

Henry Francis du Pont · 1880-1969



*Henry Francis du Pont, 1957. (Winterthur Archives
Photo, Cornell Capa.)*

Henry Francis duPont



Observations
on the occasion of the
100th anniversary of his birth

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by John A. H. Sweeney



The Henry Francis duPont Winterthur Museum
Winterthur, Delaware

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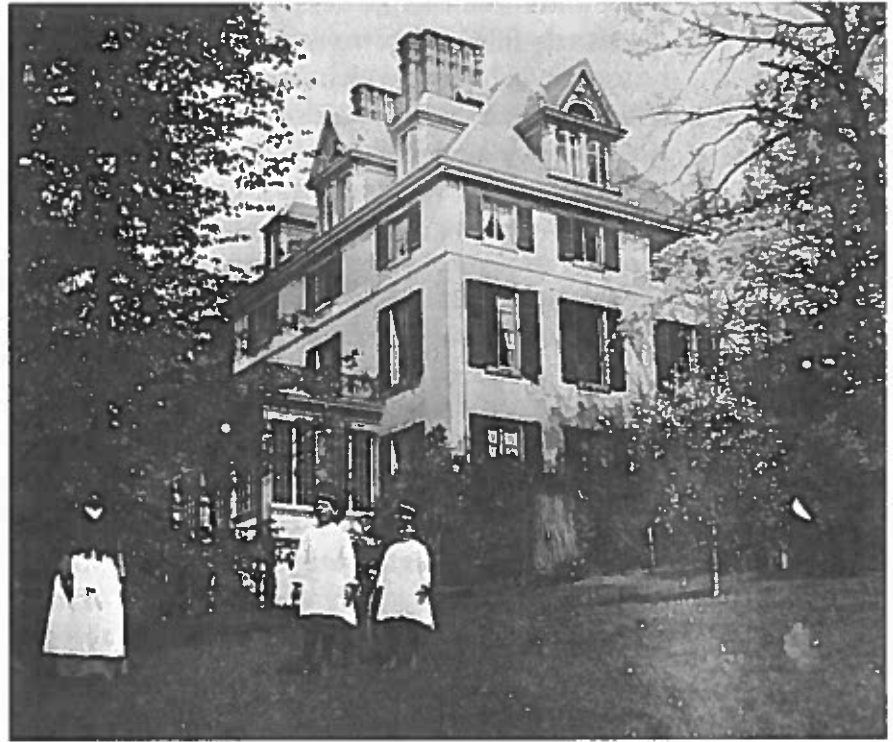
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"I am glad that I have been able to
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BASHFORD DEAN, the first curator of arms and armor at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, is quoted in *Merchants and Masterpieces* as saying, "He needs much who would be a successful collector. He should begin early. He should be devoted and persistent. He must have at hand the necessary time and means. He should have what people call good luck, and, most of all, perhaps, he must be born with a 'seeing eye' to fit him to pick and choose." Dean might well have been describing Henry Francis duPont, for he surely met all these criteria. He began early and at the age of nine he was collecting birds' eggs. After his death, in 1969, what remained of this boyhood hobby was transferred to the Delaware Museum of Natural History, an institution established by his cousin, John E. duPont, on acreage once part of the Winterthur estate. It is well known that he had the time and the means to pursue his collecting. He was devoted. The covers of his copies of *The Magazine Antiques* are marked with the page numbers of advertisements and illustrations of

things that appealed to him. He was persistent, and he often waited years to acquire a piece to match one in his collection. The sofas once owned by John Dickinson were not acquired as a pair. Once he owned the first one and learned that there was a matching example, he was determined to reunite the pair—and he did. Indeed, he had good luck, as demonstrated by the much-repeated story of his discovering in Bangkok a Staffordshire tureen that matched a service he already owned. And most important of all, he had a “seeing eye” which involved not only the intuition to determine rarity and quality in an object but also a photographic memory that enabled him to remember something he had seen years before. It was his seeing eye, too, that brought to his collecting a significance that is unique, for he had a special skill in assembling objects that related to one another, harmonized with each other, and contributed to an ensemble in such a way that the total became a visual delight. This he acknowledged by commenting, “When it comes to arranging furniture, somehow or other, I seem to feel where each piece should go.”

