

*Washington's Second*  
BLAIR HOUSE

1607 New Hampshire Avenue

*An Illustrated History*

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Photographs by Angela Laine



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## PREFACE

When the German Historical Institute of Washington, D.C., needed larger quarters for its growing staff and library in the late 1980s, the search centered on Dupont Circle. Dupont Circle is home to embassies, think tanks, office buildings, and the Washington branch of Johns Hopkins University, but it is a residential area as well. Its attractive mix of large mansions of the Gilded Age on the avenues and smaller townhouses on the side streets makes for a grand yet intimate neighborhood.

The search ended in the fall of 1988 with a decision in favor of 1607 New Hampshire. The elegant brick mansion, erected in 1911, offered a ballroom that could serve as a lecture hall along with smaller spaces—the former living and servants' quarters—for quiet research and office work. The building had been divided into numerous small offices, but there were still strong traces of its original grandeur. Painstaking renovation reopened the mansion's free-flowing spaces, and on April 1, 1990, the Institute moved into its splendid new quarters.


For whom had the mansion been built? Who had designed it? What kind of lives did its owners lead? What part did they play in the life of Washington? The Institute's staff and many visitors wanted

to know. I thus asked Dr. Malve Slocum Burns to research and write the building's history. *Washington's Second Blair House* is the result. Dr. Burns sets the story of a family and a house within a larger social and political context. The Blairs were among Washington's most prominent families in the second half of the nineteenth century, and Dr. Burns brings their world to life. She also traces the career of architect Jules de Sibour, the designer of 1607 New Hampshire Avenue, and offers readers a verbal tour of Sibour's masterful landmark. Dr. Burns's prose portrait of the mansion is brilliantly complemented by Angela Laine's photographs.

I want to thank Malve Burns and Angela Laine for the considerable work they put into *Washington's Second Blair House*. Their efforts have given the German Historical Institute all the more reason to be house-proud.

Prof. Dr. Christof Mauch  
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# INTRODUCTION TO WASHINGTON'S SECOND BLAIR HOUSE

 house is a period piece, reflecting the spirit of its age and place. It preserves in brick and stone impulses of its time—some of its defining features—together with the aspirations of its architect and commissioning owner. Once it has taken form and stands alone, it makes time stand still.

1607 New Hampshire Avenue, Washington's Other Blair House, one of the finest and best-preserved Beaux Arts buildings in the city of Washington, is such a time capsule. It speaks of America's exuberance in the early twentieth century during a period of exploding growth for the city and Dupont Circle. It expresses the sensitivities of its Paris-trained architect, Jules Henri de Sibour, and its owner, Woodbury Blair. Woodbury belonged to one of America's leading political families: his father Montgomery served as Abraham Lincoln's Postmaster General, his uncle as Union general and Senator from Missouri, and his grandfather, Francis Preston Blair, acted as trusted advisor to three presidents—Andrew Jackson, Martin van Buren, and Abraham Lincoln.

Both men, the architect and owner of the Second Blair House, are distinctly American, in very different ways. Woodbury, descendant of a signer of the Declaration of Independence on his mother's side and of a political scion on his father's, represents the establishment. He grew up across from the White House, where he played with Lincoln's children, and spent his entire career in Washington. Today, we would call him the quintessential insider.

De Sibour, no less distinguished by lineage (his father, a Vicomte, was a descendant of Louis XI of France) represents the outsider—not the poor immigrant arriving in steerage, but rather the privileged outsider. Born in France but raised in the United States, educated at Yale but also in Paris, and fluent in French and English, he is formed and informed by two cultures—France's traditions and America's propelling energies. In his early career, he shuttled between two cities: New York, where his professional life began, and Washington, where it reached its zenith. Turn-of-the-century Washington was imprinted by him, especially Massachusetts Avenue and the Dupont Circle area.

De Sibour benefited from the need and desire of wealthy Americans to build homes in the “grand” French and English historical styles. The achievements of Europe's past elite were now imported for America's leaders. Woodbury was a member of that elite, and De Sibour the perfect mediator between the old and new world establishment.

The life and family history of Woodbury link Washington's Second Blair House to the city and nation's history. Its location just a block and a half from fashionable Dupont Circle places it near the



homes of senators, presidential widows, newspaper barons, and gold-mine moguls who built opulent mansions in the open fields at the northwestern edge of the city during a particularly brilliant period in the District of Columbia. The Second Blair House's restrained splendor, its blending of traditional and contemporary is quintessentially American, though its elegant façade could grace a Boulevard Haussman in Paris.

Built in 1911, long after the steam engine became emblematic for the burgeoning United States but just before Henry Ford and his assembly-line industry transformed America yet again, it reflects a period sure of itself, a nation that has arrived, that is not shy to show that it has succeeded, but does not need to be showy. Unlike some Dupont mansions of the *nouveau riches* that shouted their owners' success to the world, the Second Blair House speaks calmly of accomplishment, grace, and refinement.

To better understand what makes 1607 New Hampshire Avenue distinct and in what ways it reflects the history of the Blair family and Woodbury's own aspirations, we shall look first at Woodbury within the context of his prominent family, then follow the course of his life as reflected in family letters and accounts, with an emphasis on his own letters. In a third section, we shall observe Woodbury and his wife as residents of 1607 New Hampshire and discuss some of their Dupont Circle neighbors. In part four, we shall outline the life and contributions of Jules Henri de Sibour, the architect of Washington's Second Blair House. Part five will be reserved for a walk through the house, the home of the German Historical Institute since 1990.



CHAPTER 1

WOODBURY BLAIR,  
SCION OF A POLITICAL CLAN

*W*oodbury Blair built his New Hampshire residence at the peak of his career, in his late fifties, when a successful man was expected to have amassed his fortune and begun to redistribute part of it to the community.

He did not really need a new home; together with his siblings, he owned a substantial federal house on 1651 Pennsylvania Avenue, inherited from his father Montgomery. He had lived in this house all his life and would return to it for Sunday lunch every week, even after he had moved into his new residence on New Hampshire Avenue. Contemporary Americans know Woodbury's first home as Blair House, the official Guest House of the United States of America. In the late 1940s, Blair House even became the home of a president, Harry Truman and his wife, while the White House was being renovated. Back in 1911, however, Woodbury, his brother Gist, and sister Minna—their youngest brother lived at their country estate—simply referred to their Washington home as “1651.”

Why then did Woodbury build a second Blair house? He had recently been married, although fairly late in life and probably not with the expectation of raising a family: his bride, Emily Wallach, was 44 and he almost 55 at the time of their wedding. His reasons for building may be manifold, although one in particular suggests itself. He may have wanted to show the world that he had succeeded on his own terms—and not on those of his famous father and grandfather. The Blairs of the 19th century were above all a political clan. Shunning public office, as Woodbury had, can be likened to a Bach offspring shunning music. Whatever Woodbury's motivation, together with his architect, Jules Henri de Sibour, he undertook to build a home that reflected his wealth and refinement and offered an attractive venue for social gatherings—dress balls, formal dinners, and high tea. He built himself a social and aesthetic rather than a political monument. Woodbury and his wife Emily lived in grand style at 1607, attended by 12 servants. When they motored off to their summer home in Newport, Rhode Island to escape Washington's summer heat each year—after having stored their silver and covered the furniture—they did so in two chauffeur-driven cars.

The Blairs had not always traveled in luxury. Woodbury's grandfather Francis Preston, a plucky lawyer of sharp intellect, had left Kentucky in a covered wagon when he was called to serve President Jackson, his clothes and household goods covered in dust. Washington had also received him with dust. It was not yet the dynamic capital of Woodbury's time that attracted the nation's rich and powerful, but rather still very much a rural town. To be sure, the grandiose Capital Building rose above the White House, but around

and below the “temples” of government lived hard-scrabble farmers in log cabins next to plantation-style homes with slave cabins.

Francis Preston’s humble entrance into Washington was soon eclipsed by his meteoric rise from editor-owner of the *Globe*, President Andrew Jackson’s Democratic house organ, to friend and intimate of the President. By 1836, he was able to buy the spacious brick building on what was then President’s Square—the later Blair House—that would also become Woodbury’s home. Living just a stone’s throw from the White House, Francis Preston left a bucket of fresh milk by the President’s door every morning, and the president often assembled his advisors in the Blair kitchen—giving rise to the expression “kitchen cabinet.”

Direct access to the White House continued for Francis Preston under President Martin van Buren—the two would remain life-long friends—but became frayed under subsequent administrations, eventually forcing Francis Preston to sell the *Globe*. From this transaction he built himself a country home in Silver Spring, Maryland, about seven miles from the center of Washington, a wonderful home for his children and playground for his grandchildren. In fact, Francis Preston loved to have his grandchildren about him and did everything possible to keep them entertained, which did not always please his daughter-in-law Minna, Woodbury’s mother. There was too much roughhousing for her taste at Silver Spring.

The country estate would also function as command center for planning political strategies. From the 1850s onward, the Blairs would gather here to write letters and telegrams to party leaders,

like-minded friends, and newspaper editors as they watched with dismay how one administration after another “pandered” to slave, i.e. Southern, interests; they would set off from there to the northern and western states, addressing the burning issues of their day. But this did not happen until after Montgomery arrived in Washington.

At first, Montgomery stayed behind in Kentucky when his parents followed Andrew Jackson’s call. The 17-year-old wanted to finish his schooling, while his sister Lizzie and brother Frank moved into President’s Square and enjoyed the run of the White House under President Jackson’s affectionate eye. After graduation from Transylvania College, Montgomery enrolled at West Point. Studious and bright, he had no liking for the military. But he was a dutiful son and would remain so throughout his life, and he gave in to his father’s and President Jackson’s entreaties. Francis Preston, who expected great things from his sons—he harbored presidential ambitions for both—may have dreamed of fashioning a second hero of New Orleans. It was not to be. Montgomery acquitted himself well, to be sure, but after a brief stint in the Seminole War, he settled on the study of law, which would remain his life’s vocation.

With the help of his maternal grandparents, Montgomery established himself in St. Louis where he served as a judge and even as mayor from 1842-1843. Specializing in land and corporate law, as well as the up-and-coming railroad business, he became a wealthy and influential man. After his first wife died in childbirth, he married Mary (Minna) Elizabeth Woodbury, daughter of Judge and former Navy Secretary Levi Woodbury of New Hampshire who had served in Jackson’s and van Buren’s cabinet. The Francis Preston Blairs and

the Woodburys had been on cordial terms for years. By all accounts, Minna and Montgomery had a harmonious marriage, producing five children, four of which lived into adulthood.

Woodbury, the first son born to the couple after a daughter, Minna, saw the light of day in St. Louis on September 1, 1852, just months before the couple moved to Washington and into Francis Preston's house on President Square. Newly installed President Pierce had appointed Montgomery Solicitor General for the United States Court of Claims. The year of Woodbury's birth witnessed one of the most contested Democratic conventions ever, exhibiting the deep rifts in the nation's fabric. Those rifts would eventually induce the Blairs—until then staunch Democrats—to move away from their beloved party and help lay the foundation for the Republican Party.

Francis Preston and his sons—intelligent, focused Montgomery and dashing, restless Frank—were passionately opposed to the extension of slavery into the new territories, the most contentious political issue of the 1840s and 50s. Like most Americans, they accepted slavery where it existed and were, in fact, slave owners themselves, though by the standards of their time benign ones. Still, they saw slavery as an undesirable state and believed it would—and should—die of its own accord. Like Lincoln, they proposed to hasten its death by advocating resettlement—or colonization—of “Negroes” in Africa, the Caribbean, and Central and South America.

