

**Alice Copley Thaw,
formerly Countess of Yarmouth, later Mrs. Geoffrey Whitney:
Fourth Owner of DACOR Bacon House, 1911-1925**

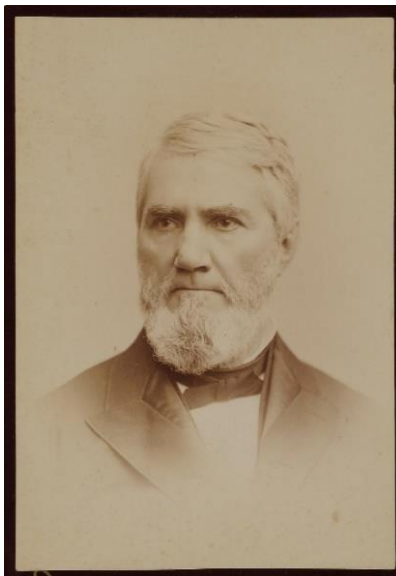
Terence Walz

Alice Copley Thaw, recently divorced from her first husband, the Earl of Yarmouth, settled in Washington, DC in 1911 when she purchased the home of former Chief Justice Melville Fuller and asked the well-known architect Jules de Sibour to modernize the house while retaining its beautiful federal era features. She moved into the house in early 1912 and made it her home for about a year. In April 1913, she remarried and moved with her new husband Geoffrey Whitney, to Massachusetts. The house was rented out by her the following twelve years before being sold to the last of the renters, Congressman Robert Low Bacon and his wife Virginia Murray Bacon.

Part 1 of this biography sketch traces her early life and its tumultuous marriage, the aftermath and her decision to move from Pittsburgh, her parents' home, to a new life in Washington, DC.

Part 1: Early Life and First Marriage

Alice Cornelia Thaw, also known as Alice Copley Thaw, was born outside Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in 1880, the youngest daughter of William Thaw, one of the one hundred richest men in the United States, and Mary Sibbet Copley Thaw, his second wife. Thaw had five



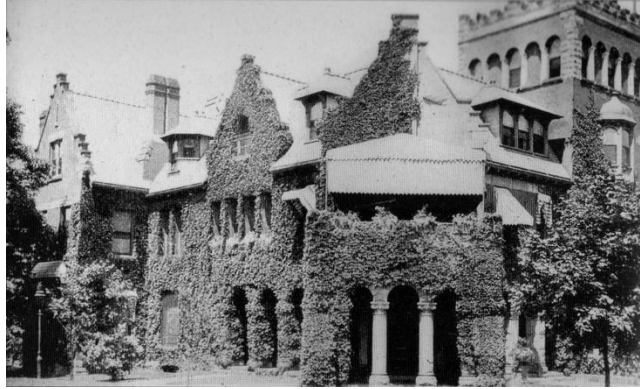
William Thaw, Sr. (1818-1889),
Alice's father. Carnegie Museum of Art.



Mary Sibbet Copley Thaw (1843-1929), Alice's mother.
Thaw Family Papers, Heinz Center, University of Pittsburgh.

children by his first wife and five by the second. The eldest of Mary's children was Harry Kendall Thaw, who later made the family name notorious due to his involvement with the showgirl Evelyn Nesbit; Alice's older full sister, Margaret Copley Thaw (b. 1877), may have been closest to her. Margaret later married George Lauder Carnegie, a nephew of Andrew Carnegie.¹

Alice grew up in her parents' big houses in Pittsburgh, attended by family nurses, a cook, a housekeeper, a Black waiter, and a Black coachman,² and she was educated at a private school, although which one is not known. Her father died in 1889 when she was nine years old, shortly after the completion of Lyndhurst, the new family home. Three years later, Mrs. Thaw took her to California for six weeks³ and then to Europe. When her older brother Edward Thaw



Lyndhurst, Squirrel Hill, Pittsburgh, completed in 1889, home of William Thaw. Library of Congress.



Staircase of Lyndhurst.

Image from Facebook "Gilded Age Mansions," posted 2018.⁴

was married in 1896, she was one of the bridesmaids.⁵ It would seem that the years before her own marriage in 1903 were what one might expect of a child brought up in great privilege.

William Thaw had made millions from investments in coal, transportation and steamboat lines, first in the Pennsylvania Canal and later in railroads that replaced the canal system. He was a major philanthropist before he died, endowing fellowships at Harvard and Princeton, and his wife, Mary Copley Thaw, continued in this path. She endowed a Thaw Fellowship for an archeologist working with the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology in Cambridge, Massachusetts, the first fellowship specifically awarded to a female recipient, and also made major contributions to the Omaha Presbyterian Theological Seminary.⁶ Alice seems not to have followed in her parents' tradition.

