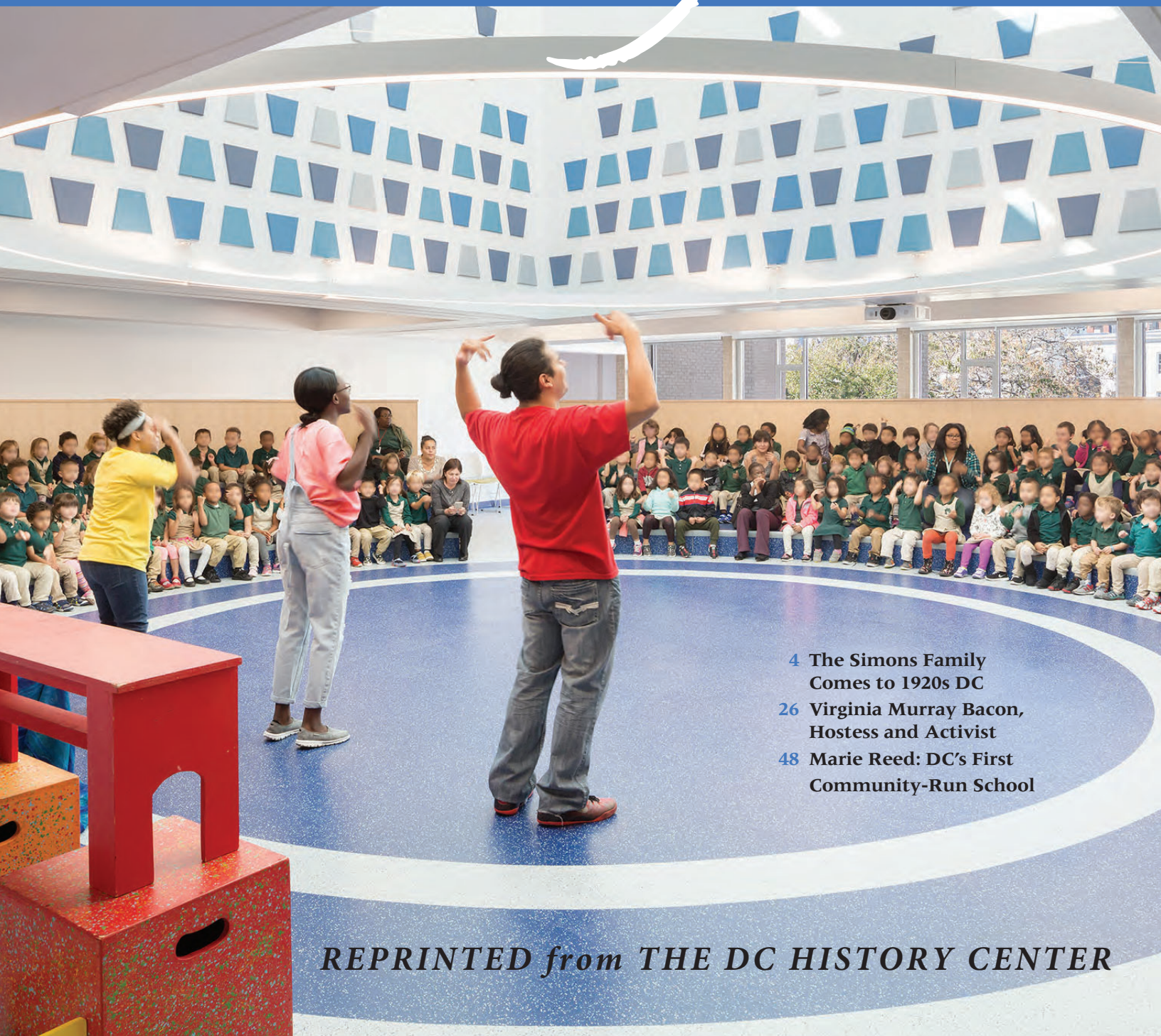


# Washington

MAGAZINE OF THE DC HISTORY CENTER  
SPRING 2025 • VOLUME 37 • NUMBER 1

## HISTORY



- 4 The Simons Family Comes to 1920s DC
- 26 Virginia Murray Bacon, Hostess and Activist
- 48 Marie Reed: DC's First Community-Run School

REPRINTED from THE DC HISTORY CENTER





FRIENDLY BUILDING  
HARDWARE MATERIAL

SALE FRIENDLY SALE  
LAMPS STORE RUGS

GLASS HARDWARE-PAINTS

SELLING  
50% DISCOUNT


SALE  
FURNITURE'S  
ASS  
AND  
W SHADES

PRINTING  
OFFSET

URGERS  
Coca-Cola

DRUGS





# Washington

MAGAZINE OF THE DC HISTORY CENTER

**HISTORY**

SPRING 2025 • VOLUME 37 • NUMBER 1

**From the Executive Director 3**

**From the Editor 3**

**In Search of a Better Life 4**

*How the Simons Family Came to DC, 1917-1928*

DAVID NICHOLSON

**Virginia Murray Bacon and the Art of the Washington Salon 24**

ELIZABETH WARNER

**The Architecture of Anti-Racism 44**

*The Struggle for a New School in Adams Morgan*

ESA SYEED

**On the Shelf 20**

**Best of the Web 23, 41, 64**

**Person of Interest 42**

**Milestones 60**

**Reviews 65**

**Supporters and Members 70**

*Cover:* The Town Hall gathering space at Marie Reed Elementary School hosts students soon after the innovative open-plan school and community center's 2017 renovation. The school embodies the values of its predecessor Morgan Community School, the city's first community-controlled public school, and the legacy of the tenacious local leaders and residents who secured the facility to educate their children and serve the surrounding neighborhood. Esa Syeed's story of the school's origins, "The Architecture of Anti-Racism," begins on page 44. *Photograph by Joseph Romeo, courtesy, Quinn Evans*

*Opposite:* On a warm September day in 1958, a young girl strolls along the 900 block of Fourth St. SW shortly before the buildings would be razed for urban renewal. Artist Garnet W. Jex combed Southwest with his camera in the weeks before its destruction, creating a survey that is now a major DC History Center collection. *DC History Center*