While H. F. duPont may be best known as a collector, with his name perpetuated in the title of the museum that developed from his collection, his passion for antiques was only one facet of his personality. Although he probably never questioned his right to inherit the fortune he did, he seemed compelled to



Henry Francis du Pont and his sister, Louise Evelina, on the south lawn, Winterthur, ca. 1884. (Eleutherian Mills Historical Library.)

prove to himself that he deserved it. His days were not merely filled; they were jammed with activities he took upon himself with a sense of noblesse oblige. Some of these activities arose from his responsibilities as a landowner and the employer of a large and diverse staff; others were the result of his achievements. He was past eighty when he accepted the appointment as chairman of the Fine Arts Committee for the White House and when he protested the dissolution of a museum collection by chairing the Committee to Save the Cooper Union Museum.

For his fiftieth reunion report to the Harvard class of 1903, he stated modestly that his years since graduation had been "filled to the brim with activities which, though vastly interesting to me, may not seem particularly varied to many of my classmates. The fields in which I have been absorbed are those of American antiquities, horticulture, and farming, at my place at Winterthur, Delaware."

He once said that he could not live without his Phillips Brooks calendar, and to appreciate this remark, one need only look at his blocked-out schedule, truly a scratch pad covered with notations intelligible only to him. Paradoxically referring to his life at Winterthur as a "comparatively calm existence," he wrote to an interviewer for the Archives of American Art in 1962:

Looking at my schedule, if you could come to Winterthur Sunday morning, April 8th on the 9:30 train, my car will meet you at Wilmington, at 11:33. I am free all day except from 5:00–6:00 when I have to go to church for some kind of music. Monday the 9th I am free most of the time. I am giving a small dinner that night. Ted and Constance [Richardson] will be there. On Tuesday I am motoring to Washington at 8:30 a.m. for my job at the White House—two and one half hours each way, when you could pick my brain. You would be on your own from 11 a.m. till 4 p.m.

My next appointment, Wednesday the 11th, is a dinner I am giving at 6:45 for the Winterthur Fellows, so you might be able to leave by the 5:39 train to New York.

Should you want to see me again Tuesday, May 1st, [take] the same morning train [and stay] till Thursday the 3rd. We sail for England May 9th and get back the middle of July.

Possibly caused by the pressures of such a schedule or merely associated with it were two traits bewildering to those who worked with him: his almost unreadable handwriting and his quick manner of speech. His sister, Louise du Pont Crowninshield, claimed that their father had once lamented, "What



*Henry Francis du Pont, ca. 1887. (Eleutherian Mills
Historical Library.)*

did I ever do to deserve two children with such *miserable* penmanship!" The fact that he was forced to change from left to right hand in boarding school could be the cause of this, or perhaps his thoughts came too fast for him to take the time to write them out. His wit was often clouded by his somewhat mumbled way of expressing himself. His chauffeur told the story that once when antiquing in Pennsylvania, Mr. duPont came out of a shop, handed him a covered glass dish, and said what the chauffeur thought to be "Throw this over the fence." Mr. duPont returned to the shop, and the chauffeur dutifully did what he was told to do. He threw it over the fence where it landed in a pile of rocks. When Mr. duPont came out the second time, he asked, "Where is the glass dish?" The chauffeur replied, "I did what you told me to do. I threw it over the fence." Actually the comment had been, "I bought this in self-defense." The chauffeur climbed over the fence to retrieve the dish, which, miraculously, had not broken. Mr. duPont's manner of speech kept all those around him on the alert to interpret his comments. More than this, his economy of words enabled him to encapsulate important thoughts into a few brief sentences. When asked about the emergence of his collecting impulse and the human circumstances and experiences that nurtured its growth and shaped its development, his laconic reply was, "I must have been born with it."