During the winter of 1902-03, Mrs. Thaw decided to spend the "season" in Washington, which had for more than a decade attracted wealthy Americans for the winter months. Some

reports say that it was not Mrs. Thaw, but Harry, Alice's brother, who wanted to spend time there.⁷ One or the other rented Senator Cameron's old house on Lafayette Square which had recently been vacated by Senator Marcus Hanna, then the most powerful politician in city. He had become nearly crippled by arthritis and decided to move to a hotel where he could be more easily cared for. Soon after he arrived to take up quarters in the house, Harry Thaw became a popular guest at Washington parties,⁸ and when he invited his sister to come stay with him, they appeared at many parties together.

Harry had met an English lord who was trying to make a name for himself on the American stage under the name of Eric Hope. He was George Francis Alexander Seymour, the Earl of Yarmouth, heir to the title of Marquess of Hertford and to Ragley Hall, the marquess's country home in Warwickshire. Harry invited him to stay with him on Lafayette Square and then introduced him to Alice in January 1903 – if he hadn't met her earlier. She was twenty-three and an heiress, worth perhaps \$100,000 a year. Their engagement was announced on February 8 by Mrs. Thaw, then staying at the Cameron house.⁹

George Seymour was thirty-two at the time of their marriage and had spent three years trying to establish a stage career. In 1900 he appeared with one of several troupes, and when his career as a legitimate actor failed to take off, he decided to go into vaudeville.¹⁰ When that too failed, he thought he might become a wine merchant.¹¹ His father had reduced his yearly allowance to £200 a year which, he complained at a bankruptcy court in England in 1900, was hardly sufficient, given his annual expenses of £3,000.¹² During his time in America, he desperately sought out heiresses to relieve his financial distress, and at one time nearly succeeded in marrying a cousin of Alice's named Mary Burden Thaw, the daughter of one of her older half-brothers.¹³ So, the earl had ample opportunity to encounter Alice before he bumped into her on Lafayette Square, and vice-versa.



The Cameron House (the old Benjamin Ogle Tayloe House) on Lafayette Square in 1916. Next door was the Belasco Theatre, which caused Cameron to leave the house because of the noise it generated. Image: Wikipedia.

After a whirlwind courtship, peppered with appearances at social events in Washington and elsewhere¹⁴ and a trip to New York with her mother to purchase her trousseau,¹⁵ they were married in Pittsburgh on April 27 in a packed church watched by throngs on the streets outside. The earl's parents came for the marriage.¹⁶ The story goes that before he would set foot in the church for the ceremony, the earl extracted a million dollars from Mrs. Thaw, threatening to call the whole marriage off if she didn't agree.¹⁷ She caved in and the marriage proceeded, but some of Alice's family remained opposed.¹⁸ Alice and the earl departed for England soon after, though they returned to the States several times in the course of their marriage, including for Christmas in 1904 and 1905.¹⁹

Harry was supposed to have given away Alice at her wedding, but he didn't turn up, so her brother Josiah did the honors. The papers reported at the time that Harry opposed giving the earl any authority over her inheritance.²⁰ Harry was by then preoccupied with a chorus girl in New York named Evelyn Nesbit whom, despite family opposition, he married in 1905. She and the architect Stanford White had previously been lovers, and on the eve of sailing to Europe from New York the following year, 1906, Thaw, Evelyn and White ran into each other at a theatrical performance during which Thaw shot White dead in a fit of violent rage.²¹ The murder and trial were sensational and bedeviled the family ever after. The trial began in January 1907 and a second trial ensued in February 1908. The countess crossed the Atlantic to attend the first with her mother in 1907 and then returned to England to resolve her own marital situation.

In the end, Thaw was declared insane and ordered to Matteawan, an asylum for the criminally insane in upstate New York, near the town of Beacon. From England, Alice went to lengths to help and is said to have written for help to Consuelo the Duchess of Marlborough, who had taken an interest in prison reform in England. The duchess wrote her New York friend Katherine Mackay, wife of Clarence Mackay, one of the wealthiest men in the U.S. – who, like Consuelo, was interested in prison reform – to go with her when she was next in the States to visit the Matteawan prison, which they did in November 1907. Harry Thaw, the *New York Times*



Alice Countess of Yarmouth.
Image: *The Bystander*, April 27, 1904

reported, never looked in their direction when the two wealthy socialites made their appearance.²²