Thursday night - which will be our last this year.  
Friday the Hu Leans gave them a huge



very nice dinner of Mrs. Townsend's last night.  
We have had a very cold and rainy spring



## Virginia Murray Bacon

### *And the Art of the Washington Salon*

BY ELIZABETH WARNER

In December of 1932, Virginia Murray Bacon, wife of Representative Robert Low Bacon (R-NY), organized a late evening supper at her stately Federal period home at 1801 F Street NW, two blocks from the White House. Among the invited guests were General Douglas MacArthur, Army Chief of Staff, and Major George S. Patton, Jr., together with their wives. MacArthur already had a reputation for flamboyance and attention-seeking, though he had some years to go before his peak, when he defied U.S. policy during the Korean War. Patton, however, was at a more obscure point in his career. Perhaps Rep. Bacon and Patton had met at the Metropolitan Club or had crossed paths elsewhere in town; regardless, Virginia was not in the habit of inviting casual acquaintances to one of her dinner parties without a more compelling motive.

To understand why Patton and MacArthur were on her radar that December, one has to look back five months to July and to a different army. The “Bonus Army” was a large group of World War I veterans who had marched to Washington

to demand that Congress immediately pay them a bonus for military service that the federal government had promised to pay in 1945, 13 years in the future. It was the depths of the Great Depression, and Herbert Hoover was president. As Hoover threatened to veto any early payment (which Rep. Bacon had also voted against), the number of petitioners grew to nearly 20,000. Alarmed, Hoover dispatched MacArthur to close down the Bonus Army camps along the Mall and the Anacostia River and chase the participants out of the city. With the assistance of Patton and his cavalry regiment, MacArthur completed his mission, but not without violence. At least one person died in the melee. A little over three months later, Hoover lost his bid for re-election against Franklin Delano Roosevelt.<sup>1</sup>

The Bacons were staunch Republicans, and they were key players in the network of salons and social events that lubricated Washington politics. Virginia was meticulous in planning her get-togethers, and she valued good conversation above all else. That December, she would have

Republican activist, international humanitarian, preservationist, and Washington socialite Virginia Bacon greets Finnish President Uhro Kekkonen in 1961. The medals pinned to her dress are awards from Great Britain, France, Italy, and Finland for her relief work during World War II. Bacon's more than 50-year tenure as a leading hostess and political influencer opened at a time when women's roles were defined through their husbands' positions and closed in an era when women achieved those positions on their own.  
*Courtesy DACOR Bacon House Foundation*





John Murray of Scotland, the 4th Earl of Dunmore and Virginia's great-great-grandfather. The Murrays left colonial America in 1775 to remain loyal to the British Crown. Their great-grandson Henry moved back across the Atlantic a century later. *Oil painting by Winifred Gordon after an original by John Russell; photograph by Brett Allison Gold, courtesy, DACOR Bacon House Foundation*

carefully chosen to invite plenty of people ready to analyze why Hoover had lost the election and the extent to which the order to rout the Bonus Army by force might have contributed. (It's entirely possible that the prospect of having to weigh in on this post-mortem persuaded the two military men to decline her invitation that evening.)<sup>2</sup>

The Bacons' F Street home still stands, and throughout its 200-year history has been a prominent setting for political and social Washington, where Virginia Bacon reigned for more than 50 years, from 1923 to 1980. Her tenure as A-list Washington hostess is part of a tradition, dating back to Dolley Madison, of women who excelled at "supplying the machinery of politics that makes government work," according to historian Catherine Allgor. Along with Mildred Bliss's Georgetown estate Dumbarton Oaks and Marie Beale's Decatur

House on Lafayette Square, Virginia Bacon's 1801 F Street was a home where it was said you were well advised to pay your respects before visiting the White House when you first came to town. A welcome by these three women (known as the "Three Bs") was a sure way to ease access to the highest levels of social and political power. Bacon's guests included ambassadors, cabinet members, politicians, European royalty, opera divas, movie stars, artists, and musicians. Conversation was her medium of exchange.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to her social role, Bacon was a tireless political activist, not only on partisan issues but also promoting historic preservation and international diplomacy, among other causes. She traveled the world, to Afghanistan, Cambodia, and Ethiopia, among other distant destinations, on missions that ranged from antique shopping to regime assessment. She also had an insatiable curiosity about everything from how electricity is generated to the genealogy of dogs to the proper technique for throwing a major league spitball ("ball must be dry & saliva on 1 spot").<sup>4</sup>

Bacon left behind more than 200 linear feet of personal papers documenting her public and private life. In addition to household records, appointment books, newspaper clippings, and files on topics that caught her interest, the boxes, most of which are held in the collections of Georgetown University, contain records of practically every event she hosted, along with invitations received and thank-you letters from hundreds of admirers. These records provide an extraordinary window into a bygone era when hats and gloves were required and an elaborate etiquette existed for introductions and the use of calling cards. Her tenure began when ladies still announced the afternoons they would be "at home" to receive guests, and formal events often didn't get underway until 10 pm and, if dancing were involved, could last all night. It began when women wielded political power through their husbands' positions and extended well into the era when women achieved those positions on their own.<sup>5</sup>

Virginia Murray Bacon was a woman who knew how to make the most of her circumstances, and she had a considerable amount to work with, born to two prominent families with colonial American roots. Her great-great-grandfather John Murray of Scotland, the 4th Earl of Dunmore, was royal governor of New York and then Virginia in the 1770s, prompting every generation of the family since to name a



President Theodore Roosevelt jumps a fence at Chevy Chase Club (MD) in 1902. On New Year's Day, 1908, Virginia Murray accompanied the president and his daughter Ethel on a ride through the DC countryside. *Courtesy, Library of Congress*

child Virginia. In 1775 Murray was forced to flee the New World as a result of his sympathies toward the Crown, and the family remained loyal British subjects for the next century until the teenaged Henry Alexander Murray (Virginia's father) traveled to Canada in the 1870s to seek his fortune. On Virginia's mother's side, the Babcocks were Revolutionary War patriots who prospered in New England banking and finance. In the 1880s, after a short period in Toronto, Henry Murray settled in New York City, where he worked at the Guaranty Trust Company and won the heart of the much wealthier Fannie Morris Babcock.<sup>6</sup>

