion in this five-year period. (Net Income from 1915-1919 reached an incredible \$243.93 Million. The Du Pont Company used profits from munitions sales in World War I to purchase a 25 percent interest in General Motors.



(Source: Annual Reviews, 1902-1927, E.I. du Pont de Nemours and Company, Courtesy of Hagley Museum & Library.)

1915 was quite a year for Pierre S. du Pont and Rodney Sharp. Pierre led a group that bought out T. Coleman's stock. Until 1914, Pierre had served as Treasurer, Executive Vice President, and Acting President. * Coleman wanted to move on and needed cash for his other investments. Pierre then reorganized the management so that Alfred I. was still a Vice President, but with no duties or responsibilities. Alfred quit the company in a rage and moved to Florida. Pierre was elected President of Du Pont and would serve as President until 1919.

* In what is likely the first historic preservation in Delaware, Pierre donated (anonymously at the time) \$5,000 to the Colonial Dames to assist them in taking apart and moving the Old First Presbyterian Church to Brandywine Park. DuPont was transforming downtown Wilmington, opening the Hotel DuPont and Playhouse Theatre on Pierre's birthday in 1913. The "Center Square" project was quickly renamed Rodney Square. Pierre paid \$245,000 for the land under the First Presbyterian Churches and Cemetery in order to build the new Wilmington Institute Library at 10th & Market Streets (Source: Wilmington Board of Park Commissioners, 1919 Annual Report, p. 12).

* Pierre named Sharp his assistant and gave him the opportunity to enter the DuPont Securities Company on the same basis as the original six members. (Source: Robert A. Raley, p. 5.) The brothers-in-law formed an effective work-relationship, one that would eventually provide the states of Pennsylvania and Delaware with schools, hospitals, and roads. (Source: Mary Anna Ralph, p. 8.)

* Sharp was made a member of the Board of Trustees of Delaware College.

* Pierre married Alice Belin. They spent their honeymoon at Longwood (6 October). Sharp was Pierre's best man. The story is that Pierre had proposed to Alice in the gardens at Gibraltar.

* The 24 October 1915 New York Times reported that Delaware College (now the University of Delaware) received an anonymous gift of \$500,000, which was understood to be from Pierre S. du Pont. The funds were to purchase the entire forty-acre tract (site of the present central campus) and to remove unnecessary buildings (April).

Sharp's impact was extensive throughout the State of Delaware. His preservation record traces at least as early as 1917, when Pierre asked him to help save the **Old Town Hall** on Market Street, vacated by the move of city workers to the new Wilmington Public Building. It is the only surviving 18th Century public building in Wilmington. The building had been sold at public auction to J. T. Mullin who announced his intention of tearing it down.

Old Town Hall, designed by Santo Domingo refugee Pierre Bauduy (1769-1833), was built in 1798, styled after Philadelphia's Congress Hall. The Federal-style structure served Wilmington until 1916, hosting elections, town meetings, a subscription library, and criminal and civil trials. Presidents Thomas Jefferson, John Quincy Adams, Andrew Jackson, and William Henry Harrison visited the Old Town Hall. The death of George Washington was observed here in 1799, A grand banquet for Lafayette was held in the building in 1824 during the French hero's triumphant return tour of the United States and Henry Clay's body laid in state there in 1852. *Source:* Historical Society of Delaware. <https://dehistory.org/visit/old-town-hall/>



Old Town Hall, Wilmington
Photo: Michael T. Melloy, Copyright 2016

With Sharp acting on behalf of his brother-in-law Pierre, who guaranteed the note, an association comprised of Governor Charles Miller, Col. George Eliot, Christopher Ward, and various members of the

Colonial Dames was able to raise the money to buy the building from Mullin. The Town Hall became the new home of the Historical Society of Delaware. (Source: Robert L. Raley). Raley, p. 9).

In July 1931, Governor C. Douglas Buck appointed Sharp to chair the State Buildings and Grounds Commission for the construction of a new statehouse in Dover. Sharp's experience with the enlargement of Delaware College/the University of Delaware was reflected in the outcome in Dover.

The new brick buildings were colonial in style in an expansive campus-like setting. Legislative Hall, a Georgian Revival colonial structure of handmade brick, is the centerpiece structure facing a large open common. The historic houses on The Green were spared, including the Old State House (built between 1787 and 1792, added to the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) in 1971, the Bradford-Loockerman House (built 1700, added to the NRHP in 1972), and the John Bullen House (built 1750, added to the NRHP in 1975). **With the assistance of Henry Francis du Pont, Sharp was also responsible for furnishing the new statehouse.**

That same year, Sharp served on the Committee to Removing the old National Bank of Delaware (designed by Pierre Bauduy, who had also designed the Old Town Hall), built in 1816 at 6th and Market Streets and moved to Lovering Avenue at Union Street. The lead on this project was Mrs. Henry B. Thompson. The building was disassembled brick-by-brick, then re-assembled and became the home of the Delaware Academy of Medicine.

In 1937, Sharp served on the Restoration Committee for the **Old Dutch House** in New Castle. Sharp worked with Louise du Pont Crowninshield on this early project of the New Castle Historical Society.

