

Lunch with Dan Miller On May 19, 2015

Transcript by Tony Rosati. The bracketed *italic* elaborations were added for clarity by Dan and Tony.

Preface

On Mondays Dan Miller and I often have lunch together in his studio. We have our sandwiches and chat. Sometimes the conversation is dedicated to our teaching or PAFA concerns. Sometimes the conversation inspires one or both of us to reminisce. In the particular conversation below Dan recalls the various places, buildings, the Academy school has been conducted. The conversation started to review that history and after a few minutes I felt that it should be recorded. So, I captured what I could on my cell phone recorder. As our conversation progressed Dan mentioned the name Jack Merriam and explained that Jack Merriam was a prominent Philadelphia realtor who dabbled in foreign cars. The transcript of the recording is written below; it begins with Jack Merriam.



DM

Jack Merriam imported foreign cars from Europe; he owned the only company [*in Philadelphia*] that sold cars manufactured in Europe and imported foreign cars, sold specialized cars. He didn't sell many of them; he didn't expect to. He also launched the moving of the Academy to the Peale House building. He owned the building, then named the Belgravia Hotel, and wanted to move the school there. He also wanted to rebuild the waterfront and put the, a, stadium on the waterfront and build a brand-new school down there. The board wasn't ready to do that. They were very suspicious of him and his aims. He eventually wanted us to move into the Curtis Building, which he also owned.

TR

And so the school before that time was in the historic landmark building?

DM

Not just here, but beyond, an annex, a row house on Pine Street, about a twenty-minute walk. You were expected to spend half your day here and the other half in the annex. And the annex was – when you walked in there was table with some dusty still life on it. That was the still life room.

Then you would go upstairs and there were two very nice studios with skylights. That's where the portrait classes were. So a lot of students had to move between locations. They had to crisscross.

TR

So, he [Jack Merriam] ended up giving the Peale House to the School, and that was when, 1950? [This building is Peale House #1 on the North side of Chestnut Street, also known as the Belgravia Hotel, an historic place. Dan relates that the then director of the school, Joseph Fraiser, didn't want it. But the School Board of Trustees decided to take it despite its need for renovation. The school needed to expand.]

DM

That was ah, 64, 1964. The school opened there in the fall of 1964. I started teaching in 64. That's the first year that Bruce Samuelson came here. He was a first year student that year.

TR

So then, we [PafA] stayed in the Peale House #1 through the 1960s.

DM

Yes, we were there nineteen or twenty years.

TR

When did we move into the funeral home on Chestnut Street? What was the name of the funeral home? The Bair Building? [The Oliver H. Bair funeral Home, at 1818 Chestnut Street, is the building referenced. It became the Peale House #2. It is on the South side of Chestnut Street across from Peale House #1. Today it is Boyds Philadelphia, a stylish clothing store]

DM

The building, the Peale House #1; the dean didn't want to put much into the building. They had to put some money into it, just to make it possible for us to be there. And, there was an inside fire escape, a wooden fire escape. After we had been there for months, Lou Sloan [faculty] decided he'd try to walk out on the fire escape, but he couldn't

because it was full of trash. It was that kind of situation.

TR

Yeah.

DM

Um, the Peale House #1 was a kind of random place. It was ah, ...Jim Lulius was the building manager. His brother Tommy has some physical disabilities. He was one of the janitors -- carpenter, and the whole family ran the cafeteria, his father and mother and sister. It was quite a situation -- and he was a wonderful guy. He always kept a pot of coffee brewing.

TR

What did you say was his name?

DM

James Lulius...

So every time I came up to talk, to take a break, I'd have a cup of coffee. And at night he'd always give you a nice splash of bourbon (laugh). He'd also try to give you tickets to the X-rated movie theater across the street (laughter).

TR

And so then came the move to the Bair Funeral Home.

DM

What happened was that James told me that licenses and inspection came once a month and he'd hand them an envelope full of money. Finally licenses and inspections cracked down on him. So one spring I got a notice from the Academy lawyers saying that within a month we had to vacate the building. So the board had to make a decision about whether they would move or stay there and put a lot of money into the building to make it serviceable and safe. I went to that meeting;

I was amazed. Security and board members were present – the board had to make a decision at that meeting whether they would stay or move. They previously asked one of the board members to walk through the new Oliver Bair building. He just took a casual walk through. His report was, “I think, our school would fit in there, it’s probably about the same size as the building we’re in”, which was not true, and they had to vote on this. And they couldn’t make their mind up.

TR

What was the vote?

DM

About 50/50. Then Henry McNeil said, “I’ll be willing to cover any exit costs”, and he did. *[Henry McNeil, was a powerful board member associated with McNeil Pharmaceuticals. He philanthropically also created an art works purchase fund for PafA.]*

TR

So when was the move?

DM

Been in Peale House #2 *[The Oliver Bair Building]* about five years.

TR

I mean you *[the school]* moved in around 1984?

DM

Around then.

TR

And then we were there.

DM

It was probably about then, probably then.

TR

There. That’s where I started in 1985. And then we later moved to 1301 Cherry Street.

DM

Yeah.

TR

Can’t even remember when; it must have been about 1989 or 1990 that we moved into 1301.

DM

Yes. There was a rotunda in the Oliver Bair Building. They got people to give a lot of money and put their names in the ring of the rotunda. People who gave so much got gold letters, a little less, silver, and they would be there, but of course we moved and the donors were furious.

TR

Of course! Well that was a history and more.

Epilogue

Dan Miller’s recounting of the different buildings in which the Academy School has thrived is continued by way of the text below, excerpted from the PafA web site.

In 2002, Dorrance H. Hamilton made a large donation to the Academy that allowed it to purchase the former federal building and automobile factory at 128 N. Broad Street, immediately adjacent to the original building. It was renamed in memory of her husband, The Samuel M.V. Hamilton Building, renovated, and the School of Fine Arts of the Academy completed its move there in September 2006.