Their daughter Virginia, born September 6, 1890, and the first Murray born on American soil since the earl's departure, grew up in New York City and Long Island. Hers was a life of considerable privilege: houses with servants and summer trips to Europe with her family. Although she never went to college—that was for her brothers—she received a classical education that included history, geography, music, mathematics, French, and diction. She was familiar with Washington as well. One of her classmates at the tony Miss Davidge's school in New York City was Ethel, youngest daughter of President Theodore Roosevelt. Virginia would take the train from New York to visit her friend at the White House. A diary she kept at age 17 records how she spent New Year's Day 1908 after a night of dancing: "In the afternoon the President led a cross-country ride, there were about twenty of us, and we jumped and went

through the wildest country." Recounting the experience many years later, she added that anyone unfortunate enough to fall into an icy creek simply had to climb back aboard and carry on: "You didn't *stop* when you were riding with Teddy Roosevelt."<sup>7</sup>

An intriguing photograph from 1911 shows Virginia dressed in a white gown with above-the-elbow gloves, train looped over her arm, veil, and ostrich plumes in her hair—a debutante ready to be presented to King George V and Queen Mary at Holyrood Palace in Edinburgh. Her status as a descendant of a Scottish peer undoubtedly facilitated this honor, which involved waiting for hours with other court-dressed young ladies to file past the throne and curtsy. A letter she wrote to her mother about the big day includes her reply to a Scotswoman who suggested

the king would be tired from having to greet so many people: "I said it was nothing compared to the American President who had to shake hands with as many people and more." Even at the age



Virginia Murray, photographed for her presentation to England's King George V and Queen Mary, 1911. *Courtesy, Booth Family Center for Special Collections, Georgetown University*

Virginia Murray Bacon, age 22, in her wedding gown. In 1913 she married Robert Low Bacon of New York in a lavish wedding at St. George's Chapel, Stuyvesant Sq., New York City, and embarked on a lifetime of patriotic works. *Courtesy, DACOR Bacon House Archive*



of 20, she would have been in a position to know.<sup>8</sup>

At this time, a woman of Virginia's social class was expected to make a suitable match and produce healthy children to ensure the continuation of her husband's dynasty. Robert Low Bacon, a handsome Harvard Law School graduate six years her senior, was her choice. They married in a lavish society wedding when she was 22. Judging by the hundreds of intimate and affectionate letters Virginia and Robert (she called him "Bob") exchanged over the years, they were soulmates almost from the moment he first asked her out for an automobile ride in the fall of 1912. Their early letters are peppered with declarations of "constant longing," but also hint at the political power alliance the Bacons were already fashioning for themselves: "Oh Virginia my dearest I need your help," Bob wrote to her from Zurich in 1913 shortly before their wedding. "We must do things together that are worth while—we must accom-

plish something out of ourselves—and I know we can. Two heads are better than one."

Bob came from equally patrician stock, and their families' Long Island estates were in adjacent neighborhoods. His ancestors were shipbuilders and bankers from Boston with a strong sense of independence and adventure. (In 1818 Bob's great-grandfather Daniel Carpenter Bacon sailed a two-masted brig from Boston to Indonesia and back, one of many such trading voyages.) The Bacons also professed patriotic duty. Bob's father Robert Bacon served as ambassador to France during the William Howard Taft administration, as well as undersecretary (and briefly secretary) of state under Theodore Roosevelt. The senior Bacon was also a partner at JP Morgan, and after law school Bob went into investment banking as well, working for Kissel Kinnicutt.<sup>9</sup>

In April 1913, the couple honeymooned in Europe and then returned to New York. When



World War I broke out, Bob served in the Army as a major in the field artillery but was not sent overseas. Virginia accompanied him on some of his postings, including to Georgia and Washington, DC. After the armistice, they settled down on the Bacon family estate in Old Westbury, New York, in a house designed for them by John Russell Pope, architect of the Jefferson Memorial. Three daughters were born to them during this time.<sup>10</sup>

The Bacons naturally took a keen interest in politics. Bob had his father's example of public service, and even before they married, he told Virginia that he wanted to run for office. Though he cast himself in the virtuous tradition of public service, Bob held no illusions about the game of politics. In a letter to his father in 1918 while still an Army major in Washington, he wrote: "My experience in this war has been surrounded by inefficiency, petty jealousies, petty politics and everything that is mean—those are the things that we have to fight here in Washington."<sup>11</sup>

For her part, Bacon relished partisan debate, for which she had been well prepared at Miss Davidge's. "In order to receive our mark," she recalled in a 1971 interview, "we had to successfully debate both sides of any question and do it convincingly. I often think if President Nixon had had that training he could have won his famous debate with John Kennedy." In a letter to her mother in late 1917, when she was 27, she wrote, "I had a nice letter from Lee and am writing her to get some inside dope on Mitchel's campaign which I hear is hopeless. It will be a German triumph if he is defeated and the greatest argument against democracy if he is not reelected after his uniquely disinterested & honest reign." (This is likely a reference to Mayor John Purroy Mitchel of New York, who won on a progressive reform campaign in 1913 but was perceived as elitist and voted out of office four years later.) A letter to her father in December 1918 announced that she would devote much of her attention in 1919 to the newly formed National Republican Women's Committee headed by Ruth Hannah McCormick, a suffragist and later member of Congress (who would lease the same house in Washington that the Bacons later purchased). Virginia was just getting started.<sup>12</sup>

The Bacons came to Washington in early 1923 after Bob won a seat in the House of Representatives representing New York's First District (then all of Long Island's Nassau and Suffolk Counties and a small part of Queens).