In the same interview in which he analyzed his collecting instinct, Mr. duPont admitted, "As I have never been particularly interested in any special kind of sport [neglecting to mention that he had once made a hole in one on his own golf course], I have enjoyed going to museums and galleries, old world houses and country places, and seeing countless beautiful houses and gardens. . . . Furthermore, it is fortunate that I seem to notice everything that is attractive and beautiful." In those sports in which he was interested—golf, not to mention bridge—he competed with himself. He admired individual excellence and seemed to appreciate high standards of performance in any endeavor. He was an ardent fan of prizefighting. He went to the National Horse Show every year and was familiar with the names and records of the riders. Competition was in his blood, and he demonstrated the competitive spirit expected on the playing field by striving toward goals of excellence in other areas: a prize holstein breeding herd; a brilliantly conceived and expertly developed garden; a collection described by Joseph Downs as the largest and richest assemblage of American decorative arts ever brought together.

He had been a serious collector of Americana less than ten years when he first entertained the members of the Walpole Society. The impression made upon those collectors is recorded in the society's *Note Book* for 1932:

The visit to Mr. duPont's house, on Saturday, was something unique in Walpole experience. That group of peripatetics has seen many early American rooms in many places. . . . All kinds have we passed through in museum after museum, but they were all rooms—museum rooms, silent places with polished floors, filled with polished, silent furniture standing in polite but aristocratic aloofness. Study and admiration they invite; intimacy is impossible. . . . Yet never have we seen so many old American rooms under one roof. Nor could we imagine that there could be put into one house so many rooms so different, in size, period and character, in such way as to make it liveable—to make a home of it. But Mr. duPont has done it. Here are rooms that welcome the guest, furniture which seems glad to receive him. There is nothing of the museum in the air.

The year before, H. F. duPont had written Francis P. Garvan that his house was nearly finished and his collecting about complete; he needed only a few small tables, a small bed, and two pictures "wider than they are high." But his collecting was not complete, any more than the planting of his gardens was complete.

It is unlikely that he envisioned fully the Henry Francis duPont Winterthur Museum with an annual

visitation of nearly 200,000 and two graduate study programs operated in conjunction with the University of Delaware, or the Winterthur Gardens, encompassing more than sixty acres and famed for spectacular groupings of native and rare plants. Perhaps from a sense of history, he was concerned even then with the preservation of what he had inherited and improved. In 1929 he inquired about the terms of Mrs. John Lowell Gardner's will that established the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston. In 1930 his lawyers formed the Winterthur Corporation, which eventually would be charged with maintaining Winterthur and the surrounding grounds in perpetuity as "a museum and arboretum for the education and enjoyment of the public." The language used in the incorporation of a trust contrasts with the understated way H. F. duPont expressed himself in conversation: "I want things kept as they are because in fifty years nobody will know what a country place was." He eschewed pretension by referring to his museum as a "house museum" and the Winterthur complex as a "place" or a "farm." Even in 1930, when Winterthur seemed secluded in the country, he was aware of urban expansion. Perhaps he had a premonition of inheritance taxes and inflation; he knew that if he were to perpetuate his inheritance, the responsibility would be his. He referred to this feeling laconically:



*Mrs. Henry Algernon du Pont with her children,
Louise Evelina and Henry Francis, New York,
ca. 1890. (Eleutherian Mills Historical Library.)*



Henry Francis du Pont, ca. 1915. (Eleutherian Mills Historical Library.)



*Henry Francis du Pont, ca. 1898. (Eleutherian Mills
Historical Library.)*

"I don't trust people. I want to have a thing going, have it established, and see it going. Then I'll know that what I wanted to do was done." This explains, perhaps, a corporation that was not activated for nearly twenty years, and thus more than eighty pages of instructions to the executors of his will and the officers of the Winterthur Corporation.

The actuality of Winterthur as it is today evolved gradually. Mr. duPont wrote in 1962, "I was born at Winterthur and have always loved everything connected with it." He explained further that as a boy he had the run of the place and the farm too. "I knew how to milk cows—I knew about everything," he told his correspondent. "When you live on a farm, you know everything that is going on." When his father delegated the management of the farm to him in 1915, he began to improve the herd which his father had started, to build modern dairy barns, to practice crop rotation, and to protect the open land. In later years, he sold the eastern part of the acreage to the Wilmington Country Club, an area which now provides a buffer between Winterthur and the encroaching suburbs of the city. Winterthur, then, was his home, and his stewardship was dedicated to the development of the land and the enhancement of its beauty. Characteristically, he justified a magnificent program with a practical base. He explained that the chestnut blight of the 1920s had left gaps in the

woods at the top of the hill above the house, and it was here that he set out the Kurume azaleas he had acquired from a nursery on Long Island to fill the empty spaces. These plants, which had been imported from Japan for the 1915 exposition in San Francisco, became the core of the azalea collection at Winterthur. Propagated, added to, grouped where the shapes and colors harmonized or contrasted to achieve the desired effect, they have become the virtual signature of the gardens.

