

OBITUARY: H. WILLIAM SELLERS

H. William Sellers (known to friends as “Bill”), a long time resident of Pocopson Township, Chester County, had a highly productive career as a land and water conservationist and township supervisor. A native of New Orleans, his conservation instincts were whetted by several resident years on the Mississippi Gulf Coast and summer camp in the Smoky Mountains. A liberal arts graduate and law school dropout at Tulane University, Sellers went on active duty as an Army officer in 1964 serving in Germany for two years before returning to the States to fulfill his Reserve commitment and attend graduate school in city planning at Ohio State. While in the service, he used his leave time to tour most of Western Europe and Turkey, studying city planning and art.

In 1973, he married Deborah Paquin of Dayton, Ohio, who was his soul-mate and mother of their children, Ethan Taylor (a Chicago-based musician, husband of Lillie and father of Ezekiel Taylor) and Alyssa Christine (a teacher, wine consultant and sommelier and resident of Greenwich, CT). During their marriage, the Sellers restored historic homes in German Village, Ohio, and Pocopson and survived numerous historic rehab, landscaping, and rural challenges as well as his frequent health challenges. As he told friends, Debbie kept the house and family together and organized so he could take on impossible challenges professionally. In addition to working on their houses, Bill and Debbie enjoyed travel along the eastern seaboard, New Orleans and Cajun Country, and Spain, Morocco, Costa Rica, and Panama.

After receiving a master’s degree in city and regional planning from Ohio State University, Sellers conducted research for the University in Saginaw, MI on one of the first teacher and student evaluation and planning projects in the country to improve inner city schools. Following that eye-opening experience in educational system dysfunction, Sellers conducted research on potential environmental and habitation issues of building the Alaskan pipeline or a new Naval base in Antarctica. When a VP in Sohio (later absorbed by BP) on the Alaskan pipeline expressed disbelief in Mr. Sellers’ projections of the potential problems of Arctic oil exploration and denied Sellers funding support for further research, Sellers became a health, hospital and environmental planner for seventeen counties in central Ohio. In 1995, the former chairman of Sohio expressed surprise to Bill over lunch that those problems had not been brought to him and were his and Sohio’s undoing.

At the request of Ohio’s governor, he served on a staff to a task force (headed by former astronaut John Glenn) charged with reorganizing Ohio’s environmental programs. Sellers’ role on the task force then led to his being made chief of planning for the newly-created Ohio EPA, which had been charged with implementing all of the new federal environmental laws passed in the early 1970s (Clean Water, Clean Air, Solid waste), Ohio’s Nuclear Power Siting law, and other laws. As he said, “With almost no one adequately educated or trained to implement the laws, we wrote our own books and had to fend off criticism from regulated entities and federal and local regulators.”

In 1975, he became Director of the Environmental Management Center of the Brandywine Conservancy in Chadds Ford. Mr. Sellers was drawn to PA by his familiarity and later friendships with the University of Pennsylvania planning stars, Ian McHarg and Anne Louise Strong, the writings of Chester County's William H. Whyte (author of The Last Landscape) and painter Andrew Wyeth, whose work resonated strongly with Sellers' great interest in art stemming from his college and European museum studies. Mr. Sellers developed a professional organization that assisted individuals, landowners, and governments with planning, research, and implementation of innovative land use and natural and water resources management and regulatory techniques. Sellers conceived and oversaw the development of many firsts of their kind "how to" publications on protecting historic properties, landscaping with native plants, community trails, holistic water management, conservation easements and their appraisal and municipal stormwater management. Under his direction, the Center became the premier conservation easement program in the country preserving 300 properties of over 25,000 acres in southeastern PA and DE and creating 4 major nature preserves - without using government funds. With the help of private investors, Mr. Sellers successfully developed and managed the implementation of a conservation plan to purchase and protect the 5400-acre PA holdings of the King Ranch of Texas. With his staff, consultants, and community groups, Sellers promoted a 1000-acre conservation alternative to the Rouse Company's Church Farm School proposal; a plan that ultimately resulted in a major parkland for central Chester County.

When Mr. Sellers joined the Conservancy, private land conservation serving local and regional goals was in its infancy and distrusted by government agencies and politicians alike. Mr. Sellers's dedication to preserving water resources and securing open spaces accessible and near to the homes of diverse populations was unique among conservationists of the times. To build credibility for land trusts, Mr. Sellers became an outspoken advocate of professionalizing the movement and organizing at national, state, and local levels. To that end, he was a founder of the Land Trust Alliance and early organizer of the PA Land Trust and Greenspace Alliances (the latter being a Philadelphia regional group).

The Conservancy's successes resulted in requests from land preservation and historic preservation groups and landowners around the country for assistance with their projects. While at the Conservancy and in his private consulting practice that followed, Sellers was instrumental in assisting the development of historic preservation organizations in Ohio and Delaware (Preservation Delaware), land trusts in Pennsylvania (Clear Water Conservancy, et al), Kentucky (the Bluegrass Conservancy and Lexington Frankfort Scenic Corridor, Inc), the Carolinas (the Pacolet Conservancy, the Penn Center), New York (Friends of the Larchmont Reservoir, Dutchess Land Trust, Adirondack landowners), and Texas (Hill Country Land Trust). Sellers also developed land conservation projects for landowners in those states and Virginia, as well as a watershed protection program for Austin, TX. After the Conservancy, Sellers developed land preservation projects for other Chester County land trusts including the West Pikeland Land Trust and the French & Pickering Creeks Conservation Trust, where he also served as interim executive director. He also served on the PA Environmental Council for 30

years, Historic Red Clay Valley (steam railway) the White Clay Creek Preserve, and as a church trustee.

Mr. Sellers' land preservation passion stemmed from his belief that substantial acreage of natural, wooded, and agricultural lands in urbanizing regions must be protected in order to preserve sustainable water sources and access to nature for everyone. After a water lecture at a church in the Great Valley of Chester County, the rector opined that Bill's passion about water was similar to his about the Lord. Sellers led the promotion of innovative storm water and wastewater recycling and reuse projects in Pocopson Township, Chester County, the Philadelphia region, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, and internationally (Poland, Germany, and Hungary).

Over his 23-year career as a township supervisor, Sellers revised the zoning and subdivision ordinances to provide innovative environmental and historical preservation provisions, including mandatory provisions for trails, transfer of development rights, and stormwater management requiring recharge or reuse of rainfall. To the maximum extent, he developed systems that relied on carrots rather than regulatory sticks. Sellers also arranged the acquisition of three parks, including 85 acres and an historic house that was part of the Underground Railroad donated by the County. Pocopson Township has more dedicated trails than most other townships.

A memorial service will be scheduled at a future date. In lieu of flowers, the family requests memorial gifts to Brandywine Conservancy Environmental Management Center or the Land Trust Alliance.

POSSIBLE COMMENTATORS:

1. Lawrence Wood, retired Chesco judge and chairman for the King Ranch years of the Conservancy's Environmental Committee.
2. A. Joseph Armstrong, Trout Unlimited, and also a chairman of the EC
3. Jean Hocker, longtime Ex Dir of the Land Trust Alliance.
4. Rand Wentworth current Ex Dir of the Land Trust Alliance.
5. Roland Woodward, former Pres, Chesco Historical Society, currently Dir of Maryland (Baltimore) Museum of Industry
6. Andrew Johnson, President of North American Lands Trust, Owner of Conservation Advisors
7. Rhett DuPont