Meanwhile, Alice’s marriage, which was troubled early on, finally collapsed toward the end of 1907 and she sued for divorce on the grounds that, though they had cohabited in various places in England, their marriage had never been consummated. The court appointed two doctors to examine the “organs and parts of generation” of both the earl and Alice to verify the matter.²³ An “absolute” divorce was finalized in August 1908, and Alice was allowed to resume her

maiden name.²⁴ She now styled herself Alice Copley Thaw. By then she was living on Clarges Street in Westminster, London, while the earl had taken quarters at “The Homestead,” Bourne End, Buckinghamshire, which from various records seems to have been the home of James J. Joicey, the eccentric ne’er-do-well entomologist and lepidopterist.²⁵ In November, Alice returned to the States aboard the “Adriatica.”²⁶ Papers speculated that she would settle in New England, where her mother had purchased a summer home, but she decided to return to the Thaw Lyndhurst estate in Pittsburgh where she had lived before she married the earl.²⁷

Alice’s lawyers worked to retrieve the stock that had been part of her dowry, which was returned to her in 1910.²⁸ Most of the time, she was able to keep a low profile in the press that relentlessly tracked the goings-on of the family made notorious by the murder of Stanford White. Nonetheless, it was reported, for instance, that she spent a fortnight in Hot Springs, Virginia, with her sister-in-law Mrs. Josiah Thaw in the fall, and that she was there when J. P. Morgan arrived in a special train, and that she had lost in a local tennis tournament.²⁹

By 1911 she was keen to make a change. In January she went to Wilmington, Delaware for a reunion with her old schoolmate and dear friend, Elinor Wilson, who was then paying a visit to her father.³⁰ Elinor had been one of Alice’s bridesmaids when she married the earl eight years earlier; when Elinor married Edward Cary Williams, she moved to Milton, Massachusetts.³¹ During a visit to see her there, Alice was introduced to Geoffrey Whitney, one of their neighbors, who would shortly play an important role in her life.³² It may have been Elinor who persuaded Alice to consider Washington as a suitable place to build a new life. She began to look for a property, and the Fuller house at 1801 F Street was available for sale by the heirs (Chief Justice Fuller died in July 1910). She resisted the urge to build a new fashionable house for herself, as many rich heiresses were doing, and opted instead for an old-fashioned house in the older part of Washington. The trust that Mrs. Fuller had set up, leaving the house in the hands of her children and their children during their lifetimes, needed to be set aside in order for the sale to Alice to proceed, and the judge duly did this in September.³³ In the meantime, Alice purchased it in May or June for \$52,000 and arranged with the well-known Washington architect Jules Henri de Sibour to modernize the house without changing its outward appearance.

De Sibour had trained in France and opened practices in New York and Washington. But he closed his office in New York and worked exclusively in Washington from 1910 onward – his wife’s family came from Washington.³⁴ One of the early projects in this new phase of his illustrious career was the design in 1910 of the residence for William Watson Laurence, a paint



The architect Jules Henri de Sibour (1872-1938). Image: Wikipedia.

and white lead manufacturer, later the residence of the French ambassador on Kalorama Street. The permit for renovations on Mrs. Copley Thaw’s new house was granted on July 24, 1911. In the course of the renovations, which took place during the remainder of the year, the interior of the house was considerably altered.³⁵

Alice renewed some acquaintances during a brief visit to Washington in July, having dinner with Alice Roosevelt Longworth and her husband Rep. Nicholas Longworth, F. Oden Horstman, son of a wealthy Philadelphia manufacturer, and others, at Café Republique,³⁶ a new restaurant that had recently opened on 15th and F Streets. In fact, she may not have known many people in the city, and must have relied on her Pittsburgh friends to make connections. She then retreated to Long Island for the summer³⁷ and Hot Springs for the autumn, while work on the house continued. Alice returned in November to check on the renovations, according to a newspaper account:

Miss Alice Copley Thaw, formerly the Countess of Yarmouth, left Washington for Pittsburgh after spending several days in the Capital supervising the alterations on her new home. The house, which is of modified colonial architecture, 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.

¹ http://everything.explained.today/William_Thaw_Sr/

² Data on servants in the house from the 1880 census.

³ *Pittsburg Dispatch*, February 26, 1892, p. 5. The party included Margaret and a young friend, Jennie Ross.

⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/gildedmansions/posts/the-grand-staircase-at-the-thaw-mansion-once-located-in-pittsburgh-now-demolishe/2158795761075424/>

⁵ *New York Tribune*, Thursday, April 9, 1896, p. 6.

⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary_Sibbet_Copley. On the significance of the Thaw fellowship, <https://www.thecrimson.com/article/1891/1/26/the-peabody-museum-probably-few-men/>.

⁷ *Boston Journal*, January 31, 1903, p. 7 (Mrs. Thaw spending the winter with her son in Washington); *River Press* (Montana), January 7, 1903, p. 4. His fabulous wealth excited the imagination of reporters who envisaged lavish dinners and balls.

