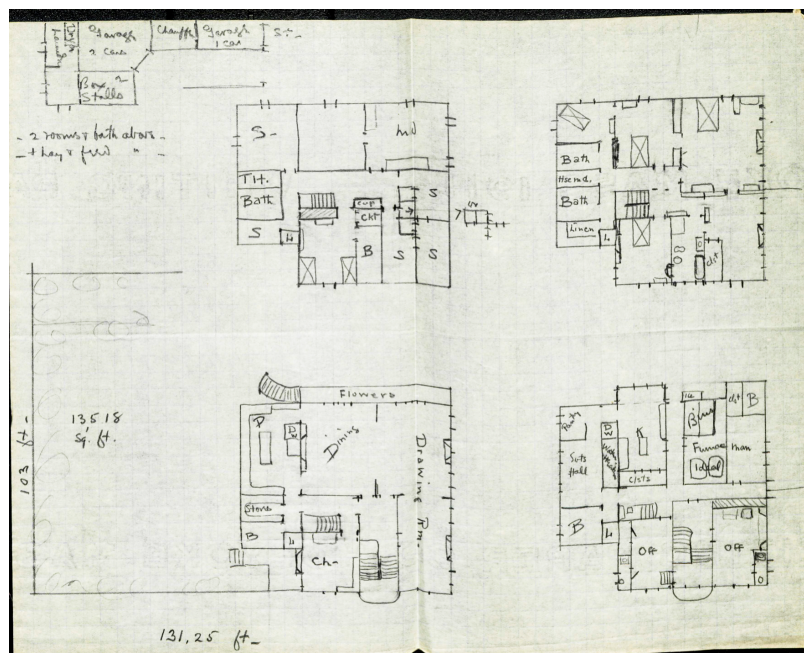


Virginia Murray Bacon's Life at 1801 F Street

Elizabeth Warner

Virginia Murray Bacon, the last private owner of DACOR Bacon House, led a fascinating and peripatetic life, full of adventure, travels around the world, meeting and hosting all sorts of famous people—but in honor of the 200th anniversary of the DACOR Bacon House, this article will focus on her relationship with 1801 F Street, where she lived for 57 years. This house was very special to her, and not just for its historical significance or the fact that it is two blocks from the White House, where she had dined and danced many times as a young girl at the turn of the 20th century.

Virginia Bacon didn't spend all her time in Washington, D.C.—she had an estate in Old Westbury, New York, and a dairy farm on an island along the St. Lawrence River, and she traveled widely, often for months at a time. But 1801 F Street was the place where she held her headliner salons, welcoming policymakers, European royalty and opera stars to her tables (where it was said she often assigned topics for discussion in advance). This was also the house where she did most of the fundraising and relief work that earned her medals from four countries, and where she provided a free daily lunch to nearby Government workers during World War II. And this was the home she endowed in her estate plans to ensure that it continue as a public space where diplomats and civic leaders could gather to discuss the important issues of the day.



Virginia Bacon created this drawing (on graph paper, to get the dimensions correct) of the 1801 F Street property when she was considering renting it in 1923 (Georgetown University archives, box 44 of 67)

Virginia and her husband Robert Low Bacon moved to the nation's capital in 1923 following Bob's election to Congress the year before. (It was not their first sojourn; in 1918 during his military service, Bob had been assigned to Washington as adjutant to Maj. Gen. William Snow and the Bacons had rented a townhouse on 18th Street north of N.) In the course of her search for an establishment that would be suitable for her household, which by now included three children, several horses and numerous dogs and servants, Virginia consulted with the current tenant, Ruth Hanna McCormick, whom she already knew as Sen. Medill McCormick's wife (Ruth would later become a member of Congress herself). Ruth recommended the house enthusiastically, and Virginia concluded in a letter to her mother that "the house was very old and [will] need small repairs more constantly than a newer house but that it's [sic] charm and atmosphere made it worthwhile".¹ At the time, the house was already 100 years old. After noting that Chief Justice John Marshall had been a resident there, Virginia went on to emphasize that this was the only house she really liked—other locations lacked garden space, sufficient light or enough rooms for staff. "I am having great fun arranging it & living in it in my mind, but I fear so much anticipation will bring bad luck," she added.

Luck was with them, and they moved into the house in November. The Bacons were happy to rent at first, but in early 1925 the owner, Alice Whitney (nee Alice Copley Thaw), announced an intention to sell. Virginia wanted to buy. She dutifully scouted other houses again but deemed them unsuitable. She wanted 1801 F Street. One of her reasons might have been that she was then using the Mews to stable two of her horses, which enabled her to saddle up and go for a ride in Rock Creek Park whenever she felt like it. She also liked the fact that you could see the Washington Monument from her front windows.



Two of Virginia Bacon's horses look out of their quarters inside the Mews into the garden, ca. 1924.

¹ Letter, Virginia Bacon to her mother, Georgetown University archives, box 33 of 67, group Z2.

The dividing walls marking their stalls are still intact. (Georgetown University archive, box 2 of 9)

Bob was hesitant and threw up various roadblocks—he would need a mortgage and was unhappy with the terms being offered, he wasn't certain if his mother would provide needed financial support—and while he dithered, Alice Whitney actually sold the house to a third party, a man named Edmund D. Rheem, who was planning to flip it to a developer. A few days after receiving this news, during which time some very tense conversations must have taken place within the marital home, Bob found financing he liked and the Bacons purchased the house for \$87,500, (nearly \$2 million today), which incidentally was \$10,000 more than Rheem had paid a few weeks earlier (Whitney had purchased the house in 1911 for \$52,000). Some additional complications ensued regarding who was at fault for the missteps as well as the commissions to be paid the various brokers involved, which led to a few letters of remonstrance and hints of seeking legal remedies, but it didn't matter: the house was now theirs.

