

Spanning the Gap

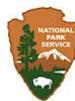
Park Profile:

Philosopher Charles Peirce

By Megan O'Malley

Most visitors associate the recreation area with picturesque landscapes, the scenic Delaware River, and a variety of outdoor activities; only a few know about the park's connection with philosophy, mathematics, and astronomy. The park's link to these academic fields is the building now known as Peirce House, the former residence of America's most eminent philosopher, Charles Peirce (pronounced *purse*) Peirce and his wife Juliette called the home *Arisbe*, after one of the Trojan cities in Homer's *Iliad*. Arisbe is located just outside Milford and now houses the recreation area's Division of Research and Resource Planning. Charles Peirce, who was born in 1839, lived at Arisbe from 1887 until his death in 1914 and did some of his most important work while living there.

Peirce has been described by some as America's Leonardo DaVinci. Like DaVinci, Peirce's interests and skills spanned the entire intellectual world. Peirce produced ground-breaking work in the world of philosophy with his theory of pragmatism. He was an inventive cartographer, and made contributions to the disciplines of astronomy, psychology, logic, chemistry, meteorology, and geodesy (mapping the earth's surface.) As if his achievements in science and philosophy were not sufficient, Peirce also was an actor and wrote short stories and plays.



U.S. Dept. of the Interior
National Park Service

Spanning the Gap
The newsletter of
Delaware Water Gap National Recreation
Area
Vol. 22 No. 3 Fall 2000



Though his genius is undisputed in the philosophical and scientific communities, his complicated personal life and eccentric personality alienated him from his peers. He taught at Harvard and Johns Hopkins universities, but he was considered a poor lecturer and was thought to be egotistical and unstable. He was never offered a professorship.

Some of Peirce's most innovative scientific work, however, was not for academia, but for the United States Coast and Geodetic Survey (USC&GS), the forerunner of the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). While with the USC&GS Peirce produced a map accurately depicting the earth on a flat surface. This map, drawn in 1877, is still used today by airlines and by pilots to plan international flights. Despite this and many other landmark projects, Peirce resigned from the USC&GS in 1891.

Dissatisfaction with the administration of the USC&GS and an end in funding for his projects undoubtedly contributed to his resignation. However, as was the case with his work in the academic world, choices Peirce made with his personal life had severe repercussions on his professional career. In 1883, just two days after divorcing his long-estranged first wife, Peirce married Juliette Froissy, a woman much younger than himself. By standards of the day, it was a scandal, and may ultimately have forced Peirce to resign his position with the USC&GS.

With the doors of both the academic world and the government's pre-eminent scientific agency closed to him, Peirce retreated to Milford, Pennsylvania where he and his wife embarked on a new life. For the next 27 years Peirce devoted his mind to philosophy and his small financial resources to establishing a scientific and philosophical think-tank at Arisbe. Though they had little money and even less business sense, the Peirces began a series of additions



Juliette Froisy Peirce and Charles Peirce in the garden of their home, *Arisbe*.



Arisbe in the era that it was home to the Peirces.



and renovations to their home that would at times make the house virtually uninhabitable and would eventually leave them penniless. The couple had almost no income, but Peirce remained unfailingly devoted to his life's passion -- philosophy.

Some may find Peirce's manic devotion to his philosophical studies at the expense of his own comfort and financial stability to be illogical or ridiculous. While it is true that during his lifetime Peirce received no recognition or money for the bulk of the work he completed at Arisbe, it undoubtedly brought him deep personal satisfaction.

After Peirce's death in 1914, Juliette sold his papers to Harvard University, where they were edited and published several years later. (She lived on at Arisbe until her death in 1934.) With the publication of these volumes that Peirce had worked on for years in isolation, his brilliance was finally recognized.

Peirce's dream of establishing a learned institute at Arisbe never materialized in his lifetime, but the presence of the recreation area's scientific division in his house certainly comes close to fulfilling this goal of his later years. From his extensively rehabilitated home, the Research and Resource Planning Division inventories, monitors, and collects scientific data on the recreation area's natural environment, and carries out careful mapping of natural and cultural resources in the park. Peirce would have approved. Though he was cut off from his peers in the academic and scientific world, Peirce now stands shoulder to shoulder with great thinkers of history. He stands alone, however, as the nation's most original and celebrated philosopher.



(Above) Two views of Arisbe around 1990. Now known as *Peirce House*, it contains the offices of the recreation area's Division of Research and Resource Planning.



(Above) Arisbe in 2001.



(Above) Arisbe in 2003. (NPS photo by Ken Sandri)

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