The Dutch House, one of the oldest houses in Delaware, is a late-17th-century house in New Castle, built between 1664 and 1682. The house was purchased in 1937 by the Delaware Society for the Preservation of Antiquities, and restorations done. It opened shortly after as a historic house museum, the Old Dutch House. The assembling of the objects on exhibit was a project of Mrs. Louise du Pont Crowninshield, sister to Harry du Pont of Winterthur. She was strenuously opposed to placing a single piece of furniture in the house, unless it was the proper type and period and given Mrs. Crowninshield full powers to furnish the house at her own discretion." It was deeded to the New Castle Historical Society in 1946. Source: New Castle Historical Society. <http://newcastlehistory.org/houses/dutchhistory.html>

In 1947, Sharp was named to the Restoration Committee for the **New Castle Court House**. Built in 1732, it served as Delaware's first court house and eventually state capitol. It was in this historic structure that the representatives of the people of Delaware voted in 1776 for independence from both Pennsylvania and Great Britain. (Source: <https://www.nps.gov/frst/planyourvisit/new-castle-court-house.htm>). It is one of the oldest surviving courthouses in the United States and a registered National Historic Landmark (1972).

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PHOTO: Courtesy of Delaware Public Archives through Robin Brown

Ridgely House (1728), and a number of 19th century Italianate-style commercial buildings. It was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1977. Source: npgallery.nps.gov/NRHP/GetAsset/NRHP/77000383_text

The Old State House is a Historical and Cultural Affairs Museum.

In 1955, Hugh Rodney Sharp served on the Restoration Committee for the John Dickinson House. The John Dickinson House is a Historical and Cultural Affairs Museum.

Odessa. In 1938, Hugh Rodney Sharp began a decades long effort to restore historically significant buildings in Odessa. In 1938, he restored and furnished the William Corbit House in Odessa (in 1958, it was donated to the Winterthur Museum with an endowment). That same year Sharp restored the Odessa School House (it was given to the Town of Odessa for use as a Community House in 1947). Sharp also the restored the Pump House (1942), the Moore House (1942), and the January House (1951). In 1955, Sharp moved the Leftover House across the Appoquinimink Creek and rebuilt it. In 1957, he restored the exterior of the



PHOTO: Courtesy of Delaware Public Archives through Robin Brown

Odessa Hotel, which he donated to Winterthur in 1966.

In 1964, he moved, restored and furnished the Collins-Sharp House. In May of that same year, **Sharp** accepted an award from the Delaware Chapter of the American Institute of Architects, "for his leadership in the preservation of the architectural heritage of Odessa."

Newark. Hugh Rodney Sharp remains the largest benefactor to the University of Delaware, followed by his brother-in-law and boss for a time, Pierre S. du Pont. Sharp and his wife Isabella worked with Pierre to acquire approximately 40 acres of land in Newark for the expansion of Delaware College into the University of Delaware, acquire and restore buildings, design, build and furnish buildings, endow Professorships and more.

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Wilmington.. Gibraltar. Hugh Rodney and Isabella du Pont Sharp bought Gibraltar in 1909 and set about restoring the mansion. The first round of expansion of the residence coincided with the beginning of the 7-year landscape design project (1916-1923) by Marian Coffin.

In 1958, Sharp was a Member of the Rebuilding Henderickson House Committee, which moved the Henderickson House to Old Swedes Churchyard to prevent its being torn down. The pine mantel and woodwork around the large fireplace are original, but the floorboards were taken from a Massachusetts farmhouse of the same period. The pine ceiling beams were made by hand as part of the restoration. Existing doors and windows were used as patterns for new ones, and the curved staircase was reconstructed in accordance with marks on the walls. The straight staircase is new; it was added for safety reasons. The house is now used as the church offices and a small museum.”

In 1968, H. Rodney Sharp passed on a ship in August while returning from Italy. Between 1950 and his death, the **Isabella du Pont Sharp Trust** had provided \$32,589,183.84 to the University of Delaware. Since the University invested much of that money, the total value of the Sharp Trust to the University's endowment had grown to \$58,532,640. (Source: <https://www1.udel.edu/PR/Messenger/02/2/familiar.html>). This sounds like a significant sum, but consider this: the Dow Jones Industrial Average on 1 July 1968 was at 905.32, the Standard & Poor 500 at 100.38. The August 2021 equivalent value of the Sharp Trust balance, if it had been invested solely in these indexes and not drawn down its balance, would be between \$2.24 - \$2.54 Billion.

	Isabella du Pont Sharp Trust	Dow Jones Industrial Average *	S&P 500 *
1968 Level	\$58,532,640	\$905.32	\$100.38
16 August 2021		\$35,505.11	\$4,464.90
1968 to 2021 Growth		3821.83%	4348.00%
DJI 2021 Equivalent	\$2,237,017,908		
S&P 500 Equivalent	\$2,544,997,788		
* Dow Jones Industrial Average on 1 July 1968; S&P 500 on 4 June 1968.			

Only a few months after H. Rodney Sharp’s death, the Corbit-Sharp House was designated a National Historic Landmark.

There are other compelling reasons to fully restore Gibraltar. The original proposition when it was saved from demolition in the 1990s was for a restored Gibraltar to be a “gateway to Chateua Country,” a residence that was central to the beginning of DuPont’s second century. Were Pierre S. du Pont and Hugh Rodney Sharp alive today, there is no doubt they would make every effort to restore the property.

Michael Melloy, 26 February 2022

Please join us this Sunday afternoon from 3 – 4:30 pm at the Highlands School as we discuss in greater detail what is at stake.

<https://www.facebook.com/events/1056593001588717/>

And please plan on attending the 9SDC presentation at the Delaware Art Museum on Monday 28 February. They are hosting a “Meet & Greet” reception at 5:30 pm to 6:30 pm, then a presentation of their proposed Housing Development and Gibraltar plan and Q&A from 6:30 – 7:30 pm.

#Gibraltar

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#HistoricPreservation

#HRodneySharp

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#duPontFamilyHistory

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