

Return to Part 1

Soon I found employment as a project manager with an award-winning Washington architectural firm, and my staff and I would be responsible for preparing construction drawings and specifications for an eight story apartment building. Ruth, meanwhile, had found the perfect home for us in Montgomery County, Maryland; a recently remodeled, barn-red one-horse stable overlooking both the historic Chesapeake and Ohio Canal and the Potomac River in the town of Glen Echo. In this small village, a 19th century Chautauqua community, we would be able to live in our little home for one year until the owner's apartment lease elsewhere was concluded.



Halsey and Jim Bascom, 1964, taken in Bronxville NY. *Courtesy of Mansfield Bascom.*

It became Ruth's custom every winter afternoon to sit by a small kitchen window, a glass of beer in hand, and watch the sun set over the Potomac. Perhaps it was not like the glorious sunsets over the Condado Lagoon, but good enough. The following summer I arranged for my son Jim, the product of an alcoholic womb, to spend a few months with us using the screened porch as his room. Ruth became the instant mother to a ten-year old.

Our next home rental, a more conventional three-bedroom ranch house just blocks away in Glen Echo

Heights, had a more distant view of the river. With the owner's permission, Ruth repainted the monotone interior. She painted the kitchen cabinets to match the pastel pink, lavender, blue and plum candles she liked, and the dining room a light gray as a background for the candles. The hardware store had a sale of overstocked paints, and she bought a gallon each of an ugly green and equally ugly purple. She painted one large wall of the living room with the green and then dry-brushed the purple over it, with horizontal and vertical strokes. The product was lively, linen-like, and amazing pleasing.

Hoping that Wharton would live for many more years, Ruth and I bought a house in the Washington area, a four-bedroom home on Cabin John Creek a block from the Potomac River near Cabin John Park. On a half-acre lot, it was one of four houses built in the 1940s by a lumbermen's association to show-off all the ways that wood could be used in homebuilding; instead of drywall there was 12" wide wood paneling. While in serious disrepair and needing much work, it was cheap, and Ruth and I quickly developed plans for its rehabilitation.

Letty at 76 was no longer physically able to continue living at Hedgerow. It was decided that she would come to Maryland and become a permanent house guest—with the first floor master bedroom and bath set aside for her. I made many architectural changes to enlarge and enhance our new home, including the permanent bedroom for son Jim.

My brother was an eminent expert in the science of waves and beaches, and had designed the first deep-water drilling ship, and the system for maintaining its position in a 12,000 foot depth. His company, Ocean Science and Engineering, Inc., was expanding into larger quarters in Washington, D.C., and I was invited to join the firm. Having just completed plans for a waterfront apartment complex in Annapolis, I now readily accepted.

Jim, by now an adolescent, seemed to have reached the limit of his scholastic capabilities. Frustrated by his inability to comprehend what he was being taught, he found himself continually in trouble in school and out. It became serious enough that Ruth and I were now concerned both for his welfare and our own. Jim needed to live elsewhere. Jim's mother knew of a boarding school that would accept him if Jim was agreeable, and she was willing to pay the tuition if I would take him there. Jim agreed to try the school for a year.

By 1967 Wharton, now 80, continued to enjoy life in his studio. He had just created a 16-foot tall sculpture for a Philadelphia library, and was still producing sculptural furniture with the help of two craftsmen. Ruth and I visited Wharton once a month, leaving Letty in the care of her old friends. But later that year, Wharton suffered a stroke, and after his hospital discharge, Ruth stayed with her father for a month until actress Miriam Phillips, Wharton's longtime companion, was free from her theatrical commitments to care for him. Ruth alerted her siblings Peter and Mary of the realities of their father's situation, and all began to make plans for the probable future.

Wharton's Paoli property had continued to increase in value over the years, and each time he needed additional cash he had been able to get the funds by increasing his indebtedness on the property. But now, because of Wharton's age and health, the bank was reducing the term of the debt repayment so that the monthly mortgage expense had become exorbitant—he was forced to borrow to even pay his mortgage. Ruth and I were the only ones with sufficient borrowing capacity to help, and it fell to us to purchase the entire site—studio, workshop, farmhouse and the 16 acres—and then re-mortgage the property for a longer term, with the understanding that the entire site would eventually be preserved as a publicly supported, not-for-profit museum.

