

# The Giant of Westtown

*By Stephen Wahrhaftig, Westtown Historical Commission*

Westtown School was already over 100 years old by the time student William Engle graduated, in 1910. Engle's family was from Newark, New Jersey, and being Quaker, wanted William to attend a quality Quaker school. Westtown had earned a reputation as an excellent boarding school, and he was enrolled. William was known by his fellow students to be both artistic and philosophical. He was often seen roaming our countryside, carrying brushes and pallet, sketching and painting the beautiful landscape in this area of Pennsylvania. He also loved the ocean and spent summers with his family in Beach Haven, NJ.

The young artist was fortunate enough to meet a relatively unknown artist who had moved to nearby Chadds Ford. His name was Newell Convers Wyeth. NC Wyeth, of course, would become one of the most celebrated illustrators of his day, eventually producing nearly 4,000 paintings and illustrations for books and magazines. His legacy includes his artistic descendants, Andrew and Jaimie Wyeth.

After graduating from Westtown, Engle studied at The Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia, and three years later moved to Chadds Ford to study with Wyeth. There, he became Wyeth's assistant, and in due course, NC and William were close friends.

During this time, William's health began to fail. In 1912 he was diagnosed with tuberculosis. At that time, people thought that the disease could be controlled by spending time outdoors. The young artist tried working on a classmate's family farm in Iowa for a summer, but his health steadily declined. By 1913 William Engle was in such poor health that he was forced to move back to Newark to be cared for by his family. He died there on his 25th birthday.

In 1920, the Westtown Class of 1910 held a reunion. There, classmates remembered their missing artistic classmate. Someone suggested that they approach Engle's friend and teacher and commission him to create a painting in honor of their fellow student. The class raised the sum of \$500, which was no small fee in 1920. They approached NC Wyeth, who agreed to create a work of work of art in William Engle's memory, to be displayed at Westtown School.

Several artistic subjects were considered, then rejected for various reasons. Then Wyeth came upon an idea that was both compelling and appropriate. Wyeth knew his assistant to be an artist who loved painting the outdoors. The young artist also adored the beach, and like Wyeth, shared a sense of wonder and imagination.

The resulting work is a large-scale painting (72" x 60") finished in Wyeth's inimitable style - beautiful soft colors and a combination of both realistic illustration and pure fantasy. The work was painted at the Beach Haven beach, where Engle has spent so many enjoyable hours. In it, we see the massive pastel-

tinged clouds that Wyeth was famous for. It is called 'The Giant'. In it, a group of children on a beach look up in wonder, as clouds form the image of a fairy-tale giant. There, beyond the ocean waves, the giant strides past, gripping a huge club, clothed in a medieval gown and jeweled belt.

To heighten the painting's surreal feeling, none of the children are facing us in the picture. Instead, they are all gazing away from us, towards the billowing clouds. Wyeth seems to be inviting us to see the world the way these children are seeing it, a world full of fairy tales and wonder. Where we, as adults might see only clouds, children may see fantastic characters and stories.

Six children are depicted in *The Giant*. The five kids on the right side of the picture are all NC Wyeth's children that he chose to place into the painting. The blond child is Andrew Wyeth. One boy, on the left, gazes along with his friends. This child is William Engle. Only William wears a hat in the painting. The hat resembles the one Engle would wear as he traveled the environs of Westtown, searching for scenes to paint.



The Giant by NC Wyeth, Westtown School

A classmate of William Engle was interviewed in the 1940s, who said that *"Bill had always meant to execute a scene like this of children by the sea, looking up into the clouds,"* and that Wyeth took this dream and created the painting that his assistant would never make.



William Engle, painting (about 1910)

Before presenting *The Giant* to Westtown School, he exhibited to public acclaim. In fact, the artist wrote about it in a letter to his mother. In the letter, Wyeth states that the painting had caused a 'sensation' in the gallery.

Today, *The Giant* is mounted on a wall in the Westtown School dining room. Generations of students have admired the work as they had their daily meals. The painting is carefully respected and is protected only by a motion detector that emits a sonic warning if an admirer gets too close to the work.

At Westtown School, students grow up, graduate, and move on to other phases of their lives. Many of them live on in the memories of their teachers and fellow students. But one of them lives on in a painted masterpiece that decorates the walls of one of Westtown's oldest institutions.

## History Lectures

*(Saturdays at 10 am in the Stokes Assembly Hall)*

### APRIL 27

West Chester historian Malcomb Johnstone will present "Lincoln and His West Chester Connection." The first biography of Abraham Lincoln was printed in West Chester and it was instrumental in his winning the Republican nomination for president in 1860. Come hear how and why this Lincoln connection with West Chester was accomplished.

### JUNE 22

Westtown Historical Commission will present a "Brief History of Westtown Township: From Farmland to Suburbia." From its founding in 1685, within William Penn's colony, to the present, Westtown Township has been home to colorful characters, historic happenings, and wonderful old structures. Come learn about the interesting stories in Westtown's history.

### SEPT. 7

Author and historian Bruce Mowday will talk about "Gen. Lafayette at the Battle of Brandywine." The young Lafayette got his first taste of battle, and a wound, at the Battle of Brandywine, Sept. 11, 1777 in nearby Thornbury Township. Learn how the battle informed Lafayette's character and usefulness to General George Washington and contributed to his heroic status in the fight for American Independence.

### NOV. 9

Westtown Historical Commission will present "Darlington Corners: Westtown's Historic Crossroads Village." Discover the businesses and people who lived and worked in Darlington's Corners at the intersection of Street Road and Wilmington Pike. Now largely demolished for modern purposes and Rte. 202 widening, this village was once the heart of Westtown Township.

## Historical Commission Vacancies

### Do you have a passion for local history?

Then consider giving back to your community and making new connections by volunteering for the Historical Commission! The Historical Commission meets the second Tuesday of each month at 7:00 pm at the Township building. To apply for the Historical Commission please send a brief resume or statement of interest to [historical@westtown.org](mailto:historical@westtown.org). Applicants for any Township commission must be current in all municipal obligations.