H. F. duPont said that color is a vast field in itself. He emphasized this point when he wrote, "if you have grown up with flowers and [have] really seen them, you can't help [but] have unconsciously absorbed an appreciation of proportion, color, detail, and material." Stories have been told of his walking through the gardens on a spring evening, driving a stake in front of a plant of discordant color, and writing in his ever-present pocket notebook that it should be moved at the proper time to another spot. "I think color is the thing that really counts more than any other," he commented. "Shape is so important—the way each plant grows, it is perfectly beautiful. Shape is terribly important—I mean, all the proportions, shape, and color." In a very real sense, he saw a garden as a picture, giving credence to the remark that the Winterthur garden was created by an artist. His knowledge as a horticul-

turist enabled him to pick and choose the species and varieties for his garden, but the "seeing eye" of the collector enabled him to place them to best advantage. He was a gardener before he was a collector, and the habits he developed outdoors were transferred to the arrangement of his collection indoors.

As early as 1918, he was collecting English and European antique furnishings for his New York apartment. Many of these same objects were later regrouped, or "reinstalled" in museum parlance, in the smaller house to which he and his wife moved when Winterthur became a museum. In the summer of 1923, visits to the summer home of Mr. and Mrs. J. Watson Webb at Shelburne, Vermont, and a few days later to Henry Davis Sleeper's house at Gloucester, Massachusetts, inspired him to collect American decorative arts. The house he and Mrs. duPont were planning to build at Southampton, Long Island, became an experiment, with Sleeper as an adviser, in creating comfortable, livable interiors where antique American furniture fitted easily into rooms paneled with woodwork from eighteenth-century American houses. The display of the collection was essential, but the achievement of an overall effect was the guiding principle. The result was the "lived-in" effect for which the Winterthur Museum later became noted. "I saw a background, a setting," he told the interviewer from the Archives of American Art in 1962. "Unless it looks well, then



*Mrs. Henry Francis du Pont, June 24, 1916.
(Winterthur Archives.)*



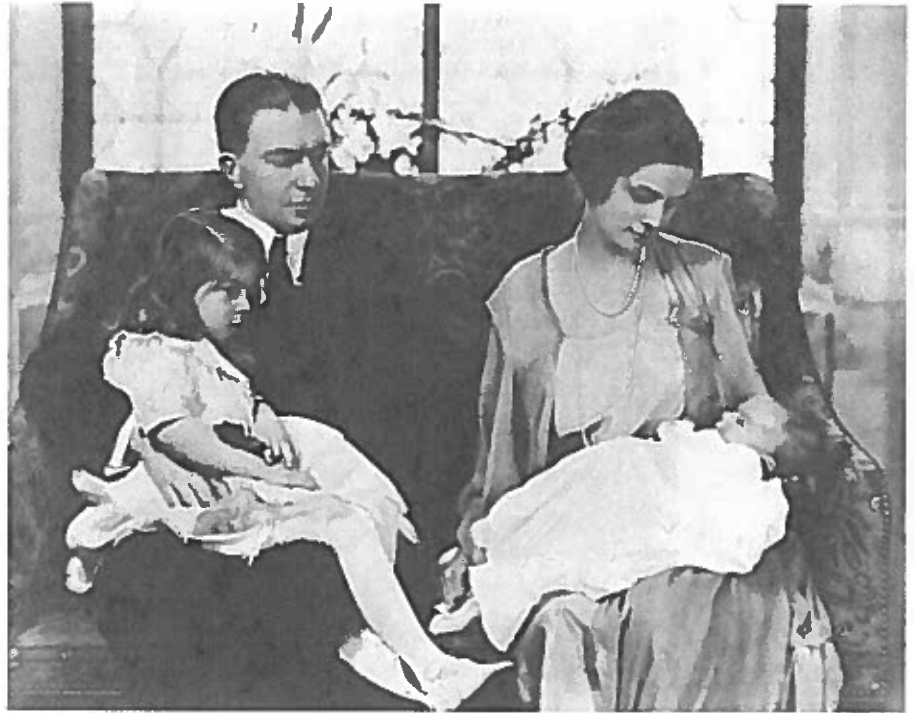
*Mrs. Henry Francis du Pont and her daughter, Pauline Louise, 1921. Portrait by Harrington Mann.
(Winterthur Archives.)*