Did the moral issue of enslavement of men by men trouble them? It must have, yet they did not accept “Negroes” as equal—as Lincoln eventually would—but instead mourned the inequality that

slavery created for *white* men. In their eyes, it deprived hard-working white workers and artisans of jobs and income. This, in turn, eroded the base for education, the development of technology, etc. Thus, the Blairs fought not only for the freedom of African-Americans—as long as African-Americans would then settle elsewhere—but for greater opportunities and living standards for white men.

The year of Woodbury's birth, 1852, also saw the publication of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in book form after it had been serialized in a journal. The book provoked heated debates on slavery. Southerners whose fortunes depended on the institution of slavery had to contend, or did contend that "Negroes" weren't equal. While Westerners and Northerners might have accepted such a premise in the abstract, they were stirred—and disturbed—by the flesh and blood suffering depicted in Harriet Beecher Stowe's book and further moved by impassioned preachers—Quakers, Congregationalists, and the Amish foremost among them—holding forth on the moral evil of enslavement of men by men. The entire Blair family was caught up in the issue. Frank Blair, who had joined his brother in St. Louis upon graduation from Princeton, fought for the rights of Free-Soilers in Missouri where he had permanently settled—"free" men, not slaves, were to till the soil in the new territories—while Montgomery and his father advised him from Washington.

Woodbury was born into groundbreaking times, and not only on the ideological front. Railroads were opening up the northwest for settlers and prospectors, expanding the size of the country and its opportunities. The discovery of gold in California spawned mass



hysteria and mass migration to the West. Some of those who made their fortunes from gold mines or railroading would become Woodbury's Dupont Circle neighbors, for example Thomas F. Walsh, who built a 60-room mansion on 2020 Massachusetts Avenue in 1903 for his daughter Evalyn, future wife of Ed Mclean of the Washington Post family and owner of the Hope Diamond; or Richard and Mary Townsend, railroad heirs who built a grand mansion on Massachusetts Avenue in 1901, designed by Carrere and Hasting, which is the home of the Cosmos Club today.

Taking his first steps at President's Square in the early 1850s, Woodbury—or "Wood" as the family called him—would have had no notion of Dupont Circle. In those days, it existed on paper only: on the map of Washington's genius designer L'Enfant, who had marked out a 'place of special merit' at the intersection of Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Connecticut Avenue. This part of Washington would not be developed until the mid 1870s and early 1880s.

But the child Woodbury would have been familiar with the downtown area around the White House—Lafayette Square, President's Square and, after Lincoln moved into the White House in 1861, the President's home itself. Although originally situated in Francis Preston's home, Wood's family soon moved into the house next door—both now form the Blair House complex—freeing the house at 1651 for use by the Blair family at large. Wood's home and that of his grandfather became a rendezvous for progressive Democrats, Free-Soilers, and before long, members of the newly formed Republican Party. The older Blairs often rode into town from Silver Spring since Montgomery and his father kept close counsel,

and the active and vibrant man needed to be as close to the center of power as possible. The volumes of correspondence between Francis Preston, Montgomery, and Frank attest to an extraordinary family closeness. Only brother James, the second son of Francis Preston, seems to have been somewhat more on the periphery due to his travels in the South Sea and other far regions.

In 1857, when Wood was four years old, his Uncle Frank was elected to the House of Representatives where he would serve until 1864, though with lengthy absences during which he fought the Rebels as a Major General. Frank was a firebrand and was involved in many controversies. Wherever he went he made waves and was in the news. By all accounts, he loved a good drink, fine smoke, and congenial company, and must have livened up Woodbury's home. Wood's own father, Montgomery, by contrast, seemed to have been a serious man, who walked a straight and narrow line, though everyone attested to his kindness. He was an avowed Christian and did his best to awaken religious feelings—or rather a firm commitment to Christ—in his all too rational father and swashbuckling brother. When he had traveled to California in late 1853 to sort out the affairs of brother James who had unexpectedly died there, he wrote a touching letter to his wife Minna. He asked her to rear the children—should anything happen to him—so that they would rather be “honest and devout than distinguished” and encouraged her to “fill their minds with the love of God.”

Just before his brother Frank arrived in Washington from St. Louis, Montgomery had taken on, pro bono, the case of former slave Dred Scott who was seeking his freedom. He argued the case before

the U.S. Supreme Court at a time when the country was deeply divided on the issue of race. It is extraordinary that Montgomery, who did not advocate equal rights for “Negroes,” would put his name and safety on the line for a black man. His principled and courageous act, buttressed by his belief that Dred Scott had a valid legal claim, sheds light on the highly charged issue of relations between black and white men in American society and the contradictory responses it evoked. Montgomery was perfectly willing to put his personal, financial, and professional resources—even his safety—at the disposal of a black man, but he could never picture himself and his family living side by side and on equal terms with that same African-American. This attitude—though temporarily eclipsed by idealism, the passions of war, and the early years of reconstruction—was to prevail in American society for at least a hundred years after the Dred Scott verdict had been rendered.

If logic and precedence had ruled the day, Montgomery would have won his case. But the notorious Judge Taney ruled against Dred Scott, declaring that “Negroes” had no rights the white man needed to respect. The 1857 landmark decision, intended to cement the “old order,” so enraged people that it helped fuel the fires of a war that would do away with the old order in far more radical ways than the conservative judge could have foreseen.

Montgomery, an intelligent advisor to his father and brother as well as a busy lawyer, worked tirelessly first for the Free-Soilers and then later for the Republican Party. All three Blairs attended the Republican convention of 1860 that nominated Lincoln. They were seated among the dignitaries on the dais and greeted with warm

applause in recognition for their guidance during the formative stages of the party and their ceaseless campaigning for Republican candidates.

Frank immediately resigned his seat in Congress to devote himself full-time to Lincoln's election and was among the small delegation traveling to Springfield to bring Lincoln the news of his nomination. From this point forward, the father-son trio worked with total dedication for Lincoln's election: Frank in Missouri where he enlisted the help of the freedom-loving Germans, and Montgomery and his father in Maryland, a tobacco-growing, slave-holding state where the Blairs could not make much headway. But their early, energetic, and intelligent support for Lincoln would eventually bring political gain.

What would the impact of all this feverish activity have been on a young boy such as Woodbury? He was three when his father became embroiled in the Dred Scott case, and not yet in school when his Uncle Frank came to Washington as a congressman, stirring up the capital and polarizing the hearts and minds of all he met; he was seven when his entire family devoted every free moment and all its energy to the election of Abraham Lincoln. He must have heard of the bloody clashes in Kansas and of legislators attacking each other up on Capital Hill. He must have shared in the immense joy and jubilation when Lincoln was elected—perhaps his father or his grandfather lit bonfires at their country homes to celebrate the victory. He must have witnessed the intense jockeying and lobbying for a share of the victory pie that ended with his father's nomination as Postmaster General in the new President's cabinet. His uncle,

G. V. Fox—who had married his mother’s sister—was named Assistant Secretary of the Navy and his Uncle Captain S. Phillips Lee—married to his father’s sister—commander of a Navy vessel.

Almost overnight the city he knew changed. War had broken out. Men and women stopped what they were doing and ran outside to read flyers, seek information, and watch soldiers march by. Meadows and parks disappeared under tents, barracks and corals; private homes turned into boarding houses, soup kitchens sprang up, a shadow army of barbers, tailors, cooks, blacksmiths, shoemakers, medics, and nurses rose alongside the uniformed army. A young boy might think that war was exciting, especially if he felt close to an uncle like Frank who was eager to fight—but perhaps he also understood its gravity when he looked into his father’s and the President’s eyes.

Woodbury was nine when his grandfather invited Robert E. Lee, a cousin of his Uncle Captain Lee, to 1651 Pennsylvania Avenue in the spring of 1861. Perhaps he listened at the door when his grandfather offered Lee the command of the Union army on behalf of President Lincoln. He might have heard what the famous general answered, as recorded years later in his memoirs, “If I owned the four million slaves, I would cheerfully sacrifice them to the preservation of the Union, but to lift my hand against my own State and people is impossible.” Two weeks later, Robert E. Lee resigned his commission after 30 years in the Army of the United States and joined the Confederacy.

Perhaps Robert E. Lee was just another important visitor to Woodbury. There seemed to be so many of them. But the first battle

between Union and Confederate soldiers—later called the Battle of Bull Run—must have captured his imagination. The city of Washington fevered with excitement. A thousand carriages, picnic baskets in tow, rushed to one of the first engagements between North and South at Bull Run. When the Union was routed, its soldiers raced carriages in a headlong dash for safety, clogging Highway Bridge—today’s 14th Street Bridge and the principal bridge back into town. It wasn’t until terrified citizens had locked their doors behind them that they learned of the Confederate failure to give full pursuit.

Woodbury and his family must have felt the same fear their neighbors did and wondered if the Confederates would drive them and the President out of town. At least the Blairs could take refuge at Silver Spring or Falkland, but the President had no country estate, though he would surely have been welcome to come with them. Lincoln was popular with the Blair children, not in the least because he played ball with them. Years later, Woodbury recalled Lincoln’s lanky arms and legs flying and coat tails flapping as he raced about the lawn. Since the Confederates did not march into Washington, Woodbury, his father, and grandfather continued to walk in and out of the White House almost as if it were their own home, and everyone who couldn’t do so thought this to be a great privilege. Would a boy in Woodbury’s position feel that his family was the most important in the world? Probably. Would that boy have felt empowered? Most likely he would have.

CHAPTER 2

WOODBURY BLAIR  
IN HIS OWN RIGHT

Up to now, the story of Woodbury Blair and that of his extraordinary family has been told from the outside, i.e., by a third-person ‘objective’ narrator. In the second part of *Washington’s Second Blair House*, Woodbury will be able to “speak for himself,” at least intermittently, through his letters. Although the outside narrator must continue the story, Wood’s own words can make him come alive. Woodbury rarely comments on his own times directly—in stark contrast to his father, uncle, and grandfather who couldn’t help but comment, analyze, and influence what went on around them—but he did occasionally talk about himself in ways that shed light on his times.

More than 200 of Woodbury’s hand-written letters have survived from his boarding school days, his first year at Harvard Law School, and the first twenty years of his life as a Washington attorney. Shortly after his marriage to Emily Neville Wallach in 1907, the public letters stop, leaving us with very few first-hand accounts for the last 25 years of his life.

The overwhelming part of his boyhood letters were written to his mother Minna in Washington, usually addressed to “Mrs. M. E. Blair, Care of Hon. M. Blair, Washington, D.C.” The Blair family was so prominent that no street address needed to be given. His father Montgomery was only addressed in critical times, i.e. when Wood was in trouble. The later letters from Washington, almost all penned at his law office, were almost exclusively addressed to his younger brother Gist, first in Princeton and then in St. Louis where Gist practiced law for more than twenty years. There is a sprinkling of letters to his youngest brother Montgomery, twelve years his junior, while Montgomery was a student at Princeton. Although his older sister Minna and her husband Richie are frequently mentioned in Wood’s letters to Gist, we have no correspondence directly addressed to her.

