

Sallie Sprigg Carroll, DACOR Bacon House First Grande Dame

Introduction

“For sixty years [she] has been well known and loved by all who knew her. Her pure and Christian character was manifested by every act of her life.” – *Evening Star*, February 12, 1895, noting the passing of Mrs. Sally Carroll.

Sarah Sprigg Carroll was the first *grande dame* of DACOR Bacon House and left a lasting imprint on the history of the house. She established the former Ringgold House as a center of Washington society, beginning in the 1830s. It was in the house that she gave birth to three of her four daughters and three of her five sons, married off all four of her daughters, held funerals for her husband and three of their sons, bought, sold, hired, and managed a staff of a near dozen enslaved and later free servants, and entertained the Washington elite, including presidents, congressmen and supreme court justices. By the 1880s, her home on F Street, in the words of a newspaper columnist, “for over forty years has been famous as the scene of generous hospitality.”¹ In tribute to Sallie’s background, grace and fortitude, Marian



The only known portrait of Sallie (Sally) Sprigg Carroll, painted by an unknown artist.
Courtesy Maine Historical Society, John Marshall Brown Papers.

Gouverneur mentioned in her memoir of old Washington society, that even almost to the time of her death, “she remained standing while receiving her guests.”²

Sallie Carroll’s history, which I attempt to pull together in this four-part biography, is in fact a social history of the DACOR Bacon House, then called the Carroll house or Carroll mansion, between the years 1835 and 1895. It serves, too, as a microcosm of Washington City’s past. During this sixty-year period, the nation passed through a historic cataclysm and enormous changes engendered by a monstrous civil war and by the forces of modern technology that changed the way people lived and interacted. Sallie, perhaps initially with the assistance of her husband William Thomas Carroll, was moreover responsible for many structural changes to the house. They began with the creation of a “piazzza” overlooking the garden on the west side of the house, and then, after the death of her husband, the addition of a third floor, a balcony on the north side of the building, and a new entrance stairwell after the street had been lowered by seven feet. Her copious and generous entertaining – as Mrs. Gouverneur remarked “she is never happier when having people in” – gave an aura to the house that remained throughout its two-hundred-year history. When speaking of teas, parties and dances held in the house, society columnists in the local newspapers often mentioned how “beautiful” or “charming” the house looked, and they appreciated how generous the owners of the house had been over the decades to members of Washington’s social world.

At this point, the writing of the history of the William T. Carroll family is without the benefit of personal diaries or household ledgers. However, a treasure-trove of letters relating to members of the family, dating from the early 1800s to the period just after the turn of the twentieth century, were found in the Maine Historical Society Research Library, and they have added immensely to an understanding of the family’s internal history, particularly in the period after William’s death in 1863.³ A few personal relics from the family’s sixty years residence in the house remain, some of which are now found in museums in the East Coast.⁴ The absence of vital documentation such as account books, limits our ability to obtain a full portrait of how the house was managed. There is little documentation on the many enslaved and free laborers who lived and worked in the house for much of their lifetimes. However, with the documentation found in Maine and the help of federal censuses, tax records stored in the National Archives, property deeds in the District of Columbia Archives, the testimony of compensated emancipated

petitions filed in 1862, and the recollections of others, we can construct a reasonably full picture. Moreover, a few personal letters have survived in other people's or institutional archives, while an extraordinary amount of information about members of the family can be found in newspaper columns.

The reason the Carrolls received such attention is open for discussion. Part had to do with the family's "old" standing within Washington society of the time, part to the prominence of William Carroll's position in the Supreme Court, and part to the important people that they attracted to the house. They may also have encouraged reporters to keep track of them, especially their summer plans when they left the city, important parties they planned, perhaps even providing the names of the guests who attended. As government grew, especially during the Civil War years, newspapers multiplied. Local "society" became itself the subject of daily columns. The social activities of the Carroll family members, with its Civil War military connections, four engaging daughters, but especially the central and venerable figure of Mrs. Carroll, the Carrolls became fodder in those columns. As their stature grew over the years, so did the house's fame. It became, as the *Evening Star* wrote in 1879, "as well known to the old residents of the city as the White House itself."⁵

¹ *Philadelphia Times*, as reprinted in the Charles Town, WV *Virginia Free Press*, October 15, 1885, p. 4.

² Marian Campbell Gouverneur, *As I Remember: Recollections of American Society During the Nineteenth Century* (New York: D. Appleton, 1911), 214-15. She may often have been a guest, but she is listed as attending a tea in 1886 with at least two of her daughters: *Sunday Herald and Weekly National Intelligencer* May 16, 1886, p. 2.

³ The family papers of the John Marshall Brown and Alida Carroll Brown (the youngest Carroll daughter) in Portland, Maine, are archived but not fully cataloged in the Maine Historical Society. I am grateful for the help extended to me during a research trip in 2024 to the library, particularly to Katie Alleman in the Research Library and Sofia Yalouris in Digital Services. Jamie Kingman Rice, deputy director of the society, helped facilitate my access to the research library, for which I'm most grateful. It is through her own research on the Brown family that she unearthed the only known portrait of Sallie Carroll, above.

⁴ Family portraits that probably hung in the house during Sallie's era are now found in the collections of the Washington County Fine Arts Museum, Hagerstown, Maryland; the Maryland Center for History and Culture, Baltimore; and at High Museum of Art, Atlanta.

⁵ "Washington Society" column, *Evening Star*, January 29, 1879, p. 2.