Wharton had expressed concern as to what would become of his studio and collection when he died, hoping it would be meaningful enough to others to be preserved. With this purchase, Wharton was now grateful and happy. He could continue to live at his home among his creations. On the recommendation of his long-time friend and accountant, he named Ruth as his executrix.

Ruth and I quickly learned the old farmhouse was un-rentable. Wharton's tenant had not paid his rent for the past three months, and had broken down the stair rail to use as firewood to heat the house. Further inspection revealed a severe lime build-up was allowing only a trickle to pass through the water line; the unpainted tinned steel roof was pitting and leaking; the paint on the trim was peeling; and the kitchen was completely out of date—just a cast-iron sink, a stove and refrigerator, and no cabinets or counters. We concentrated on rehabilitating the kitchen, working weekends, and found contractors to take care of the rest.

Along with each of our meals at our home in Maryland, Ruth would prepare an extra serving that she would pack in small cardboard freezer boxes for Wharton—his “CARE packages.” And each weekend, we would drive to Paoli to check on Wharton and restock his freezer. The workshop had a fireplace—good for disposing of sawdust, scraps and mistakes—and each Friday Wharton would have his two cabinetmakers place a mattress for Ruth and me on the floor in front of the fireplace. One week, having just completed a set of eight chairs, he arranged them in a circle around the mattress, awaiting an audience.

He continued to create new designs, and keep his workmen busy to the end. But, on May 6, 1970, Wharton died of a heart attack at Lankenau Hospital in Lower Merion Township, Pennsylvania. I was in Florida managing a beach replenishment project, and Ruth hurriedly traveled north by plane and taxi, arriving at the hospital just an hour after her father died. She printed a reproduction of Wharton's woodcut *January* for the announcement of his death, referencing for the first time the not-yet-existing Wharton Esherick Museum.

Wharton's companion Miriam, who had given up her Philadelphia apartment to care for Wharton, would remain at the studio after his death. His two master cabinetmakers, Horace Hartshaw and William McIntyre, would rent Wharton's workshop and produce their own work using Wharton's wood and machine tools, which the family would give them.

At the time of Wharton's death, I was committed to manage an extensive technical feasibility study for the U. S. Maritime Administration involving a deep-water supertanker seaport at the mouth of Chesapeake Bay. It would be nearly two years before Ruth and I could move to Paoli and convert Wharton's workshop into our new home. In the meanwhile Ruth searched diligently to find a nursing home for her mother. She finally found a comfortable facility for Letty in Coventry, PA, near Letty's sister Marie, and near enough to Paoli for weekly visits.

By December 1971, the Wharton Esherick Museum had been incorporated as a Pennsylvania not-for-profit corporation, tax exemption had been applied for, and the first meeting of a five-member board of directors had been held. Ruth was elected as the Museum's president (a position she would hold until 1990), Miriam as secretary, and I was treasurer and director.



Living-dining room of the workshop with Ruth's dish cabinet and kitchen in the background on the right. The sculpture visible in the conservatory to the left of the kitchen is Wharton's *Reverence*, exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art's "Sculpture of the 20th Century" in 1950. Behind the sofa is his 1942 *Adolescence*. All the rooms look out onto Ruth's free-formal terrace garden. Photograph by Roger D. Thorne.

In April, 1972, Ruth and I sold our Cabin John house, loaded all our belongings into a rented truck and drove to Paoli. There we joined Miriam in Wharton's studio, while storing our household possessions in the workshop. Then we began the formidable job of adapting the workshop into our new home with the help of a recent industrial design graduate, a plumber, and an electrician. The central hexagon would remain unchanged as a spacious living-dining room; the eastern hexagon would be divided into three diamonds for a bedroom, a study, and an entrance hallway with closets and the trap door to a small basement. The western hexagon would become the kitchen, utility room and a garden room with a stone floor and a large tree for the orchids and a clerestory to let in more light.

Ruth and I began the conversion together, with Ruth footing the ladder while I ventured up with a vacuum cleaner strapped to my back to clean the 15 year collection of sawdust from the cables that kept the walls from splaying. Ruth repainted the exterior trim—she had first painted it for Wharton years before when the building was new—while I sanded and applied polyurethane to the unfinished floors.

