

The Garden at 1801 F Street Through Time

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When the house was first built (1825), there were at least two appendages, a carriage house, constructed along the 18th Street side of the plot, and another structure whose use is not precisely known. In the area between the house and the carriage house was most probably the property **well**, from which enslaved domestic workers drew water for daily usage for household members. The well remained in use until 1871, when the house was hooked up to the new sewer lines.



Recreation by Beyer Blinder Belle of how the original house may have looked in 1825. Note the wall on the left, and now how the house foundation is level with the street. In 1871, the streets were lowered seven-eight feet, leaving the house “standing in the air.”

A **wall** may well have been erected in 1825, defining the boundaries of the property, but for sure it was reinforced or rebuilt in a later period by the Carrolls who moved into the house in 1835. Some idea of what the wall – which enclosed the garden – might have looked like can be seen in early photographs of the house directly across F Street owned by the Randall family and shown in this early photograph. Daniel Carroll’s famous estate “Duddington” in southwest Washington also had a “high brick wall capped by free stone [which] concealed the grounds from public view.” (This comes from *Recollections of Old Alexandria and Other Memories* by Mary Louisa Slacum Benham, published in 1978.) The “Duddington” Carrolls made an attempt to border the carriage driveway with fragrant flowers, and Sally and William may have done the same at their house on the corner of F and 18th.



The home of the Randalls on the southeast corner of F and 18th Streets (mistakenly identified in this photo as the home of Attorney General William Wirt who in fact lived on G Street).
Note the high wall of the garden.

There are no descriptions of the garden during the period of the Ringgold family's time in the house (1825-1834). During the Carrolls' long stay (1835-1895), references to the house and garden became more frequent. On April 11, 1865, when Washington heard news of Lee's surrender at Appomattox, federal buildings in downtown Washington and some private homes were festooned and lit with lights. The *Evening Star* reported on April 12, 1865 (with an oblique reference to flowers):

The private residence of Mrs. Carroll (mother of General Carroll and mother-in-law of General Griffin, of the 5th corps), on F Street near 18th, was brilliantly illuminated, and generally admired for the tasteful manner in which it was decorated. The 5th corps badge and **floral baskets were suspended from the windows, while the outside of the house was festooned with large flags and evergreens.** A transparency, which was encircled with evergreens, occupied a prominent position on the portico, and bore the inscription "Griffin."

Another early reference is found in reports of the sad demise of the father of one of Sally Carroll's long-time servants, Jimmy Jackson, who, when visiting his son in the house in 1870, went out to **the well in the backyard** to get some water and suffered a heart attack (*Evening Star*, September 3, 1870)

When the street was lowered in the early 1870s, Sally Carroll was obliged to build a retaining wall around the whole of the property and to install a new staircase from the new lower street level to the entrance of the house. It may also have been at this time that she raised the roof of the house by adding a fourth story, replacing the dormer windows that were once there, and had decorative iron cast lamps and window grates installed. Beyer Blinder Belle, which published a Historic Structure Report on the house in 2021, also state that it was at the time these changes were made that the wall around the garden was reinforced.

In the early 1880s, as her daughters married and moved out of the house, Sally Carroll sought to rent rooms in the house to supplement her income. She advertised in the newspapers (*Evening Star*, May 18, 1883), indicating at this time that the garden was planted with trees that provided comforting shade:

“Furnished rooms for rent.... The house is one of the coolest and most pleasantly situated, being exposed on all sides and **having large and well-shaded grounds.**”

A more specific reference to the garden comes in 1886 when Sally Carroll had rented out the house for the winter season to the wealthy and well-connected Pell family of New York. They threw a farewell party at the house before leaving in May, which a local newspaper reported (*The National Republican*, May 1, 1886):

“The fine old place was like a bride adorned with her wedding finery. Everywhere, at open casements and **over the garden wall, hung great clusters of wisteria**, perfuming all the neighborhood.”

Thus, we know that the garden walls were covered with wisteria.