The two years before Woodbury was sent off to private school, 1861 to 1863, were banner years in the life of his father and grandfather. As close advisors to President Lincoln—Montgomery in an official and Francis Preston in a private capacity—both men enjoyed the President’s confidence and the prestige and satisfaction of helping shape national policy. Unfortunately, their time of service also coincided with the greatest crisis in the life of the nation that would eventually lead to their own crisis with the President—but not for some time. Montgomery and his father are credited with strengthening Lincoln’s resolve to re-enforce Fort Sumter and helping to ensure that the administration took a tough stance vis-à-vis the southern Rebels.



The Blairs and Lincoln saw eye to eye on most major issues; both were opposed to the spread of slavery into the new territories and both favored resettlement of slaves. But slowly and imperceptibly, the issue of slavery that had brought them together would pry them apart—a process hastened by a series of impetuous actions on the part of Frank Blair, most prominently the so-called Fremont affair. As the war progressed, or rather did not progress, the question of slavery took on new dimensions. Freed slaves were eager to fight for the Union and Southern slaves eager to run away and join them. Lincoln had to consider their value to the war effort, but he did more than just that. He discussed the concerns of African-Americans directly with them, rather than deciding on them without their participation, and he was the first American president to invite “Negroes” such as Frederick Douglass to the White House. As a result, he abandoned the resettlement idea and gave serious thought to the emancipation of slaves. In 1863, he began work on the Emancipation Declaration—initially opposed by Montgomery and Seward. After the Battle of Antietam, he presented it to his cabinet and subsequently to the nation amid great cheers from all progressive Republicans.

As political life became more difficult for the Blairs, war touched them personally. In the summer of 1863, General Early and his confederate troops marched through Maryland and burned down Falkland. Silver Spring was spared. Fortunately, Francis Preston had organized a fishing trip to Pennsylvania for his grandchildren, Montgomery, and himself. No members of the family were home. Montgomery’s friends wanted to seek financial help from the

government for his loss, but he wouldn't hear of it. How could he accept help, when a similar fate befell countless others in the nation? He would take care of his family himself. His stoic attitude in the face of disaster is to be admired, especially since only a year earlier Montgomery and Minna had lost their eight-year-old daughter Mary during a fever epidemic. The war, the death of their child, and an increasingly beleaguered position in the President's Cabinet must have produced tensions in the Blair home at 1651 Pennsylvania Avenue. Perhaps Montgomery and Minna wanted to shield their oldest son Woodbury from these hardships, at least as much as possible, by sending him off to private school. And of course, they wanted to provide him with the best education.

Under the circumstances, it would be understandable if the voice we hear in Woodbury's letters from school were sad, timid, or shy, but this is not the case; instead, it is assertive, the voice of a boy who knew his worth. Only the first few letters give an indication of homesickness. In 1863, he writes to his mother Minna, "I never think of home now at all for I have got use (sic) to be away," but continues somewhat wistfully, "a fellow lent me his watch today and I wore it to church it reminded me how you used to lend me your watch" (1863). Strikingly, not one of his letters ever says "I miss you" or "I love you."

Already in 1864, he writes of operating a hen house with two other boys which yields "at least 4 eggs a day." He and the boys acquired the hens from a man by paying him 75 cents and giving him 2 "opossums" and a rabbit. One must be careful with over interpretation of youthful writing, but in this case it is tempting to

detect the later “entrepreneur.” Woodbury always knew the value of money; he would turn into a successful lawyer and businessman and he would leave behind a considerable fortune at the time of his death. There are many references to money; everything Wood purchased is chronicled to the penny, and he also frequently requests money. Practical initiative and money consciousness characterize young Woodbury Blair from the start.

Also characteristic is a well-developed sense of self-worth which must have been nourished by an understanding of his family’s influential position within the life of the nation. In June of 1865, he writes from Burlington, Vermont, “Do you think that the teachers have any right to make the boys go without their meals if they do not know their lessons?” making it perfectly clear how he himself viewed the matter, “I do not care if [the teachers] send me away I will have my meals or leave the school,” and “You pay for my board as well as my schooling, so I think that I have a right to eat as much as I want.”

Needless to say, Woodbury hated school and the restrictions it imposed and earned his share of demerits while in Vermont. In his eyes, the demerits were usually not his, but other people’s fault. Thus he reports to his mother in October of 1865, “I did not speak a word all day today in the study and Mr. Gibson gave me those demerits out of spite,” and in later letters, he suspects and accuses his mother: “I don’t think I have heard or read of a mother who was so desirous of finding out something . . . of entertaining a suspicion.”

Reviewing his protestations of innocence (at times accusing teachers, other times classmates or circumstances of doing him wrong) one is left with the distinct impression that this boy loved

straightforward and not so straightforward adventure and resented anyone who stood in his way. One finds little evidence in the correspondence that he felt much enthusiasm for books or learning, not even in his later letters.

While Woodbury had to contend with ‘spiteful teachers,’ his father slowly but inevitably had to give way to the radicals in his own party, represented by Fremont, an ardent political enemy since his confrontation with Frank Blair in Missouri. After the successful battle for Atlanta, Lincoln was advised, as he had been before, that holding on to Montgomery would cost him tens of thousands of votes. This time the President listened when it became clear that the movement for Fremont as President threatened to draw away the German vote (Fremont had issued an order for the emancipation of slaves owned by rebel Missourians as early as 1861 and became a hero to all “progressive Americans,” including the Germans). On September 23, 1864, Lincoln wrote to Montgomery, “You have generously said to me more than once that, whenever your resignation could be a relief to me, it was at my disposal. That time has come.”

Lincoln did not act from political power motives alone, but must have understood that Montgomery, and indeed all the Blairs, could not follow where he was leading. Montgomery himself, however, must have seen his demise primarily within the party-political context rather than the larger, ideological one. But he resigned gracefully, ending his letter to Lincoln with, “I cannot take leave of you without renewing the expression of my gratitude for the uniform kindness which has marked your course toward me.”

The position of Postmaster General—rather than Secretary of War, which he left in 1864—might have caused lesser men to spend the chaotic times of the Civil War on the sidelines, but not Montgomery. When he took over, the Pony Express still galloped west, and arcane practices, such as the right of certain postmasters to frank their own letters, still ruled the day. Montgomery abolished this right, commissioned national surveys, produced postal route maps, introduced indelible ink (cutting down on mountains of “dead letters”), set up Army post offices, and encouraged the mail trains (“traveling post offices”) to run at night, a practice that was unheard of.

One of his foremost achievements was the introduction of postal money orders, which are still in existence today, making the transfer of money safe and easy. The efficient and speedy delivery of mail became an important part of the war effort, just as it would be later for building the infrastructure of business and commerce during Reconstruction. Montgomery’s foresight, intelligence, and organizational talent contributed immeasurably to both.

Faced with the formidable task of keeping the country’s mail moving during war and under severe budgetary constraints, as well as preoccupied with the intense power struggles within his party—not to mention rebuilding Falkland—it is no wonder that Montgomery did not have the time to write to his son Woodbury at school. Communication with the children was Minna’s domain. But he did step in when Wood’s troubles accumulated to such a degree that he was suspended from school as a sophomore, a fate that had befallen his Uncle Frank thirty years earlier. There is reference to this

particular event in family correspondence, although the exact nature of the trouble remains unknown. Money did play a part.

We have, however, a revealing *mea culpa* letter from Woodbury to Montgomery who, we assume, came across as a serious, responsible, and dignified father. Interestingly, the few letters to his father admit to his own failings much more readily than do the letters to his mother, but in those days fathers were expected to set standards and mete out punishment while mothers were allowed to be softer and thus more open to emotional manipulation. We can also assume that his father had been presented with some irrefutable evidence by the school authorities. Wood's letter to Montgomery begins, "Your letters were received in due season and they caused me to reflect very seriously upon the subjects which I am sorry to say have not been regarded by me in light of sufficient importance, but I assure you I now fully realize the extent of my heedlessness and shall endeavor for the future to do everything in my power to atone if possible in some degree for the anxiety which I have caused you and my mother. That my expenses have been enormous this year, I know only too well, but I am now living as economical (*sic*) as possible, spending only what is absolutely necessary and as [of] next year will have no old bills to pay."

Although Wood clearly expressed his willingness to "atone," the language of his apologia is somewhat formulaic, even "lawyerly" with its many qualifications ("if possible in some degree," etc.) One is thus left with the impression that he was trying to reassure his father while already hinting at possible complications for his reformation process. All in all, one could say that Wood appears to have been

much more of a realist than an idealist, that he had the ability to recognize his own and the world's limitations—even though he was loath to admit to the former. For the rest of his school days, including Harvard, he appears to have struggled with the pull exerted by life, rather than the one exerted by books.

We can imagine his relief when he did succeed in graduating from Harvard in July of 1874. His joy—and surprise—are jubilantly recorded to his mother in July of 1874, “the greatest event of my life up to this time is over and I am perfectly satisfied with the result . . .” He was all the more “satisfied” because he firmly believed that he had failed, or, as he put it, “I thought then that all hope for me was gone.” This all changed at his graduation ceremony when a tutor called out, “Mr. Blair, you are one of the fortunate ones” and handed him his papers. Recalling the event, he wrote home, “I don’t think I have felt so well for years . . .”

He duly celebrated with friends and relatives—especially his Uncle Charles, a well-known judge, his maternal aunts, and cousin Lowery, all of whom had become a second family to him during his Cambridge days and would form an important part of his social life during his first and only year at Harvard Law School.

1874 was an invigorating year for Woodbury—he successfully graduated from Harvard, achieving what his family and society expected of him. His letters home reflected joy in their light-hearted tone, but it was not a good year for his father. Montgomery lost the nomination for Maryland’s Congressional seat. In hindsight, we can say that the Blairs’ influence on national politics had peaked by the late 1860s, but it would take years until they and their

contemporaries came to recognize that. For a very brief time after Andrew Johnson became president in 1865, the Blairs again occupied a privileged position. The doors to the White House were as open to them as they had been under Andrew Jackson and Abraham Lincoln, with one crucial difference—the man in the White House had neither the courage nor the shrewd intelligence of his predecessors, and he squandered the opportunity of appeasing a war-torn society. After failing to enlist Ulysses Grant for their moderate course, the Blairs became so frustrated that they decided to promote Frank Blair first for the presidency, then for the vice-presidency. The results were disastrous, helping to ensure a decisive victory for Ulysses Grant and the radical wing of the Republican Party. Montgomery felt especially bitter about his inability to be nominated in 1874, since he had intended to use his Congressional seat to fight the corrupt Grant administration.

All of these disappointments seemed to have passed Woodbury by, at least as far as we can ascertain. There are no discussions of politics in his letters from college. Instead, they reveal a preoccupation with social life at Harvard—where he joined the Hasty Pudding Club—and with the difficulties of his studies. But these difficulties had been miraculously overcome. He could now come home triumphantly.

The Washington he found on his return from Harvard was vastly different from the Washington he had left ten years earlier. The barracks, tents, and corrals from the feverish preparation of war had been dismantled and the city's parks restored. The legacy of the Civil War found striking expression in the monumentally impressive



Pension Building, erected to administer soldiers' pensions. Designed and built by General Montgomery Meigs in a free-style American adaptation of Michelangelo's Palazzo Farnese, it boggled citizens' eyes and minds. (Interestingly, it was Henri de Sibour, the architect of 1607 New Hampshire Avenue, whom the government would designate to remodel the Pension building in 1929 and again in 1934. But hard economic times put an end to such plans.)