I reshaped the chimney to match Wharton's model, and replaced a plaster partition with wide oak slabs to make a new entrance to the bathroom. To design and build a bathtub for two, I constructed a wood frame covered with metal lath and stucco, and finished it with fiberglass and plastic like a boat. Ruth then painted the tub and walls in four shades of blue boat paint resulting in a swirling underwater appearance.

The large cast-iron radiators were replaced with wood-faced baseboard heating units of my design. Wharton's pole line through the woods for electric service and telephone, which required frequent tree-pruning, was replaced with a new underground connection from the closest power lines running along nearby Horseshoe Trail. I spent the three hottest days of August 1972 hand-digging a trench across the road and through the woods, and laying the wires.

For the garden room, I milled a large window frame from redwood timbers to match two existing ones, using an electric chain saw in a mill that I had designed. A portion of the roof between the beams was cut out and rebuilt as the clerestory. Wharton's



Ruth's view of the living-dining room from her kitchen. Wharton's desk figure rests on the dish cabinet in the foreground, and his iconic music stand is prominent in the living room. Most of the furnishings in the workshop are Wharton's creations. *Photograph by Roger D. Thorne.*



A tub for two, with skylight above, designed and built by Bob and painted by Ruth in 1972. *Photograph by Roger D. Thorne.*

woodman, Ed Ray, took-down a well-branched 16-inch oak tree which I laboriously installed to support the orchids. I prepared a stylized floral design for the stone floor, and Ruth and I drove a pick-up truck the 150 miles north to the quarries in Hop Bottom, Susquehanna County, to select the sizes and colors we needed.

Ruth enjoyed cooking and entertaining but didn't want to be hidden away in a kitchen from her guests. So the kitchen was designed as a part of the dining room, with walnut counters and cabinets. The only visual barrier was a chest-high dish cabinet that hid the sink and any mess while permitting uninterrupted conversation. Horace Hartshaw was the cabinetmaker.

In September 1972, the studio was officially opened to the public on weekends. Visitors were anticipated from far and near. Wharton's collection was exhibited without cases or signage, with reliance on the competence of the docents to adequately describe the work and its significance to the artist's legacy. The bulk of the collection was placed on display, rather than selected works in sequence for changing exhibitions. Museum professionals said it was all wrong. And initially, the three



The diamond-shaped master bedroom is one-third of a hexagon. On the marble headboard is the inscription "Here lay Mansfield and Ruth." To the right is Wharton's 1926 wall-hung dropleaf desk on which Ruth did her homework as a girl and paid bills as an adult. Above, a Libby Holman poster hangs on the wall. Photograph by Roger D. Thorne.

non-family board members, major clients of Wharton, considered the museum to be a family folly with little chance of survival. In fact one of these members actively sought other museums, including the Philadelphia Museum of Art, in which to place all or parts of the Esherick collection—in the belief this would serve to increase the value of their collections. It was further proposed to sell all the real estate for development.

In 1972, the Smithsonian Institution opened its new Renwick Gallery across Pennsylvania Avenue from the White House with an exhibition called *Wooden Works*, featuring the creative work of five leading furniture-makers including Wharton Esherick, Sam Maloof, Wendell Castle, Arthur Carpenter and George Nakashima. Wharton's work—including his library ladder, music stand chair, and other objects—were on display at the center of the room, surrounded by selected works by the others. Ruth, Miriam and I were there to represent Wharton at the opening dinner. Soon after this *Museum News*, the magazine of the

American Association of Museums, published an article by respected curator Lloyd Herman describing the Wharton Esherick Museum as a "gem" and encouraging readers to visit.

Ruth never forget the day she was making a dress in the studio, with fabric and patterns spread out on the big desk and her sewing machine, ironing board and a litter of snippets about, when cars drove into the property, and she suddenly remembered that a group from Virginia had booked a weekday tour. Rushing outside, she warmly greeted them while I quickly changed from my work clothes. I then hurried outside to explain to the group in detail about Wharton, his philosophies and the exterior of the studio, all the while giving Ruth quick opportunity to put away all her sewing supplies. I finally brought the group through the door of the studio just as Ruth disappeared up the spiral stair with the ironing board. Our adrenalin didn't return to normal until late that night.