No sooner did Sally Carroll move back into the house than it was reported that she would throw a “**garden party**” in honor of friends of hers from Boston, Robert Winthrop, once Speaker of the House (1838-40). Reports of this party noted (*Evening Star*, May 11, 1886):

The spacious rooms were thrown open to the guests, and the large balconies were enclosed with crimson draperies, thus extending the refreshment room. **A winding staircase led into the beautiful rose garden with its gravel walks and inviting rustic seats.**

Clearly, Sally must have employed a gardener at some stage to plant the roses, lay out the gravel paths, and install the rustic seats. In the 1870s, this might have been John Finn, who had previously worked as a gardener for her son, Gen. Carroll, in the Takoma, Maryland area before he came to the city to work for Mrs. Carroll. She must have enjoyed being in the garden since she had taken trouble to install a winding staircase from the reception rooms on the second floor to the garden level.

Molly Fuller, the wife of Chief Justice Melville Fuller and the next owner of the property (1896-1910) may have focused attention on the garden and spent some time there, planting flowers and shrubs. The Fullers had had a garden in Chicago before moving to Washington in 1888, and **Molly maintained a garden in their summer home in Sorrento, Maine, where she planted geraniums** (*Evening Star*, March 4, 1899). Molly's ideas for a garden might be seen in this scratchy photograph in the collection of the Chicago Historical Society. However, her demanding social schedule in Washington and her frequent trips to visit children in far-flung places did not allow her much time to garden.



A grainy photograph of the Fuller's garden in Chicago before they moved to Washington, DC in 1888.

She replaced the winding staircase that Sally had installed with another sturdier staircase leading from the second floor of the house to the garden. In a letter found in Melville Fuller's correspondence in the Library of Congress, the chief justice wrote his wife in 1897 that the "first thing" she should do when she returned to the house (she was away traveling) was "to **put the garden in order**"(Box 1, Family Correspondence, Mary Ellen Fuller Correspondence, March 22, 1897). As far as is known, the Fullers did not employ a gardener, though Molly may have needed help from time to time.



An early photograph of the house, ca. 1900 when the Fullers occupied it, shows the embankment around the house lacked any vegetation or flowers. The high wall of the garden can be seen on the left.

Alice Copley Thaw, an heiress from Pittsburgh, lately divorced from her husband the Earl of Yarmouth, purchased the house in 1911 and set about modernizing the interior to her liking, hiring the architect Henri de Sibour. As de Sibour was working on the house, the newspapers reported that the ex-Countess of Yarmouth was interested in gardens. The *Washington Herald* noted (September 11, 1911):

[The house] has a beautiful Garden on the side, and it is said **Miss Thaw is planning to raise rare plants and make it one of the most noted Gardens in Washington.**

Significant architectural changes were made to the carriage house and to the garden dependencies, but of changes to the garden itself, nothing is known – despite Alice's purported interests. She lived in the house for only a few months (1913) before she decided to remarry and moved to Massachusetts. She and her new husband, Geoffrey Whitney, purchased a property near Woods Hole, where they became avid gardeners. He was known for his cultivation of roses, some of which he developed for the company of Jackson and Perkins. She specialized in planting

exotic and unknown plants in their garden there. In an article about the garden (*Spiritsail*, 2005, p. 13).

She imported many plantings for an English-style walked flower garden. There were also English hollies imported by the local horticulturalist Winifred Wheeler. There were several Cedars of Lebanon now giant specimens..., a grapevine grown from a slip brought from the Cape Verde Islands, and perennials from Mrs. Whitney's grandfather's house in southern Ohio.

She might have developed the garden in similar ways in Washington if she had stayed longer.

Thus, the garden as we know it now, is the modified creation of the last owner of the house, Virginia Murray Bacon, who with her husband purchased the property in 1925 from Alice Copley Thaw Whitney. She was fond of the garden and held fund-raising tea parties in “**the lovely old garden,**” for instance, in 1952, to aid St John's Orphanage. In 1958, she had a **35-foot oak tree planted in the garden**, requiring F Street to be blocked off while the tree was hoisted from a truck over the garden wall to its site in the garden. She, like Chief Justice Fuller, kept dogs, in her case Scottish terriers, which had free rein in the garden while Mrs. Bacon was at home there.

It was Mrs. Bacon who also had the breezeway connecting the garage and outhouses to the main house via a New Orleans-style iron work exterior in 1949.