In 1871, in order to govern the capital, Congress had set up a Board of Public Works that was soon headed by Alexander (Boss) Shepherd, one of Washington's most forward-looking planners and entrepreneurs. He focused his considerable energies on the infrastructure, building water and sewer systems, bridges, and sidewalks. He expanded and above all, *paved* the city's roads, lined them with trees, and installed gaslights. He also engaged in much speculative house building—for the benefit of the city, his own pockets, and those of his friends. Whatever his motives, Washington became a much more modern city, offering comfort and conveniences that soon attracted the fashionable and wealthy who arrived to spend the winter in Washington. Without Boss Shepherd, the impressive mansions around Dupont Circle might never have been built, and Woodbury might not have been inspired to add his own jewel to their architectural crown.

Woodbury must have been surprised by the many freed slaves that had flooded into his town and the ascendance of an African-American elite. During that far too short period of hope and exuberance after the war, Howard University was founded, offering liberal arts classes as well as professional training in medicine, law,

and education. In 1879, it received a partial “federal endowment”—the guarantee of annual grants—and by the turn of the century it had become a “national Negro university.”

Howard University was also to play an important role in the career of architect Henri de Sibour, who would design Woodbury’s later home on New Hampshire Avenue. A quarter century after Congress assured Howard’s survival, a young de Sibour entered a competition by the university for the design of a new, state of the art hospital.

Woodbury, the young Harvard Graduate, had a hard time leaving his family for law school that fall as we learn from one of the most touching letters to his mother, “I never before had such a strong desire to remain. It has always been very hard for me to fix upon a day for my departure, but this year I found it particularly disagreeable to make up my mind to start.” He adds a separate letter to his fourteen-year-old brother Gist with messages to sister Minna and Uncle Fur, who was possibly a teddy bear or family dog.

Dear Gist,  
I received your letter today and you must  
kiss mother tonight to put in a letter for  
me and pull Min’s hair, tell hur (sic) that I  
Sent it to hur and kick and poke uncle Fur  
and tell him to charge it To me,  
from Woody

Only five years later in September of 1879, Wood dispenses grown-up, practical advice to “his little brother” Gist who is about to

graduate. “In your last letter you referred to the subject of class photographs—if you are wise you will buy just as few as possible. In one or two years you will not remember who the men are and will regret every cent you paid out for them . . .” This is a vintage Woodbury comment, exhibiting the money-conscious realist.

By 1879, when this letter was written, Woodbury had been back in Washington for three years. Why did he return from Harvard Law School after just one year? This cannot be determined. Perhaps he had spent too much money or had not performed well enough academically; both are quite realistic conclusions given his past record. We do know that he enrolled at George Washington Law School and was admitted to the bar of the Supreme Court of the District of Columbia in 1877.

The Blair political machine that had once been in the vanguard of the slavery struggle and prepared the ground for Lincoln, only to lose ground with the times, was to be broken up by death just as Woodbury returned to Washington. On July 9, 1875, Wood’s uncle Frank, Congressman, Senator, unsuccessful presidential candidate and Civil War General, died in St. Louis. He was eulogized by Missouri’s political elite and by General Sherman, and a marble statue was commissioned for the rotunda of Capitol Hill where it still stands today. Young Woodbury must have mourned the loss of his uncle, that charming, daring swashbuckler who was so much livelier and jovial than his serious father.

Frank’s death, however, was hardest on his eighty-four-year-old father. Francis Preston lost a beloved son who was both a trouble maker and golden boy but, above all, a source of hope for his father’s

presidential dreams. With Frank's passing, Francis Preston lost his drive and ambition. He died, barely a year later, in October of 1876, leaving a complicated will that was to be administered and eventually sorted out by his faithful son Montgomery. Francis Preston's death and his contributions to the nation were recognized in major newspapers throughout the country, the New York Times foremost among them.

The deaths of two towering family figures must have upset the Blair home deeply. Montgomery lost more than a father and brother, he lost his life-long "running mates," and with them the irreplaceable driving force for all that defined his political and much of his professional and personal life. He had now become the last of his kind, for he must have understood that Woodbury did not share in the family passion.

Montgomery and his family also took care of the debts left behind by Frank. It would be understandable if Wood's mother Minna—who had no role in public life—suffered more from the burdens politics imposed on her husband than the rewards it brought. Perhaps Woodbury's preoccupation with money was instilled by the "negative" example of his uncle Frank, and his disinclination towards politics was confirmed by the realization that it did not allow time for leisure and the enjoyment of the finer things in life.

Wood must have mourned his grandfather's death, for Francis Preston was said to have adored his grandchildren, spending as much time with them as he could, giving them the run of the house at Silver Spring and arranging pony and hayrides for them. For the Blair family—and in many ways for the country—an era came to an end

with the passing of Francis Preston, a man of the “old school” of politics—a firebrand, to be sure, but also a man who did not seek financial gain through political office.

The times in which Woodbury lived, by contrast, would be characterized by financial excesses and—beginning with the Grant administration—by financial corruption in government that became the bane of his father’s existence toward the end of his life.

Montgomery never recovered from the election shenanigans surrounding the Tilden/Hayes election. Together with William C. Corcoran and two others, he founded a daily paper, the *Union*, and turned it into a lobbying platform for Tilden as president, declaring the Electoral Commission unconstitutional. The *Union* folded when it failed in this effort, although it had become the largest morning daily in town within only two months of its founding. While the country settled down without public outcry after Haye’s inauguration, Montgomery couldn’t let it be. In 1878, he persuaded the legislature of Maryland—to which he had been elected—to pass a resolution asking the attorney-general of Maryland to bring a case before the Supreme Court with the aim of declaring the decision of the Electoral Commission null and void. It led nowhere and may have been one more reason for the less ambitious Woodbury to stay out of the “family game.”

By the time Montgomery died in 1883, Woodbury had worked in his father’s office for seven years, specializing in real estate and banking. He had also helped run his father’s unsuccessful campaign for Senator of Maryland in 1882, an experience that must have strengthened his resolve to remain a private citizen. The death

of his father must have impacted Woodbury greatly—it may also have granted some relief, though we can only speculate. After all, he had worked under the scrutiny of a man who had bailed him out of serious trouble at least twice. The fact that Woodbury and Gist rarely, if ever, refer to their father either positively or negatively in their letters as if they had grown up without a male parent is perhaps less striking when we consider that there are few emotional comments in the letters all together. Men of the “Victorian age” were not expected to show emotions.

Public reaction to Montgomery’s death must have reconfirmed the prominence of his own family. The president delayed a trip out of town, ordered flags to be flown half-mast, and the Post Office was closed to honor Montgomery’s role as Postmaster General and prominent citizen. He was laid to rest in Rock Creek cemetery.

Woodbury’s practice appears to have supported him comfortably, although he was apt to complain about slow business. Surely he inherited some of his father’s clients and was able to gain new ones. He was, after all, a very well-connected young man who knew the city and its power brokers. His expenses were reasonable since he lived at home with his mother and sister Minna. His youngest brother Montgomery attended Princeton as had Gist before him. Gist, in the meantime, had moved on to St. Louis where he established himself as a lawyer; he would not return to Washington until 1907. The two brothers maintained a lively correspondence, with most letters concentrating on business and legal matters, including shared investment interests.

By contrast, the few letters to his mother—since Minna and Wood lived together there was little need to correspond—were more personal; they attempted at humor and are for this reason telling. The reader senses affection, an affection that must have been, at least in part, transferred to Gist after his mother's death in 1887. A letter excerpt from the early eighties written to Minna from a business trip in Alabama states "There were but two passengers in the Pullman Car in which I happened to be. An old woman who I should imagine was some relation to Harding's stepmother from the way she scolded and found fault with every one and every thing—and myself. I did not speak to her except to answer on one occasion when she addressed me directly that I thought the car was perfectly comfortable, which had the desired effect." We have come to know this cool, assertive but also funny young man from earlier letters. The year his mother died, Wood repeatedly expressed concern over her health to Gist. While the handwriting of these letters—forever changing its slant from left to right and back again—showed emotional upheaval, his choice of words remained controlled.

Then, in February 1892, Wood wrote a most unusual letter, filled with great emotion, much of it anger. Though the letter dealt with important matters—his supposed engagement to a Mrs. McKay, whom the family, especially his aunt and sister, could not accept—its tone and attitude conjure up the angry boy from Vermont. This time, Aunt Ellen slipped into the role of the teacher who gave him demerits, and the stakes are much higher: they involve love, money, and his position in society. Money and scandal were the twin

embarrassments he had suffered before. The newly added one is love—or at least infatuation.

The letter begins quite civilly, “No one can regret more than I the present condition of affairs or more fully appreciate just what it is with the family attitude assumed towards me personally by one member of the family . . .” But as soon as Aunt Ellen is named, he cannot hold back, “I can only account for Ellen’s behavior and insulting letters on the grounds of insanity. The dye which she has used for many years on her hair has effected (sic) her brain . . .” and “she imagines when she appears in public, decked out in gaudy trumpery that she personally holds the position she did in Pierce’s administration.” Wood’s anger was also directed at his younger brother Montgomery who had apparently reported to their sister Minna whenever Mrs. McKay came to Wood’s office. All in all, we seem to hear the voice of an adolescent rather than that of a forty-year-old man.

Woodbury was in a delicate position. He was linked to a divorced woman with children who had been accused by her husband Gordon of infidelities. Whether these infidelities reflected back on Woodbury or not was not mentioned, but Wood made a point of informing his brother that Mrs. McKay was as “innocent as a child” when Mr. McKay married her, according to Mr. McKay’s own testimony. Wood also reported that her former husband “has been to see her frequently and would marry her again tomorrow if she were willing,” but that Mrs. McKay “would rather die than marry him . . .” Are we then to assume that she would rather live and marry Woodbury? Not quite.



“Whatever our marital wishes might be, she could never marry anyone until some settlement was made and money placed in the Trust Company for the benefit of her children. Her mother and sister by an unfortunate failure in some business matters are now entirely dependent on her. *No man could assume such a burden* (my italics) and she would not of her own will permit a man to support the family.” Although Wood was quick to add that Mrs. McKay feels as he does, his categorical statement leaves no doubt that marriage was not an option, at least not under the circumstances. It was quite possible that he hoped the circumstances would change—i.e. that Mr. McKay might have set up an adequate trust for the children—or that he himself would eventually make enough money to support so many people, but we cannot know for sure. Wood reported further that Mr. McKay plans to “establish himself as a philanthropist” and intended to leave his property to public institutions and not, as might be expected, to the children. Wood took the time and trouble to look into the matter: “I have proof of his position with this matter.”

What then did he expect the family to do? Above all, he hoped that they would not turn against him but take a “quiet attitude without necessarily sponsoring or encouraging . . . refrain from saying anything disagreeable about Mrs. McKay should she be attacked in your presence. The fact of my reported engagement would justify what you could in her defense.” In sum, he expected family loyalty, a virtue he had consistently seen practiced by his father, grandfather, and uncle.

We have spent so much time on one letter because it offers a rare glance into Woodbury's emotions as well as into the Blair family dynamics. It also confirms our overall assessment of Woodbury as a realist and shows the importance he placed on his family's name and legacy. Time and again letters written by him and his brothers refer to family honor, for example Montgomery's letter to Gist of Nov 9, 1891: "Wood and I have joined The Society of the Sons of the Revolution by way of doing some honor to those of our ancestors who were in the scrap, and keeping alive the spirit of '76." Woodbury himself reports on a visit to Uncle Charles—the Counselor—shortly after the family upheaval over Mrs. McKay, "The Counselor and I understand each other and I am quite certain he has no particular worries or anxieties on my account or that the family will ever be humiliated or have any reason to be ashamed of any act of mine—where the family is concerned."