They moved into 1801 F Street NW, at first renting it. The handsome red-brick building was built in 1825 for Tench Ringgold, U.S. marshal for the District of Columbia. (It was expanded by subsequent owners, including the Bacons.) The classic Federal style house is four stories tall on a triple lot with a walled garden and a connecting building that originally served as a stable and carriage house. Servants' quarters were on the ground and fourth floors of the house and above the stable (the Bacons employed up to eight servants at any given time). Chief Justice John Marshall and several associate justices including Joseph Story boarded there in the 1830s. Its other 19th-century owners included Chief Justice Melville Fuller and the longest-serving clerk of the Supreme Court, William Carroll. It was even home to a Russian imperial minister for a time.<sup>13</sup>

In early 1925 the house came up for sale.

Bacon fell in love with this grand four-story house at 1801 F St. NW, photographed about 1910, and lobbied her husband to purchase it. She famously entertained there until her death in 1980. *DC History Center*





In May 1924, Bacon took her three daughters, Martha, Alexandra, and Ivy, to pay a call on President Coolidge at the White House. *Courtesy, Library of Congress*

Although Virginia wanted to buy it, Bob disagreed. She dutifully looked for other rental accommodations but complained to her mother that her husband wanted another rental because his mother would cover that cost. Virginia dismissed several other houses whose deficits included no garden, insufficient servants' quarters, dark, too expensive. She wanted 1801 F Street. She could see the Washington Monument from the front windows in those days. She treasured the garden, kept horses in the carriage house, and liked being two blocks from the White House.<sup>14</sup>

Bob's reluctance almost cost them the house. A speculator purchased it on March 3 and demanded \$87,500 (nearly \$1.6 million today), which was \$10,000 more than they would have paid had they acted a few weeks earlier. After what must

have been a frantic three days, Bob agreed to the higher price. The house was now theirs.<sup>15</sup>

Homesteading drama aside, life in Washington suited Virginia tremendously. Live-in servants took care of cooking and cleaning and tended to the children, all of which left her free to take an intense interest in her husband's dealings in Congress. She attended hearings and regularly wrote to his colleagues to request information. She kept extensive notes on New Deal legislation such as social security, labor policies, and farm subsidies. She took courses in art history and opera and began hosting dinner parties to bring together the people who interested her. There was time for theater, bridge, foxhunting, and "motoring" in the countryside. Bob went salmon fishing and yachting, while Virginia shuttled their three daughters



ters between 1801 F Street and other residences. And there was always Europe, where Virginia had gone nearly every year as a child.

Rep. Bacon went about his job with great dedication and industry. He was gregarious and highly regarded in Congress, and the voters re-elected him seven times. He is best known now for the Davis-Bacon Act, adopted in 1931 and still in effect, which requires federal construction contractors to pay their laborers not less than the “prevailing wages” for the geographic location where the work is performed. He diligently corresponded with constituents, whether they were desperate to avoid foreclosure or complaining that the U.S. Navy was disturbing the fishing off Montauk Point. He was somewhat sympathetic to racial justice causes, introducing anti-lynching legislation on at least two occasions, and supporting similar bills introduced by others (none of which succeeded until 2022).<sup>16</sup>

In a March 1925 letter to her mother that triumphantly reported on her success in purchasing 1801 F Street, Virginia Bacon also demonstrated the intensity of her investment in the social and political scene after just two years in town. “Last Tuesday the Philharmonic was here,” she wrote. “I took 2 boxes and had with me Mrs. (Sen.) Reed, Mrs. Jo Grew, Lady Betty Fielding, the British Ambassador, Leland, Tottenham, & Balfour & Mrs. Garrett. I had Helen Alexander, Dr. & Mrs. Hunt stopping with me, as Bob went to N.Y. for a day to fix his tax, and I took the Hunts & Leland to Aunt Katie’s for dinner & thence to the Dutch Minister’s for a concert.” In the same letter she noted she hadn’t had an evening at home alone in a month and had finally reached her limit for going out. But she couldn’t resist the company of her friends at home. “Louie insisted on my playing bridge with her, [Hungarian First Minister] Lazlo Szechenyi, and Talleyrand [likely 5th duke of Talleyrand, France],” she reported. “I refused to go there, so they came to me and I took all their money from them.” (She also was good at poker.)<sup>17</sup>

Congressional wives in the early 20th century were expected to do all sorts of work for free, including pouring tea during the “at home” days of women higher up in the pecking order. The wife of a newly elected House member would be junior to all other House spouses, and no matter how long she had been in town would never outrank a senator’s wife. The wives of cabinet members and ambassadors ranked higher still. There were elaborate rules of etiquette for greeting, seating, and

corresponding with all the various layers of official Washington. But a sure way to rise in status was to become known for having an impressive mix of guests at your parties. Bacon was extremely competitive in practically everything she did, and she must have decided early on to make a run for the top ranks. “She presided over a dinner table that was disciplined and directed as well as fun,” Ambassador Lucius D. Battle recalled in a eulogy, “Topics did not arise, they were proposed by Mrs. Bacon and were pursued by experts in the field strategically placed around the table.” Bacon herself “kept a watchful eye to see that plates and glasses were full, all the while conversing, if need be, in French with the guest on her right and in Italian with the guest on her left.”<sup>18</sup>

By the time she gave the December 1932 supper that MacArthur and Patton declined to attend, Bacon was confident enough to invite 200 people following the White House Diplomatic Reception, one of the most important social events of the year. Her journals, normally replete with full names and positions, on this date had space enough for only a series of last names crammed together. Among those of note are Longworth (that would be Alice Roosevelt, oldest daughter of Theodore and widow of former House Speaker Nick Longworth), Stimson (likely Secretary of State Henry L.), Pershing (likely Gen. John J.),



Representative Robert Low Bacon and Virginia Murray Bacon, two influential Washingtonians, photographed in the early 1930s. *Courtesy, Booth Family Center for Special Collections, Georgetown University*



Bacon, following her talent for politics, was elected vice chair of the New York State Republican Committee. Here she meets with Chairman Melvin Eaton and Secretary Lafayette Gleason in 1936. *Courtesy, Library of Congress*

and Bingham (likely Sen. Hiram, the explorer who discovered Machu Picchu).<sup>19</sup>