why have it? . . . It's one of my first principles that if you go into a room, any room, and right away see something, then you realize that [it] shouldn't be in the room." Mr. duPont saw his collecting as putting collections together, or, in his phrase, feeling where every piece should go. His approach to arranging his collection, as in grouping plants, was similar to that of an artist creating a picture, one often visualized before it was painted. When the large addition to Winterthur was being planned in 1928, he wrote to his architect asking that the space between the windows of "the Port Royal Room" be extended so that it would accommodate a large piece of furniture. It was a year later, with the addition still under construction, that he bought the Van Pelt-Reifsnyder high chest that stands between those windows today.

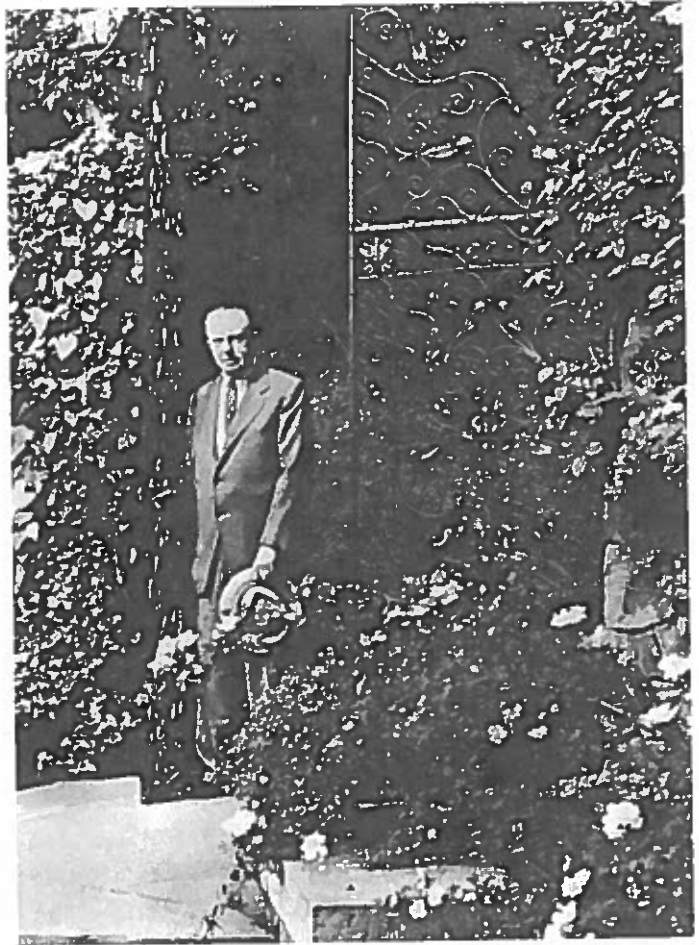
This period of feverish activity, during which the duPonts furnished an apartment, built a summer house, and enlarged the family home, coincided with a burgeoning interest in Americana generally. It was a period initiated by the Hudson-Fulton Exhibition of 1909 and highlighted by the opening of the American Wing of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1924. There appeared a new generation of collectors, among whom were a number who influenced museums and, in turn, younger generations of collectors: Mrs. J. Watson Webb, Mrs. Francis B. Crowninshield, Miss Ima Hogg, Mrs. Katherine

Prentis Murphy, Mrs. Harry Horton Benkard, Francis P. Garvan, John D. Rockefeller, Jr., and, to be sure, Henry Francis duPont. It was the period, also, of the development of the display technique of the "period room." This generation of collectors wanted to do more with their collections than merely to acquire them. As analyzed by Alice Winchester, former editor of *The Magazine Antiques* at a symposium sponsored by the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in 1977, they wanted to be creative in their collecting, to arrange them to best advantage, and to live with them in the manner to which they were accustomed. In adapting the period-room concept, which stems from the habitat group of the natural history museum, they interpreted their arrangements in terms of their own life-styles and the taste of the times. The rooms of the collectors of the 1920s are now themselves historic documents.