The McKay story gives rise to further conjecture. Firstly, Wood mentioned in a letter that he knew Marion McKay while a student at Harvard. One of his classmates was engaged to her. She, however, left Cambridge at age 16, and the engagement eventually "died the death of school girl engagements." Might Woodbury have been in love with her then? Or possibly ever since? This would throw a more romantic light on the McKay episode and might also explain why he had not married as a young man. Or did the young girl's presence at Cambridge have anything to do with the scandal that almost led to his expulsion from Harvard? The letters do not provide us with an answer.

Secondly, later letters to Gist between 1894 and 1896 quite casually refer to Wood's plans to meet up with Mrs. McKay in Paris, without any further explanation or any sign of embarrassment. There appear to have also been no protestations on the part of the family. He had not married Mrs. McKay. He had not bestowed the family name on a divorced woman accused of infidelity. If he chose to see her during his vacation—especially abroad—that was his business. The way Wood describes his paramour in later letters leaves the reader with the impression that he was quite content to keep the relationship at an informal level. On June 16, 1896, he writes to Gist, “I will meet her there [Paris]. I don't know if she will take an apartment or go to a hotel or what she will do before I arrive. After that, much depends on her plans where I go. She usually makes a thousand plans and when the time comes does something entirely different from anything she has planned. I never make any plans, therefore am never obliged to change my arrangements. So, we therefore hit it off very well together.”

The final irony is that the building lot for Woodbury's residence on 1607 New Hampshire came to him through the estate of Aunt Ellen whose “brain had been effected” by hair dye. Did he ever think of her as he walked the ground with his architect or saw the walls of his splendid house rise up in the air? Was the baronial mansion—apart from being a comfortable home for him and his wife—in some way or another also a snub at her?

The name of Mrs. McKay figures less prominently as the 1890s come to a close, leaving the reader to wonder if Woodbury and his lady had settled into such a comfortable relationship that it no

longer warranted any mention or if the relationship had already run its course. Most of Wood's letters to Gist for the remainder of the decade concern business, as they had before that emotional interlude of 1892, and would for years afterwards.

What is most striking about the period between 1883, when Montgomery died, and 1907, when Wood begins a new phase of life by entering into marriage, is the absence of any discussion of political, social, or cultural issues. Even current events are rarely discussed. The *Guilded Age*, characterized by industrial expansion, corporate empire building by the likes of J.P. Morgan and Andrew Carnegie, and the accumulation of tremendous wealth alongside social injustice and the development of urban ghettos, was the period of Woodbury's most active professional and social life. It was *his* age, but we find no mention of presidential elections or of major events such as the tragic massacre of Indians at Wounded Knee in 1890. We find no discussion of the Spanish-American War of 1898 that began as a 'liberation war,' stirring the hearts of Americans, but quickly turned into an instrument for gaining land and power, marking the entry of the United States' into world politics. There is no mention of the struggle between the Democrats and Republicans or the rise and fall of a populist party, which would have preoccupied his father and grandfather; likewise no comment is made on developments in the South, where white Southerners established and jealously guarded a system of segregation, often enforced by violence. There is also no mention of Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, the novels of Henry James, or the poems of Emily Dickinson.

Surely, Woodbury read the papers and participated in the discussion of current events at his clubs, but none apparently stirred him enough to make him vent his anger, outrage, or concern in letters to his brother. He simply wasn't the political animal his father, uncle, or grandfather had been. Instead of trying to bring about change, he "rode" the waves of his day and tried to assess how current events would affect business and real estate. As a white, protestant, upper-class male, he was bound to benefit from a political and social system dominated by other white, protestant, upper-class males. And this he did. He did so by restricting himself to a business sector and geographic area he knew well—real estate in Washington and St. Louis. The city and power structure of Washington was his sphere—not the White House or Congress. He knew it inside out, he served it as a lawyer, and he made use of his knowledge as a business man. Gist did the same in St. Louis. Together, the brothers did well for themselves and for each other. Their letters are like a ball game, one brother batting a suggestion, the other receiving it and batting another back.

Occasionally, family concerns surface in the letters. Wood seems to have felt despair over his older sister's unhappy marriage, certainly so when he wrote to Gist in 1895, "I am very uncertain about going away . . . and would give anything or do anything in the world for her happiness and comfort." But over time he seemed to have resigned himself to her situation, although the occasional sharp remark about Minna's husband Richie will continue to enliven his letters.

Falkland and its need for repairs is another recurring theme. There were discussions as to the disposition of the country estate among family members, especially when Gist considered returning to Washington in 1896 and possibly to Falkland. He and Wood discussed Gist's possible affiliation with the Trust Company, where Woodbury was a director, but the plan apparently came to naught. The topic was dropped and Wood continued to address his letters to St. Louis. In 1895, brother Montgomery, the youngest of the Montgomery Blair clan, married Edith Draper, a young woman who was well received by the family. The young couple and their rapidly growing family spent summers at Falklands.

The year 1907 turned out to be another banner year in terms of family news and written expression of emotion, certainly the most eventful year since the family drama of 1892, caused by Wood's entanglement with Mrs. McKay. 1907 is also the last year that allows us to follow events through Woodbury's and his brother's eyes. Their correspondence—at least intermittently revealing—ends when Gist returns to Washington permanently in late 1907. Afterwards, we are left to speculate or piece together information from other sources.

Early in 1907, Woodbury makes one of his rare comments on politics, or rather the effects of politics on the financial sector. He writes to Gist from New York, "I am over here for a day or two and a more depressed crowd you never saw. No one sees any hope anywhere in the financial world—but I have seen greenbackism, free silver and Mr. Rooseveltism, and I don't believe this last Crank is any worse than the others." He must have been referring to the panic of 1907—headed off brilliantly by J. P. Morgan, who was instrumental in

organizing a special fund to prop up financial institutions. The panic passed.

As of May, Wood's letters concern the health of his youngest brother, Montgomery, who had returned from a Panama Canal trip with "Panama fever." He was hospitalized in New York, and for weeks his life hung in the balance. Wood reported faithfully on his brother's condition to Gist and discussed the practical steps he and the family took to care for Montgomery's children so that his wife Edith could stay with her husband in New York. He also, of course, expressed his concern.

But, as soon as it became clear that the balance had tipped in favor of life, Wood suddenly informed Gist "I cabled you immediately when I settled the date of my marriage . . . ." as if Montgomery's dangerous illness—and thoughts on the frailty of life—had spurred on such a major decision. We, the readers of the letters, are startled. Marriage? We had seen no reference to it, though surely Woodbury must have told his brother of his serious intentions before this, for example, when Gist came through Washington on his way to Europe. Or Gist may have known of the impending marriage for some time. All we know is that Wood sounds happy and eager to have his brother experience the same good fortune. He ends his letter with "My advice to you, young man is to go and do likewise." Who then is Wood's fiancée and from where does she come?

At age fifty-five, Woodbury was mature and experienced enough to recognize a good woman when he met one, and, according to lore, he had known his bride, Emily Neville Wallach for many years. The fact that he makes no reference to her name or

circumstances is another indication that she was part of the Blair social circle. Emily was the daughter of Richard Wallach, mayor of Washington from 1861 to 1868, i.e. during the crucial period of the Civil War and Reconstruction. The Blairs and Wallachs met when Woodbury was a boy of eight, if not before. We know from city records that the Marshalls of Washington, Richard Wallach, and Francis Preston and his son Montgomery Blair were among the honoraries greeting President-elect Lincoln when he first arrived in the city.

We also know via Emily's niece that the couple courted for almost twelve years and that Woodbury wanted to have made his fortune before marrying. By this reckoning, the courtship began around 1895, a time when Woodbury was still seeing Mrs. McKay in Paris. Sometime between then and 1907 his business affairs prospered, and he must have come to recognize Emily's superior value. Unfortunately, we get only a few glimpses of her personality through two letters written by her and through Wood's comments to Gist, but these glimpses are overwhelmingly positive.

By his own account, Wood did not need the church's formal blessing for his union. "I am too old for that farce," he writes to Gist on July 5, 1907, and comments on the wedding breakfast that was to follow the church service, ". . . breakfasts are amusing for children but not . . . dignified for a man of my age." This is Woodbury, the man of the world, speaking. But he always referred to his bride Emily with affection and pride, "Have seen Mrs. Fox, Ellen and Cousin Mary and they are all delighted with Emily." (Letter to Gist; June 18, 1907).



Emily Neville Wallach must have been an amiable and charming woman, and, of course, she was neither a divorcee, nor a mother with overwhelming financial obligations for her family, and she was part of Washington's established society. Woodbury and Emily came from the same social class; they understood each other. It is a groom at ease who reports to Gist, "When Robert [servant at 1651 Pennsylvania Ave] was packing up my things [to visit the aunts] I told him to put some of my old socks in my trunk as I thought Emily would like to make herself useful and mend up a few during our outing. She has not commenced yet, but I have been doing something more difficult than sewing—hooking up the back of a dress. Did you ever try to work those damned little hooks and eyes? Give me mending socks any time. Emily joins me in much love," (June 18, 1907).

All lightheartedness and down-to-earth expectations of darning socks aside, it would appear that the couple were well suited for each other. Later that year, Wood writes from Narragansett, where he and Emily have gone to escape Washington's summer heat, that he has not been feeling well, but "Emily has come up a trump. She has discovered to me a new phase of life and comfort. I may have had such a care when a child (sic) . . . but it left only a dim memory, almost impersonal." What an uplifting experience for Woodbury and a somewhat sad reflection on his childhood. "Care" is something he "may" have experienced as a child. If so, it has remained a shadow experience, an almost impersonal memory, but affectionate care now becomes a reality through Emily.