Bacon's own political activities included organizing canvassing efforts and speaking events, maintaining voter records for the Republican Party, service on the Board of Governors of the Women's National Republican Club, chairing the Nassau County Federation of Republican Women, and vice chairing the New York State Republican Committee. In 1933 she wrote "Our Washington Letter," a monthly column published in *Woman Republican* magazine that covered goings-on in Congress and issues such as price controls and delivery of the mail, often in extremely wonky language. "So far the flight of American capital abroad has had a far greater influence on the depreciation of the dollar than has the purchase of gold," she wrote in December that year, denouncing President Roosevelt's monetary policy.<sup>20</sup>

Underpinning her success was what a 1935 profile in the *New York Times* described as her "amazing memory." Bacon, the article reported, read about 20 newspapers a day, along with magazines and other documents and reports, and she "clips and

pastes and files every scrap of political information that comes her way." She could recite the exact words of a speech heard years earlier. A prodigious memory was helpful to the hostess as well. She knew who to seat next to whom for maximum impact, and what personal notes and gifts were most appropriate.<sup>21</sup>

The *Times* article also recounted Bacon's accidental entry into public speaking, when she was tapped at the last minute to stand in for her husband at a town hall in Rockville Centre, Long Island. After that first experience, she said, she was never again nervous in front of a crowd. "It was like throwing off a coat and being free." Politics, she added, was not a war, but a game. "We are all one country; each political group is seeking the best exit out of the depression." Despite claims to across-the-aisle bonhomie, however, Bacon on the lec-

ture circuit was a loyal Republican foot soldier, routinely referring to President Roosevelt as a socialist or worse and lambasting the Democrats for graft taking place in New Deal programs. "If enough citizens don't see that this election is a life and death struggle for the survival of our form of Government, that it is a fight to the finish, and final test of our capacity for self-Government, then our Republic is doomed, and our people are condemned to a living death," she wrote in the lead-up to the 1940 election, urging voters to eject Roosevelt.<sup>22</sup>

Bob Bacon was undoubtedly the most enthusiastic beneficiary of his wife's political activity and encyclopedic knowledge. Her mother, however, was another matter. The two were very close and exchanged letters multiple times a week discussing the health of the Bacon children, the conduct of servants, the purchase of furnishings, and the discreet inter-generational financing of various expenditures. Her mother also took an intense interest in her daughter's social activities. But Fannie Morris Murray had no interest in politics. This greatly frustrated Virginia, who in 1924 accused her mother of wishing her a life of "household



drudgery" that "would completely kill my spirit and atrophy my soul," instead of "rejoicing with me that for the first time I am at last enjoying the very life to which I am best suited & sharing in my husband's career." Her work was important, she added, because "every bit of knowledge or influence that one can acquire or give here, when our whole government has reached such a low level, may make a difference to the whole country."<sup>23</sup>

By the mid-1930s Bacon was speaking across New York and along the East Coast to hundreds at a time. She was in her element and propelled by her own steam. In time her mother reluctantly came around, if not to celebrate her daughter's political appetites, at least to acknowledge reality. A letter written by Fannie Murray to Bacon's brother Cecil in July 1934 reported that another

acquaintance "told me that she thought Virginia's address which she gave at the Republican Club one of the ablest she had ever heard, & all think that it is she who has made Bob's career."<sup>24</sup>

Between April 1934 and the end of 1940, Virginia Bacon suffered a series of devastating losses: six family members, including both parents, her mother-in-law, one of her two siblings and, most tragically, her oldest daughter Alix, who was only 21 when she died of pneumonia in December 1935. This was also a time when the future of the entire planet was growing more uncertain. But it was the sudden death of her husband on September 12, 1938, that changed her life most profoundly. He collapsed in her arms of a heart attack while they were riding home after he



Political cartoonist and satirist Robert Osborn, Bacon's frequent guest, captured the hostess with her signature West Highland terriers at home with guests in May 1944. Courtesy, DACOR Bacon House Foundation



After his concert at DAR Constitution Hall in 1967, pianist Arthur Rubinstein and his wife Aniela enjoy the South Drawing Room of 1801 F St. amid treasures from Bacon's world travels. *Courtesy, Eddie Adams Photographic Archive, Briscoe Center, University of Texas at Austin*

had delivered a political speech in New York City. Unable to get to a hospital in time, Congressman Robert Low Bacon was pronounced dead at 54 at a police barracks in Lake Success on Long Island.<sup>25</sup>

Several of the hundreds of letters Bacon received after his death urged her to run for his seat, and some local newspapers declared that she would be the best person for the job, especially as Election Day was so close and there was little time to introduce another candidate. She was as well known as her husband and probably would have coasted to victory.<sup>26</sup>

It may seem surprising that she didn't take the opportunity, given her enthusiasm for everything Washington. She would have felt supremely at home in Congress; she already knew everybody.

And most women elected to Congress between 1920 and 1940 were widows or daughters of members who died in office. But Bacon was overcome with grief and likely could not bring herself to step into his empty shoes. It's possible as well that she decided she could be more effective in pursuing her multiple causes and interests if she were not bound to an oath of public office. A seat in Congress, for example, might have restrained her from such activities as a cruise she took along the Vistula in the summer of 1939, just before Hitler invaded Poland. In a speech to the Pennsylvania Council of Republican Women, Bacon described her visit to Danzig, already brimming with Nazis ("No one could call his soul his own"), and Leningrad ("men lying drunk on the pavement, the long queues of



half-clad, ill-shaped, starved-looking people and the famished way in which our guide gobbled her food. . . . If the Communists in this country could see conditions in Russia, they would . . . break all connections with Moscow.”)<sup>27</sup>

The blow of her husband’s death could not stop her, and neither could the all-consuming war, which changed her thinking about the world and the need for American participation in securing peace. Well before Pearl Harbor forced the United States into the conflict, she gave speeches warning against European fascism. “We must stop Nazi aggression before it reaches our shores,” she said in June 1941. “The time for decision and debate has gone by.” As the owner of property near the Atlantic coast, she took a months-long homeland defense course in fall 1941, learning to operate a radio and transmit Morse code. But she did not close 1801 F Street and retreat to the relative safety of her New York country estate for the duration. She stayed in Washington and, like others of her social class, opened up her home to military and government workers in the nearby War Department for free daily buffet lunches. She worked tirelessly to raise funds for European allies and humanitarian relief and was awarded honors from multiple countries for her efforts. And she continued to entertain on a near-weekly basis, perhaps taking her cue from numerous British friends on the importance of keeping one’s spirits up.<sup>28</sup>

