

**When the DACOR Bacon House was the
residence of the Russian Imperial Minister
November 1875 – Summer 1878**

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Part 1

DACOR Bacon House, which had been built by Tench Ringgold, a member of a wealthy merchant enslaving family from Maryland, was bought in 1835 by another Marylander, the political figure, enslaver and former governor Samuel Sprigg, as a present for his daughter, Sally Sprigg. She had married several years earlier a cousin named William T. Carroll, who was Clerk of the Supreme Court of the United States. They had four daughters and five sons during thirty-five years of marriage before William died in 1863. During the years of their marriage, Sally and her husband entertained frequently, socializing with presidents, cabinet ministers, Supreme Court justices, and members of Congress. After William died, Sally kept up the entertaining. Her house became a center of Washington society, a place where people went to meet and exchange news and gossip – a pattern followed by subsequent owners.

By the mid-1870s, Mrs. Carroll had fallen into financial straits and decided to lease her home on the corner of F and 18th Streets in November to the new Russian ambassador to the United States, Nikolai Shishkin, a career diplomat with long experience in the Balkans and considered an accomplished public servant by Tsar Alexander II. He replaced two earlier ministers, the first of whom, Konstantin Katakazi, had been declared *persona non grata* by President Grant in 1871 for insulting behavior to Hamilton Fish, the secretary of state, and, more immediately, Baron Henri d’Offenberg who had been in Washington since 1873.¹ Shishkin presented his papers to the Secretary of State Fish at the end of October 1875, and took up quarters in the Carroll mansion about a month later.² The fact that the Department of State was newly located in the south wing of the new Executive Office Building made the location of the Carroll mansion especially convenient.³

The lease may have been for a two-year period, until the end of 1877, with perhaps a proviso extending the period a few months. It was reported in the papers that Mrs. Carroll let it



The earliest known photograph of the house, 1900, courtesy Washington History Center.

to the Russians for \$6,000 a year.⁴

Regarding the new imperial minister (as ambassadors were called), a wag writing for the *Washington Capital* newspaper mentioned the lease on the old house while recalling, with apparent nostalgia, the former minister, Count Konstantin Katakazi, and his stately and stunning wife, Mme, Olga Katakazi:⁵

“[An] unusual number of open houses this coming winter. Among them and most talked about is that of the new Russian minister who has, we are told, taken the Carroll mansion on the corner of 18th and F street. This venerable residence is probably one of the best fitted, in its large, handsome rooms, for social entertainments of any in the city, and from the days to Bodisco⁶ down to the vivacious Catacazy, the Russian legation in Washington has been famous for its hospitality. The memory of a right jolly past comes up upon a sigh at the mention of old Cat.... The Cat-Fish war, with all the collateral circumstances, was one of the funniest known in diplomatic annals, ... And what a central character was Madame Catacazy, that magnificent woman! as the late Charles Sumner called her in moments of enthusiasm.”



The former Russian Minister Count Katakazi, courtesy Library of Congress



Mme. Katakazi as she was pictured in *Frank Leslie's Journal* in 1871

Mme. Katakazi at that time had become an object of local fascination, and the portrayals of her in *Frank Leslie's Journal* make it clear why. This statuesque woman with magnificent hair and wardrobe was hugely admired and believed to be related to the European princely family of di Santa Severina.⁷

Another gossip columnist writing for the *Daily Critic* commented speculatively if perhaps snidely about the new minister:⁸

“M. *Shishkine*, the new Russian Minister, is rather a small man, with not so prepossessing a face as Catacazy, and lacks greatly the *savoir faire* which made the late Russian Minister so great a favorite. *Madame*, his wife, is with him, and being fond of the gay world, will entertain a great deal. She is an inveterate smoker of cigarettes, which we believe is a Russian custom. They are installed in the Carroll Mansion with their family and domestics, the latter numbering ten: all dressed in a gaudy uniform on which there is enough gold lace and brass buttons for an Admiral.”