Edith Wharton wrote in *French Ways and Their Meanings*, "The essence of taste is suitability. Divest the word of its prim and priggish implications, and see how it expresses the mysterious demand of the eye and mind for symmetry, harmony and order." When Elsie de Wolfe published *The House in Good Taste*, in 1913, she said flatly that "my business is to preach to you the beauty of suitability." Such was the spirit in the air during the formative years of the great collectors of American antiques. It may not be a coincidence that H. F. duPont, recalling the process



Mr. and Mrs. Henry Francis du Pont with their daughters, Pauline Louise and Ruth Ellen, 1922. (Winterthur Archives.)



*Henry Francis du Pont at the rose garden gate, 1958.
(Winterthur Archives: Photo, Harry A. Lemmon.)*

of assembling his collection and his particular way of arranging it, stated that "it has taken all these years to get all the correct furniture and period rooms we needed, and needless to say every time a paneled room or mantelpiece was installed, I moved to this room the furniture that *suited* it." On this principle, he satisfied the demands of his eye and mind for symmetry, harmony, and order. Hidden in the terse description of this process was a quarter-century of collecting, placing, expanding, and rearranging as new ideas emerged in response to changing circumstances. In her autobiographical *Antiques I Have Known*, Corinne Griffith quotes Joe Kindig, Jr., who worked closely with Mr. duPont through the 1940s, as saying, "Harry duPont is like a conductor of music. He may not know how to play each and every instrument, but he knows how to blend them together, exquisitely."

When he had the house arranged to his liking, he felt it was too good to be dispersed after his death, and the idea of making it a museum came to him. Thus, in 1950, Mr. and Mrs. duPont moved out of the house in which he was born and where they had lived together for thirty-five years. The Henry Francis duPont Winterthur Museum was formally opened on October 31, 1951. Homer Eaton Keyes, editor of *Antiques* at the time of the opening of the American Wing, suggested that the process of arranging period rooms (as indeed the planting of a

garden) is similar to the painting of a picture. In 1951 the artist in Mr. duPont felt that his masterpiece was at last complete—much as he had told Francis P. Garvan twenty years earlier that his house was about finished and his collecting over. It was now ready for the public to see, but the artist was hardly finished with his creation. Over the next eighteen years more than twenty-five additional rooms were installed and hundreds of objects were added to the collection. Mr. duPont and the museum's board of trustees supported this ongoing program. Friends, relatives, and many people previously unaware of Winterthur took part, feeling, perhaps, as one donor suggested, that giving an object to Winterthur "was like having it go to Heaven."

Although H. F. duPont's collection had been known and appreciated by friends, collectors, dealers, and museum professionals, it was only after the public opening of the museum that the full measure of his achievement was recognized. As early as 1929, his role as a collector was known, and in that year he was a major lender to the loan exhibition of American furniture sponsored by the National Council of Girl Scouts at the American Art Association in New York. He and Louis Guerineau Myers "rolled up their sleeves" and arranged that milestone exhibition, which has been memorialized in 1980 by another exhibition, "In Praise of America," at the National Gallery of Art. By the 1950s, however, his



Mrs. John F. Kennedy, Henry Francis du Pont, and Dana Taylor, May 8, 1961. (Winterthur Archives: Photo, News-Journal Company.)