As 1943 inched toward 1944, Allied confidence in ultimate victory began to grow, and

with it Bacon’s support for the new international order that was to come. She was too embedded in the fabric of power not to know about the plans taking shape among the Allies for the post-war environment. She and her husband had vigorously opposed Woodrow Wilson and the League of Nations in 1920 (she later told a *Washington Post* interviewer that they believed it required the United States to give up too much sovereignty). But they eventually supported the idea of an international peace-upholding body and, in a move reflecting a change of heart on international entanglements, in 1937 Bob was one of 13 House members to vote against the Neutrality Act designed to keep the nation out of the European war. Virginia became a co-chair of the United Nations Forum, a consortium of clubs and nonprofit organizations that sponsored presentations in Washington related to the postwar world order.<sup>29</sup>

After the war ended and Americans began to rebuild their civilian lives, Bacon redoubled her interest in foreign affairs. She resumed an ambitious schedule of international trips that averaged a month or more. She met several times with the then-29-year-old shah of Iran during a 1949 tour of Persian antiquities, and she wrote 20 pages of notes assessing his leadership skills and the state of the country. “Not so much as a nodding acquaintance with what it takes to be an executive,” she said, but he is “[g]enuinely interested in ideas of social reform.” She



At left, Bacon speaks with First Lady Betty Ford at an intimate White House luncheon before President Gerald Ford bestowed the Presidential Medal of Freedom on Bacon’s close friend pianist Arthur Rubinstein, right, on April 1, 1976. Courtesy, Gerald Ford Presidential Library and Museum

was appointed special ambassador by President Dwight D. Eisenhower to represent the United States at official events in Ethiopia and Nepal. (Presidents often gave temporary ambassadorships to citizens attending international events as officials of the United States.) She was on a first-name basis with U.S. embassy officials from Beijing to Baghdad, and as she traveled, consulted them regularly on accommodations or road conditions or proper procedures at the border. Her house was “a museum of treasures from all over the world,” and included temple horns made into lamps she bought in Nepal, silver and brocade curtains from Damascus, and “innumerable chess sets” from around the globe.<sup>30</sup>

She also lent her organizational and fundraising skills to cultural causes, including creating a national center for the arts. Her efforts led to her

appointment to Eisenhower’s presidential commission charged with developing the concept and securing congressional legislation and funding for what became the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. And in 1976 she doggedly pushed for President Gerald R. Ford to award the Presidential Medal of Freedom to the famed pianist Arthur Rubinstein, a close friend of hers who frequently stayed at her house and practiced on her piano when he was in town to perform. Her efforts, which eventually succeeded, included a handwritten note to Betty Ford saying, “I am confident . . . that a word from you to the wise will be sufficient.”<sup>31</sup>

Everyone continued to accept her invitations to her frequent dinners mixing policymakers, diplomats, artists, and other social and political elites. (When Rubinstein’s daughters made their double debut, Bacon convinced him to present them in Washington, insisting that Beverly Hills, where he lived, was “no place to bring out a young lady.”) Other friends of note included Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart, designer Dorothy Draper, conductor Eugene Ormandy, travel writer Freya Stark, and Italian journalist Lisa Sergio. Robert Osborn, a syndicated cartoonist, was another admirer, and he drew many sketches of the festivities in her home. Though she maintained her Republican loyalties, she welcomed some Democrats as well, including then-Senator Lyndon and Lady Bird Johnson in 1957 and Vice President Hubert and Muriel Humphrey in 1965.<sup>32</sup>

Looking back in 1992 on the heyday of Washington’s grandes dames, *Washington Life* magazine’s Kevin Chaffee described Bacon, Marie Beale and Mildred Bliss thus: “Intelligent and strong-willed, mostly rich widows of great longevity, these women had the ability to recognize or to exclude others from access to information and contacts vital to rising careers. They had more power than most men but usually managed to stay friends—perhaps under the same principle that France and the U.S. are allies.”<sup>33</sup>

But Bacon was in a class by herself. She outlived all pretenders to her throne and received hundreds of testimonials from her guests, including from pioneering radio and television producer Helen Sioussat, who declared in a 1965 letter, “you are truly the best party-giver in the nation!” It wasn’t just that she was friends with presidents and foreign heads of state or that she (and often, her beloved white West Highland terriers) traveled in a chauffeur-driven 1954 Silver Wraith Rolls Royce. It was that indefinable presence, all five-



The *Evening Star*’s society photographer captured Bacon arriving in her signature Rolls Royce at the opening night of the Metropolitan Opera’s “Rigoletto” at the Capitol Theater, April 27, 1959. The chauffeur’s name was not recorded. Courtesy, *Star* collection, DC Public Library, ©Washington Post



*Occasion* BEFORE THE DANCING CLASS.

*Date* APRIL 23rd, 1960

*Guests*

VMB - at Nixon dinner for de Gaulle

Norwegian Amb. & Mrs. Koht  
Amb. & Mrs. Henry Cabot Lodge (Host & hostess)  
Eliss, Hon. Robert Woods and Mrs.  
Dunn, Hon. & Mrs. James  
Gevers, Mrs.  
Graves, Mrs.  
Grimm, Mr. Peter  
Mitchell, Hon. & Mrs. Murray  
Havemeyer, Mr. John  
Pelen Monsieur and Mme Pierre  
Pilavachi, Mr. and Mrs. Aristide N.

Captain Graves ill

REFUSED:

Spanish Amb. & Countess of Motrice, Austrian  
Amb. & Mme. Platzer, British Amb. & Lady Caccia,  
Italian Amb. & Signora Brosio, Perrone-Capano,  
Paresce, Persifor Frazers, Lebel.