PHOTOGRAPHS



*Washington's Second Blair House*



*Front Door*



*First Floor Hallway*



*First Floor Hallway*



*Reading Room  
Former Library*





*Reading Room  
Former Library*



*Reading Room  
Former Library*



*Reading Room  
Former Library*



*Staircase to Second Floor*



*Orchestra Space with Fireplace*



*Second Floor Landing*



*Second Floor Landing*





*Lecture Hall*  
*Former Ballroom*

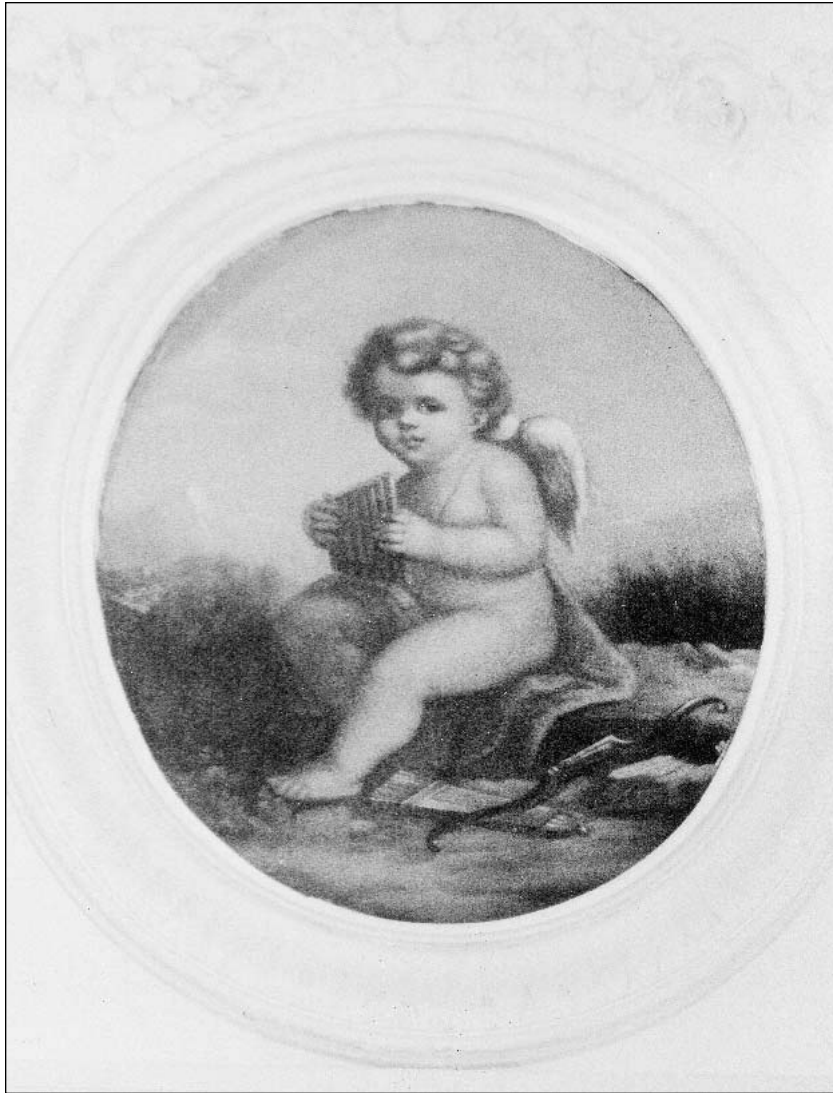




*Lecture Hall*  
*Former Ballroom*



*Medallions*  
*Dining Room*



*Medallions*  
*Dining Room*



*Medallions*  
*Dining Room*



*Medallions*  
*Dining Room*



### CHAPTER 3

## WOODBURY AND EMILY BLAIR AT 1607 NEW HAMPSHIRE AVENUE

*I*n April 1910, Woodbury received the official city permit to erect a private residence on two lots along New Hampshire Avenue. The decision to build a stately home was a major step for the middle-aged couple, especially since both Emily and Woodbury had never left their parent's home. What motivated them to undertake such a substantial venture in mid-life?

Within months of the couple's wedding, Gist returned from St. Louis and moved into 1651 with them. Space and privacy thus became more precious. And, after living with her widowed mother for years, Emily must have been eager to have a home of her own and would have expected to preside over her own household after marriage. She may well have brought a handsome dowry into the marriage that could help offset the undertaking. Even the panic of 1907 may have influenced the decision to build. It had shown up the dangers of stock investments, inducing a prudent man to invest in land, mortar, and stone. And finally, by 1910 Woodbury had made his fortune, mostly through his own efforts but also helped by family

inheritance. Aunt Ellen, his mother's sister, died in 1909, leaving most of her estate to her nephews and nieces, including the two building lots on New Hampshire Avenue. Woodbury bought out the other heirs and applied for a permit to build.

Woodbury was at the pinnacle of his career; his marriage to Emily had, if anything, solidified his position in society, driving away any trace of scandal that may have lingered because of the McKay affair. If he wanted to give visible expression to his professional achievement, social position, and respectable status, now was the time to do so. Upper- and middle-class America was rich in 1910. Woodbury's wealth reflected that of his city and that of the nation.

While Boss Shepherd had laid the groundwork for making Washington an attractive and comfortable place to live in the 1870s, the Park Commission of 1901 added—or rather revived—the concept of dignity, harmony, and gravitas, envisioned for the nation's capital by its original planner L'Enfant. Under its watchful eye—and that of the Commission of Fine Arts and later the National Capital Park Commission—Union Station and the Lincoln Memorial were built, as were the Museum of Natural History, the Pan American Union building, the American Red Cross building and Constitution Hall of the Daughters of the American Revolution—formidable structures, meant to draw attention to themselves and the achievements of the nation within generously laid out spaces.

The area around Dupont Circle benefited from both the efforts of these commissions and from the largesse of the Dupont family. When Congress decided to honor the Civil War hero Admiral Francis du Pont in 1882, it commissioned a small bronze statue to be



placed in former Pacific Circle. The du Ponts had a more exalted vision in mind. They hired, at their own cost, architect Henry Bacon and sculptor Daniel Chester French, the team that designed and built the Lincoln Memorial, to give shape to their desires. The result was the flower-star design around a large marble fountain, which can still be seen today, surrounded by a ring of trees.

Around this circle, which came to rival New York's upper Fifth Avenue as *the* place to live, the homes of some of the Gilded Age's most prominent citizens sprang up: senators, publishers, retired statesmen, gold mine moguls, speculators, and businessmen. Let us look at some of their mansions, since Woodbury and Emily would have known them and might have been inspired by them while planning to build their own home.

In 1881, Senator James G. Blaine of Maine built the brick and terra cotta Queen Anne Mansion at 2000 Massachusetts Avenue. As the Republican Speaker of the House he ran for President three times. The Leiter family—partners of Marshall Field—lived there after him, with the future Lady Curzon and Vicereine of India looking out on Dupont Circle. In 1904, the house was bought by George Westinghouse, the founder of one of America's blue chip firms who lived there until his death.

In 1892, Sarah Adams Whittemore, a cousin of Henry Adams, moved into her impressive Arts and Craft mansion on 1526 New Hampshire Avenue, designed by Harvey Page. It is one of the least pompous dwellings in the area, characterized by clean lines. Later owners of the Page Mansion include the banker John C. Weeks

who served as Under Secretary of War under Harding and Coolidge. Today it houses the Women's National Democratic Club.

From 1901-1903 the architect Stanford White built a white marble Renaissance palazzo at 15 Dupont Circle for Robert Wilson Patterson, the publisher of the Chicago Tribune. Two wings adjoin a center block in a wide U-shaped plan, creating the impression of outstretched arms. As if taking her cue from the building, Patterson's daughter "Cissy," owner of the *Times-Herald*, met the world with outstretched arms. Throughout her life she made a regular appearance in American and European high society columns.

Grandeur attracts grandeur. In 1903, architect Henry Anderson completed a residence for Irish immigrant Thomas Walsh on 2020 Massachusetts Avenue. Walsh had made his money from gold mining and let the world know it by embedding a brick of gold into his front porch. The Walshes attracted high society to their parties which were so lavish that even the New York Times reported on them. But their ostentatious mansion was not a happy home. Mr. Walsh fell into depression and died of alcoholism; his daughter Evalyn spurned the mansion after her father's death. By then she was the owner of the Hope Diamond, which, true to form, did not bring her luck. She and her husband, heir to the *Washington Post*, Edward Beale McLean, went through a fortune of a hundred million dollars while in the prime of their life. Ed McLean's parents, John McClean and his wife, attended Woodbury's and Emily's quiet wedding in 1907.

Across from the Walshes lived Richard and Mary Townsend—each an heir to a railroad fortune—who had Carrere &

Hastings (and Frederic Law Olmstead as landscape architect) transform a Victorian home into a modern mansion á la Petit Trianon. The architects and landscaper succeeded in creating a pleasing city chateau where the Townsends gathered the elite of Washington around them. Their daughter Mathilde married Sumner Welles, who served the FDR administration in several key positions.

Pride in nation and family were of the utmost importance to the Andersons, who commissioned Little and Brown to build them a home on 2118 Massachusetts Avenue worthy of their fine furniture, art, and many other treasures. The imposing mansion of limestone veneer with its beautiful portico and arched gates was finished in 1905 and became the scene of splendid balls and receptions. The house was—and remains—filled with busts and portraits of the couples' ancestors, among them Revolutionary and Civil War heroes, also with exquisite tapestries, maps, flags, and other Americana. Fittingly, the mansion was bequeathed to the Society of the Cincinnati, established by George Washington for the officers who fought in the War of Independence and their male heirs.

Clarence Moore, a Virginia tycoon, commissioned Jules Henri de Sibour to design a beautifully proportioned palais in the Louis XV fashion at 1746 Massachusetts Avenue. De Sibour may have taken a good look at the eclectic Walsh mansion or the ornate Anderson House and decided to create a mansion of simple elegance instead. At least that's what one might conclude when admiring the harmonious façade of the yellow brick mansion. A guide for the Washington Chapter of the American Institute of Architects calls it "one of the finest houses ever erected in the city."

Woodbury and Emily may have thought so, too, for they chose its architect, Jules Henri de Sibour, to design their new home. De Sibour's life and career will be outlined in the following chapter, but we can say this much now: no one was more qualified by birth, training, and professional association to serve the city's elite than de Sibour. He was the son of a French Count, trained at the Ecole de Beaux Arts in Paris, and had worked for two leading New York architectural firms. Perhaps more importantly, he had already designed several beautiful mansions in the Dupont area, most notably the Clarence Moore residence, the Thomas Gaff residence, which is today's Columbian Embassy, and the Alexander Stewart residence, today's Embassy of Luxembourg.

Woodbury and Emily may well have seen and admired his houses on social occasions, and they may have known their architect personally. After all, both de Sibour and Woodbury were members of the Metropolitan, the Alibi, and the Chevy Chase Country Club. Not only had de Sibour redesigned the Club in 1910, but he was a very active member there, serving as the premier boxing judge. Wood and de Sibour may have even met in Paris when Jules Henri was a student at the Ecole and Woodbury still summered there.

Paris, the city of grand boulevards, elegant houses, and city palaces, had impressed Woodbury's aesthetic sensibilities. He even toyed with the idea of opening an office there in 1895 as we know from a letter to Gist. "I can see wonderful opportunities here . . . If I could speak French . . . better, I would open a large office in Paris." We know that he was sensitive to architecture from a letter to Gist of July 5, 1907 in which he writes of a Mrs. Ellis, "I thought her house

had excellent lines and proportions.” Since there is almost no reference to literature, music, or the arts in Woodbury’s letters, this one stands out.

Emily, too, appears to have had some artistic flair and is credited with having persuaded de Sibour to design a Georgian entrance door to their home. According to family lore, she had a hand in painting the Putti of the Dining Room. Whatever the individual contributions of the couple may have been, together with their architect they succeeded in creating an exquisite Beaux Arts mansion, fit to receive high society and yet provide comfortable and attractive living space.

When their residence was finished in 1911, we may assume that it was furnished with the best from both the Blair and Wallach households. We know that a portrait of Woodbury’s grandfather, Francis Preston, graced the space above the library fireplace. By assigning such a prominent place to the painting—all visitors would have been ushered into the library before being received—Woodbury drew attention to his illustrious forebears and expressed pride in them.

We also know that Woodbury and Emily had their needs met by a staff of twelve—two chauffeurs, a butler, a lady’s maid, an upstairs maid, a chef, two kitchen helpers, a laundress, and two all-around helpers. The two chauffeurs lived on Corcoran Street where the cars were parked. All others were housed at 1607. In both design and usage, the house reflected the classical separation of the owners’ quarters from those of the servants. All front rooms reserved for public or receiving spaces faced the major Avenue. They boasted

large windows, and were connected by a beautiful staircase, while the back part with its functional rooms, such as the kitchen and servant quarters, was connected by a narrow stair and looked out on a small alley.