*The Earl and Countess de la Warr with Henry Francis
du Pont, 1955. (Winterthur Archives:
Photo, News-Journal Company.)*

activity was considered to be more significant than the placement of objects in suitable relationship to one another. Academic institutions recognized his achievements and he was awarded honorary degrees by the University of Delaware, the University of Pennsylvania, Yale University, and Williams College. He received the Louise duPont Crowninshield Award of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, the Elsie de Wolfe Award of the New York Chapter of the National Institute of Interior Designers, and the Thomas Jefferson Award of the National Society of Interior Designers. For his contributions to horticulture he received the medal of honor of the Garden Club of America, the gold medal of the National Association of Gardeners, and the distinguished service award of the New York Botanical Garden. He was elected a vice-president of the Royal Horticultural Society of Great Britain. In 1961, Mrs. John F. Kennedy asked him to chair the Fine Arts Committee for the White House, a responsibility he willingly undertook. Later he reflected that on election night in 1960 he never expected to see the inside of the White House again, but within six months he was more involved than ever, doing what he described as "my job at the White House." This project brought unprecedented publicity to the American arts and shifted the awareness of America's heritage from historians and collectors to a broad appreciation on the part of the American public. Mr. duPont's

reaction to President Kennedy's death was summed up in a comment to a dinner guest, "It will be a long time before we have in the White House a President and his wife, who are young and attractive, who like things, and who know what's what."

In his foreword to Joseph Downs's *American Furniture: Queen Anne and Chippendale Periods*, H. F. duPont wrote that he was glad that he had been able to preserve in some degree the evidences of early life in America and that he was gratified that others might find his collection a source of knowledge and inspiration. His collection and his presentation of it does more than that. They have become an inspiration and basis for the study of early American culture. The museum he founded is committed to this purpose.

Shortly after the opening of the museum, it became clear that the field of American arts lacked sufficient trained personnel to provide the curators and administrators necessary to develop and interpret the collection. To meet this need—at the suggestion of Charles F. Montgomery and with the encouragement of the president of the University of Delaware—the Winterthur Program in Early American Culture was established to train at the graduate level young persons who would be prepared to work in museums, historical societies, colleges, and libraries. Beginning with five students in 1952, the program has continued to grow until there are now



Henry Francis du Pont, Lammot du Pont Copeland, and the Honorable J. Caleb Boggs, Governor of Delaware, at opening ceremonies of Winterthur in Spring, April 19, 1955. (Winterthur Archives: Photo, Harry A. Lemmon.)

nearly two hundred graduates of the Winterthur program holding positions in museums as far apart as Concord, New Hampshire, and San Francisco.

It also became clear that the assembling of a great collection carried with it the responsibility for its long-term physical preservation. A survey of modern preservation techniques was begun in 1957, the first major result of which was the costly and difficult task, of five years duration in the early 1960s, of air conditioning the entire building to provide a controlled atmosphere for the collection.

Just as the collection needed interpretation and conservation, so it also needed library resources. At the beginning of the Winterthur program, Mr. duPont provided funds for the development of a library, and over the years that library became the nucleus of a research center for the study of the American arts. In the 1960s he provided the funds to build and endow the Louise duPont Crowninshield Research Building. The building, named in honor of his sister, houses expanded library facilities and research and conservation laboratories. Here, scientific work is dedicated to the preservation and conservation of the collection.

An outgrowth of this physical installation was another graduate program, started in 1974, to train young men and women in conservation work. Again in cooperation with the University of Delaware, the second program was initiated with funds provided by



*Henry Francis du Pont, January 1969. (Winterthur Archives:
Photo, Robert Hunt Whitten.)*

the National Endowment for the Arts and private foundations. Now, with the combined programs, there are more than sixty graduate students in residence at Winterthur during the academic year. They receive training in the background and connoisseurship of American art and in the scientific techniques of preservation. They bring to the museum the lively enthusiasm and high expectations of young people and ensure the dynamism of a sophisticated program.

H. F. duPont had said that he wanted to know that his wishes were carried out. By opening his museum and his garden during his lifetime, he was able to share his life's work and to take satisfaction in the public's reaction to it. In his garden, he was able to combine his love of plants per se with his love of form and grace and beautiful color, as noted by Harold Bruce, author of *Winterthur in Bloom*. In his collection, he was able to provide a source of knowledge and inspiration, and, by his endorsement of academic study, he assured the development of this source. He dedicated his life and his fortune so that Winterthur would be preserved for the education and enjoyment of the public. This was his gift to the American people, and, on the centenary of his birth, this might be said to be his gift to himself—the accomplishment of his purpose.