⁸ He dined with Alice Roosevelt Longworth, *Evening Star*, February 11, 1903, p. 5.

⁹ *Evening Star*, February 18, 1903, p. 5.

¹⁰ *Evening Star*, April 21, 1900, p. 25.

¹¹ *Evening Star*, June 20, 1901, p. 6.

¹² *Evening Times*, June 13, 1900, p. 6.

¹³ *Washington Times*, June 6, 1903, p. 6.

¹⁴ The British ambassador entertains them: *Evening Star*, February 25, 1903, p. 5; Mrs. Thaw hosted them at a dinner in Washington: *Washington Times*, March 3, 1903, p. 3.

¹⁵ *Evening Star*, April 10, 1903, p. 5.

¹⁶ Lord and Lady Hertford arrive in New York and head to Pittsburgh: *Evening Star*, April 25, 1903, p. 7.

¹⁷ The common figure mentioned: see "American Girls and Prices Paid for Foreign Titles," *Denver Post*, February 8, 1906, p. 3.

¹⁸ Benjamin Thaw, William Thaw's eldest son, didn't attend the wedding: *Philadelphia Inquirer*, April 28, 1903, p. 5; the thought of the Earl of Yarmouth and wife appearing in Newport during the 1904 season was said to scare off the Benjamin Thaws (Alice's half-brother): *Washington Times*, June 6, 1903, p. 4.

¹⁹ They arrived in New York on the "Cedric" November 18, 1903, and arrived back in England on January 7, 1904, also on the "Cedric." Each was accompanied by a personal servant. As a result of their visit, Mrs. William Thaw did not return to Washington for the 1903-1904 "season": *Washington Times*, October 25, 1903, p. 20; arrived in New York on the "Baltic," September 30, 1904.

²⁰ *Virginian-Pilot* (Norfolk), April 28, 1903, p. 1; he was supposed to have given the bride away; their brother Josiah did instead; *Birmingham Age Herald* (Alabama), May 04, 1903, p. 7.

²¹ The subject of several books: Charles Samuels, *The Girl in the Red Velvet Swing* (1953) (said to be highly fictionalized); half a dozen others mentioned in the Wikipedia article about him. A recent biography of Nesbit is by Paula Uruburu, *American Eve: Evelyn Nesbit, Stanford White, the Birth of the "It" Girl, and the Crime of the Century* (Riverhead Books, 2008).

²² *New York Times*, November 13, 1907, p. 4; the letter written by Alice is mentioned in Michael Henry Adams's blog, <https://mrmhadams.typepad.com/blog/2014/04/harbor-hill-the-end-of-the-line-of-gilded-age-hauteur-and-hurt-part-vii.html>.

²³ The full record of the divorce is found on Ancestry.com. For newspaper coverage, *Evening Star*, February 5, 1908, p. 12.

²⁴ The earl's attempt to obtain a settlement of £5,000 a year from her estate did not succeed.

²⁵ Their addresses are found in the divorce proceedings papers.

²⁶ Ancestry.com Trans-Atlantic crossings data.

²⁷ Alice is counted in the 1910 census as living with her mother in Pittsburgh.

²⁸ *Evening Star*, June 9, 1910, p. 16.

²⁹ *Richmond Times Dispatch*, October 23, 1910, p. 42; *Daily Dispatch*, October 30, 1910, p. 39; *Richmond Times Dispatch*, October 14, 1910, p. 7.

³⁰ See his entry in Wikipedia; he was the author of a number of works on military topics.

³¹ For his biography, *Secretary's Fifth Report, Harvard College, Class of 1902* (Norward, MA: Plimpton Press, 1917), 314.

³² *Boston Journal*, Dec 20, 1912, p. 7. Information provided to the reporter by Geoffrey's mother.

³³ *Washington Times*, September 6, 1911, p. 12.

³⁴ They were an old Georgetown family: Clagett, Brice McAdoo. "Three Generations of Clagetts in Georgetown and Washington, 1751-1860." *Records of the Columbia Historical Society, Washington, D.C.* 63/65 (1963), pp. 60–79. Her father William Henry Claggett is buried in Rock Creek Cemetery.

³⁵ Much of the following discussion is based on the *DACOR Bacon House: House Structure Report* commissioned by DACOR Bacon House and written by Beyer Blinder Belle (2021).

³⁶ *Washington Times*, July 15, 1911, p. 10; on this restaurant, see John deFerrari's blog, <http://www.streetsofashington.com/2021/06/the-short-exuberant-life-of-washingtons.html>.

³⁷ *Washington Times*, June 23, 1911, p. 3.