

## The Pioneering Horticulturist Marshall Pinckney Wilder

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### Abstract

Marshal Pinckney Wilder was an outstanding horticulturist who was a founding member of the American Pomological Society. He served as president from its founding in 1848 through 1885. He was born in 1798 and died in 1886. He was a leader in his community and his state of residence, Massachusetts. His love of horticulture was extensive, as he tested and conducted breeding on several ornamental species. However, his greatest love was fruits, particularly pears. He was honored by the Society with the establishment of the Wilder Medal in 1873, its highest honor.

Marshall Pinckney Wilder is best known to pomologists as a founding member of the American Pomological Society (APS). He was the first APS president, being selected for this position when the Society was founded in 1848. He served as president through 1885. He was a very enthusiastic horticulturist, and once stated "I think I can truly say that, from the day my sainted mother took me into the garden to help dress and to keep it, I have never seen the time when I did not love the cultivation of the soil." We have all gained from his skills as a horticulturist, pomologist and leader.

Marshall Pinckney Wilder was born in 1798 in Rindge, NH but lived the majority of his life in Dorchester, MA. He did not pursue higher education, but rather was interested in business and farming, joining his father's store and farm at age 21. He was involved with the dry goods firm Parker, Blanchard and Wilder until 1872. He had 14 children by three wives. Wilder died in Dorchester in 1886. He is not to be confused with his great nephew by the same name born in 1859, who was an actor, humorist and sketch artist.

Wilder always had a strong interest in local affairs, and was active in the State Militia of New Hampshire and in Boston's "Ancient and Honorable Artillery Co" where he was known as "Colonel" Wilder. Further, he was interested in state affairs also, serving as a member of the Massachusetts legislature both as a senator and representative. He was a 33<sup>rd</sup> degree Mason. He was a leader in many other organizations than APS, including:

- Founding member, New England Horticultural Society, 1829
- President, Massachusetts Horticultural Society, exhibiting at its annual meeting 1833-1886, president, 1840-1848
- President, Massachusetts Agricultural Club
- President, Norfolk Agricultural Society
- President, US Agricultural Society
- President, New England Historic Genealogical Society, 1868-1886

Although he did not receive formal college education, Wilder was a strong advocate for the establishment of an agricultural college in Massachusetts, and later was a trustee for 23 years of the Massachusetts Agricultural Col-

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lege (now the University of Massachusetts, Amherst). He addressed the first graduating class at the Massachusetts Agricultural College. He was also involved with the founding of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and supported it when it was agreed that the institution would provide instruction in pomology and horticulture.

He had broad interests as a horticulturist. He conducted camellia testing as well as breeding. He also had a substantial azalea trial. He also bred a California double poppy. His strongest horticultural interest was in fruits, however. He imported fruit trees from England, France, Belgium and Germany. The pear was his crop of highest interest. At one time, he had 404 pear cultivars under trial in his orchard. In his APS presidential address, he shared his passion for pears when he stated: "Give us pears! The most exquisite sorts, where we can grow them – by all means give us, pears! Pears for ourselves, for our families, for the millions who are about us, and who are to come after us."

He worked tirelessly to make APS a strong organization with a national scope. In his last APS presidential address in 1885, he highlighted the major achievements of the Society since its inception:

- "Brought in close communion of interest, and concert of action, the most experienced pomologists of our country"
- "Raised the standards of excellence by which fruits are judged", including rules on how shown and judged
- Catalogue of Fruits, published biennially, reporting from all states
- Giving of American Pomology "a high character as a science"

The Society further honored Wilder with the establishment of the Wilder Medal in 1873 at its 13<sup>th</sup> "session" or annual meeting held in Boston. The medal was designed by John J. Thomas. Wilder bequeathed \$5,000 in his will to fund the medals. This award in modern day is "conferred on individuals or

organizations which have rendered outstanding service to horticulture in the broad area of pomology". However, when the award was first founded, it had four classes of awards: 1) promising new fruits, 2) collections of fruits illustrating horticultural advantages, 3) seedling fruits which may have value as parents for improvements of traits through "judicious hybridizing", and 4) individuals who distinguish themselves by some area of work in horticulture. Due to these broad categories, 43 awards were given in 1873. And, they were awarded as silver or bronze. Over the years the numbers of awards decreased, although those that received the awards were exhibitors such as Wilder, L.H. Bailey Jr. of Michigan, T. V. Munson of Texas, and Luther Burbank of California. As exhibits and collections were reduced in emphasis, the number of awards was reduced, with usually only one award presented annually from 1941 onward. Further, Wilder Medals have been given to cultivars such as 'Campbell Early' grape and 'Golden Delicious' apple along with many others. Significant locations contributing to improvement of fruits have been awarded the Wilder Medal, including in 1926 the New York Agricultural Experiment Station, Geneva, and the New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station, New Brunswick.