No written accounts of grand balls at 1607 are available, but we can assume that the couple—if for nothing else than to show off their exquisite home—gave their share of receptions, dinners, and the occasional ball, and that they made the rounds at social occasions in their neighborhood. They may have met the Prince of Wales in 1919—the later Duke of Windsor—when he stayed ten days with the Belmonts, their neighbors across the street at 1618 New Hampshire. After all, for eight years they had been neighbors of Perry Belmont, the grandson of Commodore Mathew Perry and future Ambassador to Spain. We also know that they were on good terms with their neighbor to their left, Republican Congressman John Dalzell, a successful corporate attorney and congressman who worked energetically on behalf of the railroads. After Dalzell left Washington, Sir Willmott Lewis, correspondent of *The Times of London*, became their new neighbor at 1603 New Hampshire.

As a man who enjoyed convivial gatherings, Woodbury was also very much involved in Washington's club life, so much so that one of his obituaries characterizes him as "Woodbury Blair, prominent lawyer and clubman." He was president of the exclusive Metropolitan Club, member of the Alibi Club, Columbia Historical Society, Chevy Chase Club, District Bar Association, New York University Club, and Newport Reading Room. Additionally, he had been president of the Grasslands Country Club, limited to a

membership of forty; only when a member died could a new one be inducted.

Family attachments remained strong. Emily's sister, niece, and nephew were regular visitors and the couple traveled for Sunday lunch to 1651 Pennsylvania Avenue for years after they had left the Blair House. Emily's niece, Mrs. E. Taylor Chewning, came to live with the couple as a child and was married from the Blair residence after Woodbury's death in 1939. She attests to the couple's gracious hospitality and recalls how the clank of the elevator provided her and her beaux with ample warning during her courting days. She also speaks of a cook who chased the children away with his cleaver. Her daughter, Emily Blair Chewning, was born at 1607.

Once a gentleman had amassed a fortune, he was expected to share part of it with the less fortunate. Woodbury was no exception. He devoted much of his time and some of his money to Emergency Hospital, whose growth he guided from a small neighborhood hospital to a large, modern city hospital over a period of 23 years. He joined its board in 1910, was elected president in 1913, and served in that capacity until his death in 1933. When he became affiliated with the place it boasted one horse-drawn ambulance and thirty beds. When he died, it occupied the north block of 1700 New York Avenue, contained 200 beds, modern "operating theatres," X-Ray and lab facilities, and was adjoined by a Nurse and Intern Home. Thousands of patients were treated there every year and two ambulances served the needs of emergency callers night and day. It is said that Woodbury visited the wards almost every day and lent an ear to everyone who approached him.

We can understand the attraction of guiding an enterprise—deciding on the hospital's future, its policy, and its staff—but making daily visits to the wards goes beyond the expected public service duty. It shows a deep commitment, attesting to a softer, more nurturing man—a man who never had the opportunity to care for his own children, a man who may have felt a life-long obligation toward his siblings by virtue of being the oldest son. And a man who may have grown to appreciate his own father's caring role as he grew older—after all, it had always been Montgomery who helped his brothers and kin with advice, practical action, and money whenever they needed it most.

Considering the duties of his law office, his many club obligations, and the almost daily involvement with the hospital, one wonders how much time Woodbury had left for entertaining at home. Furthermore, summers were spent away from Washington. Every May Woodbury and Emily motored to “Beech-Holm,” their summer home in Newport, Rhode Island. The house at 1607 was essentially closed down, the silver and other valuables placed in a safe and the formal rooms closed off.

It was at Beech-Holm that Woodbury took ill during the summer of 1933. The couple returned to Washington, and Wood underwent an operation at Emergency Hospital, but he never fully recovered. He died on October 16, 1933, leaving most of his sizeable estate, including all real estate, to Emily, who continued to live at 1607 until she died in 1948. Family portraits, papers, and family mementos were left to his brother Montgomery and nephews and nieces, though Emily was granted their use until her death. By



bequeathing his wife three houses, household goods, and investments (apart from a \$10,000 bequest to Emergency Hospital), Woodbury provided Emily with the means of maintaining their comfortable life style and sanctioned their twenty-six-year union. He also expressed the wish that “my wife and I be as near together as possible in our final resting place.”

Emily would continue to live at 1607 for another fifteen years while the world around her changed dramatically. The Great Depression depleted countless family fortunes and made the running of grand houses a luxury. The mansions around Dupont passed from the hands of self-made men into those of institutions—foreign governments that turned them into embassies, charitable and educational organizations. The Washington of think tanks, lobbying groups, and law offices that still define the city today was emerging. No longer the exclusive playground for old and new money, it did remain the home for political power players, policy wonks, intelligence services and major interest groups. World War II and America’s role in the Allied victory turned the United States into an acknowledged world power.

Emily remained largely shielded from world events and the transformation of Dupont Circle. Woodbury’s prudent investments allowed her to maintain her grand home in style. And she was surrounded by family. Her sister, Mary Mitchell, shared the house with her, and her niece, Mrs. Hope Burrage, and grandniece, Mrs. E. Taylor Chewning, came to join them. Emily died on January 5, 1948 and was laid to rest beside Woodbury in Rock Creek Cemetery.

Looking back on Woodbury's life, one can fairly say that he grew from an impetuous boy who did not know his limits into a responsible citizen and family man. If his swashbuckling Uncle Frank had been his hero as a boy, he outgrew him by learning to fit into society and avoiding debt—in fact, he accumulated a fortune. There were no great scandals in his life apart from his youthful indiscretions and the whisperings that may have arisen from his involvement with Mrs. McKay.

He had the good fortune—in some ways the misfortune—of having been born into a nationally prominent family. Their prominence may well have strengthened his rebellious streak when he was young. A boy who played ball with the President of the United States and whose father walked in and out of the White House was not to be intimidated by obscure teachers in a country school. He was also born into one of the nation's most contentious and anxious times. In some ways this experience—and the tumultuous ups and downs of his family's political gambits—may have strengthened his desire for stability and financial security.

Closer textual analysis of his letters could even lead one to the conclusion that he was a lonely boy, although he himself never spoke of loneliness. The Civil War, the many material and political upheavals, the birth of two children after Wood, and the death of a younger sister would have commanded his parents' full attention. It is conceivable that he felt at times left out. Being shipped off to school would have contributed to such a feeling. If so, it was a condition he never discussed. On the whole, he did not appear to have possessed a reflective or introspective nature, although he was certainly shrewd.

Only after he experienced Emily's loving care in his fifties did he reflect on the feeling of having been cared for, or rather not cared for as a child.

Any underlying loneliness would have been countered by his love of life. He enjoyed fine food and social gatherings, and he chronicles this in his letters. If he was born into anxious times, he rose and made his fortune during promising times. America was on the rise as an industrial, commercial, and incipient world power. His father's and grandfather's generation had laid the groundwork, Woodbury's and later generations reaped the benefits, though building and advancing in different ways.

We can conclude that Woodbury achieved balance with age and experience—in contrast to some of his Dupont neighbors such as Thomas Walsh or Evalyn McLean. Woodbury was wiser than these gamblers and social climbers, for he appeared to be content within a well-defined sphere of influence—his hometown. There he rose to prominence in his own right and whatever that right may have been in the eyes of society or any observer, he gave expression to it and surpassed himself when he built his grand residence, Washington's Second Blair House on New Hampshire Avenue.



#### CHAPTER 4

## JULES HENRI DE SIBOUR, THE BLAIRS' ARCHITECT

*I*f measured by his legacy, de Sibour would deserve a much larger treatise, certainly larger than the scope of this booklet. Curiously, there is as yet no authoritative biography on this eminent architect who helped shape the area around Dupont Circle like few others, though there are numerous dictionary entries and an enlightening Master's thesis by Janet Davis on five of his Massachusetts Avenue houses. De Sibour was, above all, a master synthesizer and re-creator, shaped and inspired by two cultures: France and America.

The second son of the French Viscomte Gabriel de Sibour and his American wife Mary Louisa Johnson of Belfast, Maine, Jules was born in France in 1872, in either Paris or Rouen—sources differ on the city of his birth. When he was three years old, the family moved to Richmond, Virginia, where his father served the French Republic as Vice Consul. Did the descendant of Louis XI prefer to spend his life outside of France since the monarchic aspirations of the seventies had just been thwarted by the adoption of a republican constitution in France? Or did his American wife miss her homeland?

We cannot be sure, but because of his father's career Jules Henri spent his early years in the former capital of the South. The Civil War was over. Jules Henri escaped the anxieties and upheavals of that bloody time unlike Woodbury whose childhood was shaped by it. Though the spirit of the South was broken and poverty was rampant, Jules Henri was likely to have been shielded from the worst. His parents would have lived in style thanks to the French government, and his father's position would have primarily brought him into contact with Richmond's upper class. In 1885, ill health forced his father to leave the diplomatic service. The family moved to Washington, and lived there until the Viscomte died in 1889.

Jules was a teenager when the de Sibours made their home in Washington, while Woodbury was already a well-established lawyer, who had practiced with his father for seven years and on his own since 1883. The Blairs and de Sibours lived just minutes from each other and may well have met on social occasions since both were part of the city's elite. But since Jules' father was not a healthy man, the de Sibours may not have participated much in Washington's social scene. As a boy, Jules attended Young's School, later the Emerson Institute, and afterwards St. Pauls in New Hampshire.

His mother, Mary Louisa, moved the family into a new house on Farragut Square after her husband's death but left for France shortly afterward so that her oldest son, Louis, could study architecture at the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris. Jules Henri was at an impressionable age when he returned to France and must have received valuable impressions from the cultural life of Paris, his brother's studies, and of course from the city's magnificent buildings.

Unfortunately, we have no record of his Parisian impressions. All we know is that he returned to Washington as a seventeen-year-old, was tutored for one year, entered Yale in 1892, and graduated four years later. We also know that he was fluent in French and enthusiastic about athletics in Paris.

Woodbury, almost forty, was preoccupied with Mrs. McKay at the time Jules Henri graduated and was about to begin his first journey to Paris that summer. Who knows if he would have chosen Jules Henri as his architect had it not been for his own immersion in Parisian life and culture over the following years. While Woodbury would remain a bachelor for fifteen more years, young Jules Henri married two years after graduation.

The young graduate seems to have had a difficult time deciding what to do after college, and may have turned to architecture due to his connection with his older brother and was perhaps prodded by him, according to a short memoir now owned by his grandson Blaise de Sibour. Considering what he was able to achieve in his professional life, this strikes us as strange, although we can easily see him as a multi-talented man.

Shortly after graduation he entered the well-known architectural firm of Ernest Flagg in New York City. Flagg, who had been a classmate of Louis de Sibour at the Ecole des Beaux Arts, designed the Corcoran Art Gallery in Washington. He may well have involved Jules Henri, at least tangentially, in the finishing touches of that magnificent Beaux Arts building that opened in 1897. Jules Henri was not happy at Ernest Flagg's and was still not

sure if he had chosen the right profession when he met a young architect who introduced him to Bruce Price.

Price, a well-respected, successful New York architect, had designed the Chateau Frontenac in Quebec and was architect and designer of many office buildings, hospitals, and terminals. Jules Henri immediately liked Price and their relationship proved productive and lasting, cut short only by Price's death in 1903. While in Price's employment, Jules Henri became consulting architect for the Hudson Terminal buildings in Manhattan and, we assume, co-designer and builder for other projects.