Not surprisingly, Shishkin had a lot to do to repair the poor state of relations with United States and spent the next five years, much while he was at the Carroll house, making headway. In addition to his wife and three children, he brought a staff that included a governess, a housekeeper, a *chasseur* – a sort of ceremonial guard or major-domo who accompanied him on formal visits to the State Department and elsewhere – as well as ten servants, many of whom were dressed in the “striking livery of the family, green and gold small clothes, with crimson plush vest.”⁹ They would have been expected to prepare the kind of food suitable for a Russian diplomat and to be able to offer to his guests the noble cuisine they might come to expect.



Russian Minister Nikolai Shishkin, from *Leslie's Illustrated Weekly*, Feb 3, 1877, p. 357.

Living up to the forecasts of their projected it, it was announced in late January that they would inaugurate “diplomatic gaieties” by giving a grand ball, presumably at the house.¹⁰ But in

fact the only ball mentioned in the papers in February was the state dinner given by the Grants for the diplomatic corps, to which the Shishkins were invited.¹¹

During their residence, – contrary to what the *Daily Critic* supposed – the Shishkins tended to prefer their own company and their children and turned down most of the diplomatic invitations they received.¹² Indeed, they were fond of taking walks in the neighborhood, and this, too, was thought remarkable. A reporter for the Washington newspaper *The Republican* wrote,¹³

“[The Minister] and Mrs. Shishkin are very estimable, unassuming people, and put on less style than others of the foreigners. They are to be seen walking every day, dressed plainly, and she stops to kiss little children that she meets in the streets. Having kissed them, she runs after her husband, and jabbars Russian to him till he smiles, then looks back at the child his wife has kissed. They have a family of little ones of their own, and for their use the carriage is mostly devoted

Can we be surprised that, in 1876, they advertised in the *Evening Star*.¹⁴

WANTED a young white person (German preferred), to do a little housework and assist in the care of 3 children. Must be a good needlewoman. None but with the best references need apply. 1801 F Street.

¹ The only potted biography available to non-readers of Russian is found in Lee B. Croft, Ashleigh Albrecht, Emily Cluff, Erica Resmer, *The Ambassadors: U.S. to Russia/Russia to the U.S.* (Phoenix, Az: Capstone Publications, 2010), 121-24

² *Evening Star*, November 29, 1875, p. 1, “The Diplomat Corps in Washington: Recent Changes”: Mr. Nicolas Shishkin succeeded last month Baron Henri d’Offenberg as the Minister from Russia.... [Addresses:] Mr. Shishkin and M’me Barbe Shishkin, 1801 F Street.” Other sources confirming his address: Boyd’s *Washington Directory 1878; Register of the Department of State, corrected to December 1877* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1877), 36.

³ <https://history.state.gov/departmenthistory/buildings/section27>.

⁴ Article signed by “Raymonde,” *Cincinnati Commercial*, January 20, 1877.

⁵ “Capital Notes,” November 7, 1875, (Washington) *Capital*, p. 1

⁶ Baron Alexander de Bodisco, Russian minister 1838-54, who lived in Georgetown, married Harriet Williams, and is buried in Oak Hill Cemetery.

⁷ On her princely links, Ronald Sutherland Gower (Lord), *My Reminiscences* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1895), 476, whose visit in Moscow was facilitated by a relation of hers.

⁸ December 1, 1875, p. 4

⁹ “Capital Notes,” *Sunday Herald and Weekly National Intelligencer*, March 21, 1880, p. 3.

¹⁰ *Daily Critic*, January 29, 1876, p. 2.

¹¹ *Evening Star*, February 2, 1876, p. 1.

¹² They “lived in a simple, retired fashion, entirely devoted to each other, and absorbed in their little family – two sons and a daughter – they went with reluctance into gay society, and as much as possible avoided the whirl of visiting, in which the best-intentioned are frequently drawn”: *Capital Notes*,” *op. cit.*

¹³ *The Republican*, April 27, 1878, p. 7.

¹⁴ *Evening Star*, July 29, 1876, p. 2