The studio was rather dark as a showplace. Instead of installing the harsh bright lights typical of many museums, we provided partially concealed, low-voltage flood lamps to highlight specific pieces and brighten dark corners. Ruth led many of those early tours, joined Miriam in training the docents, and worked with me to prepare a thorough manual to educate and guide these volunteers.

By 1990, after eighteen years of operation, the Museum was thriving, and 3,500 visitors a year were learning about Wharton and his work. But the Board was taking no action to make the Museum permanent. Wharton's family was uneasy. To be a permanent entity, the Museum would need to own the collection it exhibited, own the site, and have an endowment fund that, growing at 5% a year, would cover half the basic operating costs. I wrote a proposal that became the Museum's strategic plan: the family would donate a portion of the collection if the public donated the balance; and the family would donate the site if the public donated the endowment. The family and the museum split the cost of an appraisal of the collection.

During her years as president, it had become principally Ruth's job to promote the Museum to the public. She was interviewed for newspaper and magazine articles, gave many slide-illustrated talks to the Lions, Rotary, and other clubs; spoke at the tricentenary celebration of Tredyffrin Township in 2007, and appeared on public television station WHYY. Ruth, Miriam and I long remembered our creation of a well-scripted, slide-illustrated, 12 minute talk for WHYY's "Take 12" program—only to have the camera man accidentally spill the slides and then reassemble them haphazardly to the script.

When Ruth formally retired as president in 1990, and I likewise retired as director, our replacements were individuals with fund-raising experience. The total valuation was estimated at some \$5 million, shared equally between the family and the public. The consultant engaged by the Board stated there was no way the Museum could raise such funds. But then one of the Museum's members offered to match dollar for dollar all gifts up to \$1 million over a four-year period. And another member pledged \$100,000 a year for four years. Against all odds, a capital campaign was feasible.

Ruth and I had long advocated the protection afforded by a gaseous fire suppression system for the Studio, and



Bob and Ruth look at Wharton's woodcut prints.
Photograph by Anne Todd.

with the recent development of an environmentally safe gas for the purpose, the Board elected to make this addition to the capital plan. The Board also added a caretaker cottage to be built on-site in the distant future to provide an "after-hours presence," as well as alterations to the workshop so it too could be opened to the public. This brought the capital plan to \$6,000,000.

I had been trying to develop a permanently-restricted endowment for the Museum, but the Board couldn't grasp the meaning of "permanent." Fortunately a newly organized group called the Chester County Community Foundation would hold the endowment principal beyond the reach of the Board, and distribute 5% a year for operating expenses. And this distribution would be considered by the IRS as a grant—public support—rather than as investment income, thereby enhancing the Museum's tax-exempt status. Ruth and I initiated this endowment fund, to which the Museum could add funds as they were raised.



Bob and Ruth on their 50th honeymoon, 2012. *Photograph by Anne Todd.*

Concerned that some future Board might attempt to use the site for purposes other than as a Museum, or sell portions of the property to raise funds, Ruth and I sought a protective conservation easement with a local trust. But the terms of engagement were onerous and unrelated. We turned to the Brandywine Conservancy, but its board determined the Esherick Museum was not within its area of interest. Finally, Ruth and I sought an easement with the National Trust for Historic Preservation, which maintained a dozen historic house museums and well understood the concerns. After months of meetings and negotiations, the National Trust for Historic Preservation turned the easement over to the Preservation Alliance for Greater Philadelphia. Ironically, this was the very organization which Ruth and I had originally contacted in this matter. Over the years the Alliance's leadership and direction had changed, and it was now adaptable to the Museum's needs.

Ruth took overall responsibility for keeping the studio clean and fresh. She created furniture and copper polishes using curatorial-approved ingredients until she found commercially available formulations. She sought dependable housekeepers, but the agencies kept sending

different women, each requiring on-site training. Then Helyn Sacher appeared. "Sissy" had grown up nearby, and as a child had often visited Wharton. She loved to clean, she loved the Studio, and soon she loved Ruth and adopted her as a mother. For Ruth, vibrant Sissy became the adorable daughter she never had. For Sissy, Ruth and I became the Mom and Dad she needed.