Without his marriage to Margaret Clagett, a Washington socialite, which took place in 1898, when he was 26, de Sibour may have remained in New York. Over time, however, the pull of Washington grew stronger. From 1900 to 1908, the young architect was listed in New York only; from 1908 onward his name appears in New York *and* Washington; after 1911, the year 1607 was built, he is no longer listed in New York directories. Washington became his home and the main arena for his work.

First, however, he returned to Paris, encouraged by his patron Price, to study at the Ecole des Beaux Arts. As was common practice, he first "apprenticed" himself to a master, the Atelier of Daumet and Esquie, before enrolling at the Ecole. One of Daumet's signature assignments was the restoration of the Chateau de Chantilly. Unfortunately, de Sibour's stay in Paris had to be cut short because of problems in his wife's family, and he never fully enrolled in the Ecole itself, although he was tutored by its professors.



Mr. Price must have been well pleased with de Sibour's work—with or without official Ecole affiliation—for he made him a partner in 1902 and supported his participation in a competition for the design of Freedmen's Hospital in Washington, D.C. Henri de Sibour's design won the contest and the young man no longer expressed doubts about his chosen profession.

After Price's death in 1903, de Sibour gradually shifted his practice to Washington where he soon made his reputation as a designer of grand houses. The Thomas Gaff house, inspired by an early seventeenth-century manor house, was one of his earlier successes, admired for its great clarity of geometric form, for its elegance and sharp detail.

The mansion—larger and more formal than a house but smaller and more individualized than an institution—remained his signature work. There his designs flow, surprise, and delight; they are never heavy-handed or pompous. If we compare the ballroom of his Gaff or Moore house with that of the Belmont House, we recognize in an instant his hallmark of elegant restraint. His proportions are harmonious, his decorations 'dance' rather than overwhelm, his spaces flow and curve. He has been credited with "improving" the quality of Washington's architecture; he certainly "uplifted" it.

After World War I, and even more so after the depression, de Sibour worked for businesses, designing office buildings for institutions and for the government. He was a consulting architect for the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis, assigned to remodel the Pension Office Building, General Meig's magnum opum (which was never carried out due to the depression), and he built the Public

Health Service Building at Constitution and 19th Street, which is part of the Interior Department today. But it is as a residential architect that he seems to have excelled the most.

Jules Henri de Sibour died in 1938 after an operation at only 66 years old. He was survived by his wife and three sons—Henri Louis, Jacques Blaise, and Jean Raymond. Woodbury Blair, twenty years older than his architect, had died under similar circumstances—after an operation—five years earlier in 1933. The passing of both men was mourned by the local press that praised the accomplishments of their prominent citizens. De Sibour's obituaries stress the shift from residential architect to public servant. They note that Jules Henri was interested in public housing in his later years.

In a sense, de Sibour's life mirrors America's fortunes from the late 1800s to the time before World War II. His entry into professional life coincided with an economic boom in America, a phase when the country was confident in its prowess—it had opened up a vast continent and now reaped the fruits of its endeavors as a leader in industry and commerce; it had just won the Spanish-American war. After World War I and the Wall Street Crash of 1929, the mood in the country shifted. The suffering of the poor and the middle class could not be overlooked. Opulence and elegance appeared obscene in light of the country's struggles. De Sibour responded, whether from economic necessity or increased social awareness or both and focused on public housing. But it was the grand mansions which established his reputation and which keep it alive still today.

And now we invite the reader to enter Washington's Second Blair House and come along on a guided tour of this turn-of-the-century mansion, created by Woodbury and Emily Blair and their inspiring architect, Jules Henri de Sibour.



CHAPTER 5

1607 NEW HAMPSHIRE,  
THE BLAIR MANSION  
IN ITS OWN RIGHT

Rising four stories high from two building blocks that form a substantial polygon, Woodbury Blair's mansion embodies the successful interplay between mass and motion, between solidity and fluidity; squared and rounded space, axes that run at surprising angles as well as straight ones. The exterior successfully embodies these tensions. By using small bricks in courses of alternating colors—a Flemish bond—the architect created a ripple effect, an impressionistic pattern that deflects the weight of the walls.

The building's weight is further "lightened" by wrought-iron balconies, the white balustrades below the mansard roof, as well as the swirling lines of the iron screens over the narrow windows flanking the entrance. Perhaps most effective is the tripartite division of the facade with its center part or bay extending toward the street—stepping toward the viewer—creating the impression of wings. Without that break in the façade, we would see a "block"

rather than a building profile. Viewed from the outside, the house is a Georgian revival inspiration.

The floral tympanon above the entrance hints at the Adamesque or late Georgian style, according to architectural historian Janet Davis. She points out that American architects trained in the Beaux-Arts style as de Sibour was, often combined elements of several historical styles according to their taste and that of their clients, rather than slavishly following one particular style.

Three and four appear to be the magic numbers for the building's facade: three wings or bays, three windows per floor—with four panes running across—three white horizontal dividers, three mansard windows. The interplay between rectangular and rounded forms is equally intriguing. The circular drive is echoed in the rounded door arch, and the three brick arches above the second floor windows reflect symmetry, perhaps the key tenet of the Beaux Arts style. The arches, in turn, are set off—contradicted even—by the square windows, the horizontal lines of the limestone courses, and the square shape of the building.

The North wall along Corcoran Street is organized around the number four: four floors, four arched windows, set off against four rectangular ones on the third floor, and four dormers. A viewer, standing on New Hampshire across from the front door, sees the Corcoran wall flowing away from him, disappearing from view—for good reason. The building was by need built at an angle, filling the difficult lot, created by the axis of New Hampshire, intersecting the smaller residential streets—a legacy of the ingenious L'Enfant who superimposed a number of wide boulevards at diagonals onto a grid of

parallel streets. By the time Washington's Second Blair House was built in 1910-1911, de Sibour had become an expert in dealing with these unusual lots, with perhaps the Alexander Stewart residence as his masterpiece.

Visitors who enter Woodbury Blair's mansion through the front door are taken by surprise. They step into a perfectly square foyer as if stepping into a box, but are immediately led down a hallway at a sharp 35° angle away from the entrance square—just as the wall on Corcoran Street moves away from the viewer outside. The hallway runs parallel to the wall. If callers did not turn at that angle, they would run into a pillar and eventually into a wall—the connecting wall between 1607 and its neighboring building. But the architect skillfully ensures that most visitors are not aware of the shift in axes. The black and white checkerboard marble floor tiles direct them along the intended path and white columns form an open wall—a kind of balustrade—between visitors and the connecting wall. Merely by stepping through the front we have entered an interior composed of several interiors, a space that is alive, filled with decorative elements that will be repeated throughout the house.

A complement of steps—an advance—lead toward the connecting wall on the right, only to make a sharp, ninety-degree turn to the left, rising majestically upward. The elegant vase-like shapes of the cast-iron banister, the black and white pattern of the floor, and the columns and door frieze all catch one's eye. Let us now enter the library to the left of the hallway, the main room on the first floor. The wooden wall panels of the room are simple, almost devoid of pattern, without the elaborative linen folds that characterize other

de Sibour libraries. The walls and ceiling calm the eye after the abundance of shapes and lively black and white accents of the entrance hall. The room unfolds quietly, inviting the visitor to read or simply rest before the host or hostess steps in to greet him. The spacious room ends in a rounded space, an apse toward New Hampshire Avenue as if to enclose the reader and protect him from the distractions of the outside world. A paneled door next to the fireplace—opposite the apse—leads to a smaller room, perhaps the smoking room, while the closed-off back part of the first floor accommodates the kitchen and servant halls.

The entire back section of the house, separated from the front or representative part by a wall and door on each floor, was entirely devoted to functional rooms and, on the upper floors, to servant quarters. A narrow servant stair connects the back floors in stark contrast to the majestic staircase of the front with its decorative rail.

Let us return and enter the house again, this time to attend a ball. We would not stop off in the library then but step into the small vestibule to the right of the door where a maid or butler would take our wraps while we adjusted our finery or made use of the small lavatory. Refreshed and beautified, we would rise up the grand stairway along the inner wall to the second floor. Once we stepped off the staircase we would find the dynamics between the hallway and the main room—the ballroom—reversed from that of the first floor. The second-floor hallway flows quietly, there are no black and white checkerboard tiles, no boxes within boxes, but instead a light wooden floor that opens into a vestibule toward New Hampshire



Avenue. The light-filled space, with its striated marble fireplace, served as the orchestra space.

On the second floor, the eye-catching features have been reserved for the ballroom. We step into the well-proportioned room through a double door with a broken pediment and floral frieze. Two windows across the room lead the eye out into space and fill the interior with light. Plaster garlands unfold along the ceiling, forming a rosette around the center chandelier and swirling around the rounded form of the front apse as if echoing dance music or the swirl of skirts around the room.

The ballroom, like the library below and the sitting room above, rounds out toward New Hampshire, enclosing the dancers and sending them off for another dance. Its apse appears to be ‘divided’ into three parts, two windows—only one is a true window, the other a glass door leading into the light-filled vestibule—and a wall niche, creating another hollow within the hollow of the apse. The niche may have held a statue, vase, or rare art object. Again, we admire de Sibour’s ingenuity. The concept of symmetry required a second window up front, but he had run out of exterior wall space because of the vestibule. So, he created a glass door in the shape of a window and the balance is restored.

Across from the apse, on the far wall, a gold and white marble fireplace delights the eye. Its colors are delicate, the marigold is mottled with a deeper brown, its decoration in keeping with the theme of vases, garlands, and urns. A majestic mirror above the fireplace would have provided depth to the eye, reflecting the light from the chandelier, the dancers’ flushed faces and shimmering

gowns, tempting the couples to dance right through the wall. Mirror and fireplace are framed by two wooden double doors, leading to the dining room.

We'll leave the music and dancers behind and enter the dining hall that receives ample light from two wide east and north windows. It is almost as large as the ballroom, boasting the same beautiful wooden floor and a marble fireplace in the same delicate colors, this time with a hunting scene as the main theme. But it is toned down, offers fewer distractions to the eye as if to allow the diners to concentrate on their place setting and their respective dinner partners. There is no enclosing apse, no rosette or wall niche, but the guests seated to the south or west can admire the painted medallions of cherubs with musical instruments on the upper wall, said to have been created by the lady of the house.

If we now return to the hall and take the stairs beyond the second and main floor up to the family quarters on the third floor, we would most likely be ushered into the comfortable sitting room whose window looks out onto New Hampshire from its rounded apse and to Corcoran Street on the north side.

The fourth floor features a second sitting room—again with an apse to New Hampshire—with adjoining bedroom and bathroom. It may have been the guest suite or the private quarters of either Emily or Woodbury. The couple were said to have separate bedrooms. Since the suite was designed for family or guests, it has a generous hallway and skylight, and the elevator connects it to the rest of the house. The remainder of the fourth floor was reserved for servant quarters. The guest or family suite opens to the light-filled hallway,

whereas the inner or servant rooms open to a windowless foyer. But it appears, from all accounts, that Emily and Woodbury lived on good terms with their servants. Each respected the place of the other, although that respect could be described as a one-way street. The industrial revolution had not yet siphoned away the serving class, and America's opulent age, the Gilded Age, provided the upper classes with the means to afford an army of servants, even after the crash of 1929, although not for long. Woodbury and Emily were fortunate to live most of their lives in an America of abundance, even excessive abundance, that allowed them to build their elegant residence according to taste and enjoy it in style.

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2. Blair & Lee Family Papers; Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library; Princeton, New Jersey.
3. Newspaper clippings and other material from The Historical Society of Washington, D.C., Washington, D.C.
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