One of the things the Bacons did as new owners was reconfigure the 4th floor to accommodate the half-dozen or so servants living on the premises and to create more rooms for guests. The ground floor of the house at the time contained the kitchen and additional rooms for staff such as a dining room and butler's office. Virginia developed the garden, consulting with experts, designing flower beds and laying paths. It also served as a riotous playground for children and animals alike and became considerably overgrown in later years. Throughout her long tenure, Virginia typically stayed in Washington from fall through early spring, vacationing for several months in the summer either abroad or at one of her northern homes.

The inside of 1801 F Street became filled with all manner of treasures the Bacons acquired from their various travels and given to them by friends and relatives—figurines, books, paintings and antiques from all over the world. Virginia's lifelong friend Dorothy Tuckerman Draper (the interior designer responsible for the Greenbrier Hotel among other commissions) once wrote to her: "The house is still so lovely – such distinction and background and as to your library upstairs there is no other room like it. I really would miss those piles of newspaper, baskets of odds and ends and all the 'delicious litter' of living."²

Bob Bacon died in 1938 of a sudden heart attack, and Virginia carried on through the world war that followed, devoting time to homeland defense and humanitarian relief efforts and continuing to open her home to guests and Government workers despite fuel rationing and other shortages. The experience of living through the fight against fascist and totalitarian regimes renewed her commitment to promoting diplomacy, dialogue and international understanding, which ultimately led her to donate her home in service of that cause and in memory of her husband.

In 1949, Virginia hired architect Louis A. Simon to design the New Orleans porch connecting the house and the Mews and overlooking the garden. When first constructed, the porch was open to the

² Letter, Dorothy Tucker to Virginia Bacon, March 26, 1956 Georgetown University archives, box 14 of 67.

outside. One of her guests rhapsodized “[it] is really perfect and lunching on the porch looking out on the trees just like Paris.”³ In 1958 Virginia procured the willow oak tree that now shades practically the entire garden. The tree was already over 30 feet tall and weighed 15 tons when it was transported from Silver Spring, Maryland, and installed in its new home. The effort required various permits, closing off streets and three cranes to hoist a tree with a rootball the size of an SUV over the garden wall.



The willow oak, installed in 1958, shades the entire garden at 1801 F Street.
The New Orleans porch is visible background left. (Photo by Elizabeth Warner)

As the years went by and the “President’s neighborhood” in which she lived increasingly became less residential, Virginia took steps to protect her home and gardens against encroachment by what she once termed “vertical ice cube trays”. Her ownership of several adjacent lots and various easements gave her leverage over developers. Accordingly, she was able to stipulate that the office building to the north could not have any windows below the sixth floor on the side facing her home. Similarly, the building west of her property was designed with a stepped-back structure that prevents it from looming over the garden. When several of her prized magnolia trees succumbed to the disruption of being next to a construction zone, Virginia required the developer to replace them with same-sized fully-grown trees. (The developer also paid to repair damage sustained by Virginia’s signature Rolls Royce when some scaffolding fell on it.)

It was on the inside of the house where Mrs. Robert Low Bacon (as she always preferred to be addressed) held court for half a century of gatherings, which she meticulously documented and choreographed. The second-floor drawing rooms and dining room, where she did most of her entertaining, are the rooms that have been the least altered during the life of the house. Mrs. Bacon could host upwards of 150 people at a time when she chose to do so.

³ Letter, Alix Toland to Virginia Bacon, June 14, 1955, Georgetown University archives box 21 of 67.

Writing in 1979, a year before VB's death, Washington Post writer Henry Mitchell described the scene at a party of hers he attended—

Inside Bacon House the chandeliers still burned with candles, and the oak in the fireplace still burned 24 hours a day all winter, and Mrs. Bacon herself was in full regalia with her wit at full steam and all systems GO, from the basins of macadamia nuts to the ultimate ambience of the place. . . .

The hostess was standing—she uses a stick to support herself and reduce wear and tear on the legs—because she likes to stand when she receives guests. She is not even 90, and people might think it rude if she sat while they stood. . .

The candles—listen, Mrs. Bacon is a pyromaniac—have smudged the high walls of her drawing room. Her style is not to worry about candle smoke. Like [Thomas] Jefferson, who chopped [a] hole in the floor for the convenience of his clock.

In a letter to her mother in 1928, writing about some of her renovation plans, Virginia asserted that she had no plans to sell 1801 F Street, adding “I hope to be able to live there until my dying day.”⁴ She essentially got her wish, a final trip to the hospital coming only a couple of days before she died on February 24, 1980. She left knowing that her beloved home would be in capable hands, as she had known DACOR and its predecessor organization called “The Family” dating back to the 1920s, when she and the Congressman made Washington their new home.

[Adapted from remarks given at the DACOR Bacon House tea event held on September 4, 2025, celebrating the 135th birthday of Virginia Murray Bacon.]

⁴ Undated letter Virginia Bacon to her mother, Georgetown University archives, box 33 of 67, group C.