While Ruth concentrated on the studio, I struggled with the landscape. Poison ivy, honeysuckle, forsythia and bittersweet were taking over the property, so I hacked and dug and burned. Large wild grape vines hung from nearly every tree. One sunny winter day, Ruth and I pulled the vines from the trunks and swung on them wildly, calling out like Tarzan and Jane, until the vines broke loose from the tree-tops and dropped us into the soft snow.

Ruth was never the clubwoman-type, but hoping to meet new friends, she was for many years a member of the Twin Valleys Garden Club of Chester County. The club's founder and then-president, Mabel Irwin, had been a friend of Letty's. Paying little attention to the prescribed rules, Ruth enjoyed making beautiful

loose arrangements in harmonizing colors. She left the horticulture to me—I was the gardener. There was one exception however: a night-blooming tropical epiphyte called a *cereus* which Ruth had grown from a piece of leaf given her by a Cuban neighbor in Puerto Rico years before. It was a vine, and now had the tree in the conservatory to climb. At each blooming—in May and October—the dining table would be moved into the conservatory, and dinner guests would cook their suppers in fondue pots as they watched the large, fragrant flowers slowly open.

A week after her 90th birthday, Ruth began experiencing breathing problems. Taken to the hospital, she was diagnosed with congestive heart failure, atrial fibrillation and malnutrition, and sent home to die in hospice care. But with adjustment of her “meds,” the frequency and severity of her fibrillations significantly reduced and her lungs were cleared. But she refused to eat—a normal condition of dying—until the aroma of an oyster stew caught her fancy, and her appetite once again returned.

Twenty-seven months later she fell, suffering a very painful compressive fracture in her spine. And on October 23, 2015, at age 93, the much beloved Ruth Esherick Bascom died of congestive heart failure. Her body was donated to a medical school as she had wished, her silky hair still its natural auburn color.

Epilogue

Mary Esherick White (1916–1996)

After leaving Hedgerow Theatre, Mary traveled the country for a year as a show girl with the Ringling Brothers, Barnum and Bailey Circus. She held numerous theatrical jobs, primarily in stage lighting, until a fall, from an overturning high ladder while adjusting a spot light, shattered both feet making walking difficult thereafter. She married Robert White, an actor/writer best known for his radio show “Deadline Drama,” and as the old sea captain in the television series “Flipper.” After Robert’s death, she returned to Philadelphia, ultimately living and dying at the farmhouse where she had been born.

Peter Esherick (1926–2013)

Fascinated by things mechanical, Peter learned to drive at age eleven, and bought his first car which he drove through the woods around the farmhouse. He left high school in his senior year to join the United States Army Air

Corps, but World War II was over before he completed pilot training. He earned a degree in mechanical engineering at Lafayette College, and worked as a sales engineer, primarily in compressed gases. Peter acquired the Patient Instrumentation Company, a firm that tested and certified hospital gas piping systems, which he ran for 21 years. During his Air Corps service he married Helen Kohler (1918-2013) with whom he had a son David (born 1955).

Mansfield Bascom (born 1923)

Bob was born and raised in Bronxville, NY, a suburb of New York City. He won a scholarship to the New York University School of Architecture but, when the school closed permanently, he switched to structural engineering. His studies were interrupted by World War II in which he served as an infantry sergeant with the 30th Division in Europe until wounded. He earned a master’s degree in structural engineering at Yale in 1948, and was employed by a local engineering firm for the design of a stadium and auditorium for the University of Connecticut. He returned to Yale in 1953 to teach structural engineering in the School of Architecture while earning a master of architecture degree in 1954. Between 1954 and 1961 he oversaw extensive alterations to two major New York hotels, and the construction of two 200-room hotels in El Salvador and Puerto Rico. He married Jean Polson (1925-1992) in 1947 with whom he had a daughter, Halsey (1950) and a son James (1954-1994). They were divorced in 1957.