*Menu*

April 23rd, 1960

Avocado en Consomme en gele

Soft Shelled baby Crabs  
Sauce Tartare

Canneton a l'orange  
Petits Pois  
Andives Belges

Glace aux Abricots  
Framboises-Fraises

Mrs. Graves	Mr. Grimm
Hon. M. Mitchell	Mrs. Pilavachi
Mme Pelen	Hon. J. Dunn
Hon. R.W. Eliss	Mrs. Koht
Mrs. Lodge	Amb. Lodge
Mrs. Dunn	M. Pelen
Mr. Pilavachi	Mrs. Mitchell
Mrs. Gevers	Mr. Havemeyer

*Remarks*

Bacon's plans for a dinner for the Norwegian ambassador in April 1960, recorded here, were carried out by high-ranking friends after Vice President Nixon invited her to a dinner for French President Charles de Gaulle the same night. *Courtesy, Booth Family Special Collections, Georgetown University*

foot-eight-and-a-half inches of her. It was the way she remembered everyone, had been everywhere, and knew exactly how to reel people in.<sup>34</sup>

Bacon's devotion to her craft meant that the show must always go on, even if she could not be there. She often juggled overlapping invitations, as on the day she attended both a reception for the Emperor of Japan and a dinner with the King and Queen of Nepal. (There was a reason for that Rolls Royce waiting patiently at the curb.) But other times she called in the cavalry. On April 23, 1960, Bacon had to excuse herself from her

own dinner because she received an invitation to dine with Vice President Richard Nixon and French President Charles de Gaulle at the White House. A lesser hostess might have cancelled her own event, but Bacon tapped her good friends Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge and Emily Lodge to host in her absence.<sup>35</sup>

Looking back in an interview in the mid-1970s, she described the lengths she went to when creating a memorable event. "The thing was to have caviar in a hollowed-out cake of ice. . . . Always at the last minute I'd call New York for the caviar



Bacon presides over an elegant luncheon at home, May 25, 1971, to publicize the U.S. premiere of the film "Death in Venice," to benefit an endangered church in Venice.<sup>37</sup> Courtesy, Star collection, DC Public Library, ©Washington Post

and *foie gras*. It would be given to Jack the starter at the train station, who would give it to the conductor, who gave it to the chauffeur. Now Jack the starter's gone. There's no personal touch any more." But always, for Bacon, the most important ingredient was the conversation. "I like to bring people together who have interesting things to share with each other," she said. "The great decisions are made at informal meetings where people put their feet up by the fire."<sup>36</sup>

As she neared the end of her life, Bacon was determined that 1801 F Street would continue as a place where diplomats and policymakers could gather and exchange views. "It is a house," she declared, "that wants to be amused." She created what ultimately became the DACOR Bacon House Foundation to conserve and manage the house and its contents as a museum collection. The foundation works in conjunction with its sister organization, DACOR (Diplomatic and Consular Officers, Retired, Inc.), a membership organization of foreign affairs

professionals, to host events relating to diplomacy and world affairs—and to keep the house amused, just as she envisioned.<sup>38</sup>

Among the testimonials to Bacon is a letter from arguably her most devoted fan, longtime friend and CIA Soviet analyst Sam Belk. In 1977 he wrote, "You flung me into the depths of depression on Tuesday night at dinner when you put Lord Astor on your right instead of me. Lords like Astor are a dime a dozen but where will you find another Sam Belk who loves you more than anyone else in the world?! . . . Why don't the two of us spend an evening together soon so I will have both the right and left sides. . . ."<sup>39</sup>

Virginia was 86 when she received this compliment, proof that she lived large until the very end. In 1928 she told her mother that she hoped to live in her revered F Street home until her dying day, and she got her wish on February 24, 1980, at age 89, just two weeks after her last dinner party, her legend intact. Writing in 1971 of a party in Georgetown to honor actors Jason Robards and Maureen Stapleton, Washington *Daily News* columnist Suzy Knickerbocker observed that the guest list included "the crème de la crème of Washington society, including Mrs. Robert Low Bacon. Bow when you say the name."<sup>40</sup>

*Elizabeth Warner is the Archivist at the DACOR Bacon House Foundation, owner of the historic 1801 F Street NW. She is working on a biography of Virginia Murray Bacon, the last private owner of the house. DACOR Bacon House marks its 200th anniversary in 2025.*

## NOTES

- 1 National Park Service, "The 1932 Bonus Army," [nps.gov/articles/the-1932-bonus-army.htm](https://www.nps.gov/articles/the-1932-bonus-army.htm)
- 2 Patton and MacArthur cards of regret, box 54, and dinner party list, box 61, Virginia Murray Bacon papers, Booth Family Center for Special Collections, Georgetown University Library; note: the Bacon papers at Georgetown are being processed.
- 3 Jeff Sharlet, "Parlor Politics and Power: A New View of Washington Women," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Dec. 15, 2000.
- 4 "The Three B's," *Washington Life*, Mar. 1, 2009; Virginia Bacon handwritten notes, box 46, VMB papers.
- 5 John Foster Dulles to Virginia Murray Bacon, Apr. 25, 1956, and Oct. 17, 1955, box 42, VMB papers.
- 6 William D. Calderhead, *DACOR Bacon House* (Washington: Archetype press, 1999), 78-86.