Miriam Phillips (1899–1997)

Miriam taught secretarial courses in the Philadelphia schools after graduating from the University of Pennsylvania with a degree in education. After a role in a play produced by the teachers, she was accepted at Hedgerow Theatre and began a lifelong career in acting, playing more than 120 roles including many world premieres, and becoming Hedgerow’s leading lady. She left Hedgerow in the 1950s to play on larger stages throughout the country including *Waltz of the Toreadors* and *Philomena* on Broadway, and at age 90, when she could no longer remember her lines, she wowed audiences without speaking a word as the matriarch in the off-Broadway *Daughters*. She became Wharton Esherick’s companion in the late 1930’s, joining him at his studio after his stroke in 1967 to care for him. After his death in 1970, she remained at the studio, was instrumental in its preservation as the Wharton Esherick Museum, and for many years was the Museum’s curator. In the 1980s she became romantically involved with Paul Modes, a theater buff and long-time fan of hers. They traveled to plays here and abroad until she retired to a home for aging actors. Paul became a board member and major supporter of the Museum.

Halsey Bascom (born 1950)

Halsey spent her childhood in El Salvador, Puerto Rico and Bronxville, NY. She majored in art at Carnegie Mellon University, but graduated from Syracuse University with a degree in archeology. With her husband, a photographer now deceased, she developed a local advertising agency. For the past twenty years Halsey has lived in Kerrville, TX where she produced women's casual wear under the label "Halsey Bascom Ranch Dressing." She is currently in the advertising department of the Kerrville *Daily Times*, and is the editor of *The Vantage Point*, the Aston Martin Owners Club magazine.

James Bascom (1954–1994)

The mentally incomplete product of an alcoholic womb, Jim struggled throughout his life; alternating between living a simple life as a twelve-year old boy with a dog—living in a teepee when he was 20—and as a grown man with a wife and job. He eventually earned a GED diploma and a certification as a hospital orderly. At age 40 he died of congestive heart failure in the home he shared with his dog in Port Aransas, Texas, estranged from his third wife. His funeral was a joyous celebration of his release from a troubled life.

It was in August of 2009 that I first met Ruth and Bob Bascom. Then serving as the president of the Tredyffrin Easttown Historical Society, I was researching a colleague's theory that timbers from an old mill in Tredyffrin Township had been purchased by Wharton Esherick in the 1920s for use in the construction of his studio. A mutual friend had suggested that I contact Bob, and a phone call quickly led to his invitation for a personal visit to the Museum.

After Bob's tour, where I indeed had the opportunity to see the beams in their second incarnation, he invited me to the residence, Wharton's former workshop, to meet Ruth. As we talked together of local history, a friendship quickly developed, and Ruth shared a cascade of vivid recollections of this historic area.

Continued conversations with Ruth over the next few years produced a trove of memories and supporting documents about local events which she had witnessed, not the least of these the often-contentious exchanges in the mid-1950s between Wharton and the U. S. military when the Army built a Nike missile radar base just east from Wharton's workshop on the Horseshoe Trail. I quickly came to learn that when Ruth shared a story, it was crisp, and could be easily corroborated either by her personal files or from within the Society's archive—a tremendous boon for any historian.

Several months after Ruth's death in October 2015, I called Bob to offer an idea. The extraordinary life of Ruth Esherick Bascom must be remembered, and who better than Bob to write the story—a legacy to our community and beyond. If he was agreeable to help create this record, our Society would enable the story to be published. Though still numb from her passing, Bob agreed to consider my proposal. Several months passed without the subject reemerging, and then, early in June 2016, Bob called me: "I've already completed several pages about Ruth, and I'd like to accept your proposition." And so, over the summer and early fall of 2016, Bob and I worked closely together: he as the creative dynamo in telling Ruth's story; I providing editorial assistance; and both of us focused on acquiring the best illustrations to highlight the text.

What a pleasure to be a part of such a worthy effort.

I am also greatly indebted to Dr. Paul Eisenhauer, former Executive Director & Curator of the Wharton Esherick Museum, and Ms. Laura Heemer, the current Curator & Program Director for the Museum, for providing image access and additional proofing support during the creation of this document. Thank you.

— Roger D. Thorne

For those wishing to learn more about the work of Wharton Esherick, the following books are recommended:

Wharton Esherick: The Journey of a Creative Mind by Mansfield Bascom. Publisher: Harry N. Abrams, 2010.

Wharton Esherick and the Birth of the American Modern, edited by Paul Eisenhauer, Ph.D., and Lynne Farrington. Publisher: Schiffer, 2011.

Esherick, Maloof, and Nakashima: Homes of the Master Wood Artisans by Tina Skinner. Publisher: Schiffer, 2009.