- 7 Calderhead, DACOR Bacon House, 81-89; Virginia Murray, "House Parties 1906-1907," box 36, VMB papers; Stephen R. Conn, "Where the Power People Live, Love, Work, & Play," Town and Country, Sept. 1975, 88-89.
- 8 Virginia Murray photo by Vandyke, London, box 1, VMB papers; Virginia Murray to Fannie Morris Murray, July 1911, box 1, Robert Low Bacon papers, Part II, Booth Center, Georgetown.
- 9 Martha Bacon Whitney, *A Different World* (privately printed, 1955), 1-9; Calderhead, *DACOR Bacon House*, 78-80; Ship's log: "Brig Vancouver from Straits of Sunda towards Boston, Jan. 7th, 1818," box 1, VMB papers.
- 10 Robert Low Bacon military record, box 1 and Construction records, box 3, Robert L. and Virginia M. Bacon Papers (GTM 20210301), Booth Center, Georgetown.
- 11 RLB to Robert Bacon, Nov. 1918, box 15, RL and VMB papers, (GTM 20210301), Booth Center, Georgetown.
- 12 Gwen Dobson, "Luncheon With . . . Mrs. Robert Low Bacon," *Evening Star*, May 28, 1971; VMB to Fannie Morris Murray, Oct. 23, 1917, box 33, VMB Papers; VMB to Henry Alexander Murray, Dec. 18, 1918, box 15, RL and VMB papers, (GTM 20210301); c250.columbia.edu/c250\_celebrates/remarkable\_columbians/john\_purroy\_mitchel.html; "Ruth Hanna McCormick," National Women's History Museum, womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/ruth-hanna-mc-cormick-simms
- 13 Calderhead, *DACOR Bacon House*, chs. 3, 4, 5.
- 14 VMB to Fannie Morris Murray, Jan. 27, Feb. 4, 1925, box 33, VMB Papers; Dorothy McCardle, "A 'Center of Living,'" *Washington Post*, Mar. 24, 1974.
- 15 VMB to Fannie Morris Murray, March 12, 1925; various papers, Mar.-Apr. 1925, box 1, RL and VMB papers (GTM 20210305).
- 16 U.S. Department of Labor, Davis-Bacon and Related Acts, dol.gov/agencies/whd/government-contracts/prevaling-wage-resource-book/dbra-coverage; Congressional Research Service, "The Davis-Bacon Act: Institutional Evolution and Public Policy, Nov. 30, 2007," H.R. 6293, 74th Cong., 1st sess., Feb. 28, 1935.
- 17 VMB to Fannie Morris Murray, Mar. 12, 1925, box 33, VMB papers.
- 18 Frances Parkinson Keyes, *All Flags Flying* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1972), 142-151; VMB to Fannie Morris Murray, Jan. 20, 1925, and May 12, 1945, box 33, VMB papers; Lucius D. Battle, "Eulogy of Mrs. Robert Low Bacon," *Congressional Record*, Mar. 12, 1980, 88.
- 19 VMB, "Dinner Parties From Dec. 1932 Through 34," Dec. 13, 1932, box 61, VMB papers.
- 20 VMB, "National Credit Crisis" *Woman Republican*, Dec. 1933, box 8 RLB papers, part 2.
- 21 NANA, Inc., "Mrs. Bacon Keeps New Deal 'On Spot,'" *New York Times*, July 15, 1935; Letterhead, Women's National Republican Club, Aug. 9, 1934, box 16, RL and VMB Papers, (GTM 20210301).
- 22 NANA, Inc., "Mrs. Bacon Keeps New Deal 'On Spot'"; Virginia Bacon speech to the Women's Republican Club of Massachusetts, April 24, 1936, box 58, VMB papers; Virginia Murray Bacon, "Power: Human Beings vs. Total Government," *Woman Republican*, Nov. 1940.
- 23 Virginia Murray Bacon to Fannie Morris Murray, May 28, 1924, box 33, VMB papers.
- 24 "Republican Women Assail Roosevelt," *New York Times*, Aug. 12, 1936; Fannie Morris Murray to Cecil Murray, 1934, box 8, RL and VMB papers (GTM20210301).
- 25 "Entire Village Mourns Untimely Death of Congressman Bacon," *Westbury Times*, Sept. 16, 1938, box 16, RL and VMB papers (GTM20210301).
- 26 "The Vacancy in the 1st District," *New York Tribune*, Sept. 16, 1938, box 15, RL and VMB papers (GTM20210301); "Mrs. Bacon May Be Named to Vacant Seat in Congress," *Long Island Daily Press*, Sept. 13, 1938, box 16, RL and VMB papers (GTM20210301).
- 27 Mrs. Robert Low Bacon, South Central Regional Conference of the Pennsylvania Council of Republican Women, Bedford, Pa., May 3, 1940.
- 28 Virginia Bacon, speech to the Committee to Defend America, June 11, 1941, box 7, VMB papers; Donna Evers, "The Three B's," *Washington Life*, Mar. 1, 2009; Dorothy McCardle, "A 'Center of Living.'"
- 29 "Robert Low Bacon," in "Obituaries, Class of 1907," Harvard Class of 1907: Thirty-fifth Anniversary Report, June 1942 (Norwood, MA: Plimpton Press, 1942), 137-139; Elizabeth Shelton, "Frame Mirrors Mrs. Bacon's Reflections on F Street," *Washington Post*, Jan. 8, 1965; Flyer, United Nations Forum, Inc., Nov. and Dec. 1945 programs, box 6, VMB papers, Georgetown.
- 30 Dorothy McCardle, "A 'Center of Living'"; notes on Shah of Iran, box 33 VMB papers.
- 31 Certificate, box 38, VMB papers; Business papers, box 36, VMB papers; The Kennedy Center history, kennedy-center.org/our-story/history/; VMB to Betty Ford, Feb. 22, 1976, folder "President - Medals Medal of Freedom - Rubinstein, Artur (2)," box 47, Philip Buchen files, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library.
- 32 Stephen R. Conn, "Where the Power People Live, Love, Work, & Play."
- 33 Kevin Chaffee, ed., *Spade & Archer's 50 Maps of Washington*, D.C. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), ch. 7.
- 34 Helen Sioussat to VB, June 24, 1965, box 5, Robert Low Bacon papers, part 2, Booth Center, Georgetown; "Let Them Drive Cadillacs," *Washington Post*, Feb 5, 1971.
- 35 Invitation cards, Apr. 29, 1960, box 12, VMB papers; VB, "Bk. XVI, Nov. 1959-1961," box 2, RLB and VB papers (GTM 20210305).
- 36 Stephen R. Conn, "Where the Power People Live, Love, Work, & Play."
- 37 Gwen Dobson, "Luncheon with . . . Mrs. Robert Low Bacon."
- 38 Hope Ridings Miller, *Great Houses of Washington D.C.*, (Whitehall, Hadlyme & Smith, 1969), 159.
- 39 Sam Belk to Virginia Bacon, Feb. 2, 1977, box 20, RLB and VMB papers (GTM 20210301).
- 40 Suzy Knickerbocker, "Suzy Says, Ham and Jam," *Daily News*, Dec. 29, 1971.