

THE HISTORY AND CONSTRUCTION
of
THE GEORGE WASHINGTON HOUSE

A THESIS PREPARED

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SUMMARY.

INTRODUCTION

A short distance from Washington on the Washington-Baltimore Boulevard is the town of Bladensburg which was once a flourishing port but later, owing to a variety of causes, declined and practically passed into oblivion. The most popular of the inns of this town was the "George Washington House"

History

The fortunes of this inn have closely followed those of the town. At one time the stopping place of such famous personages as George Washington and Patrick Henry, it was practically unknown at the beginning of the present century, but is again coming into its own, this time as a tourist's home.

Construction

This portion of the thesis describes the plan of the inn, and the materials and construction methods used, giving special attention to those which differ radically from modern construction practice.

INTRODUCTION

A few miles beyond the District of Columbia Line on the Baltimore-Washington Boulevard, at the juncture of this road with the National Defense Highway connecting Washington and Annapolis, is the historic old town of Bladensburg.

Bladensburg, chartered in 1742, was a flourishing business-center long before anyone even dreamed of the City of Washington. This town was one of a series of similar places, of which Georgetown and Richmond are examples, in Maryland and Virginia, situated at the head of navigation of the streams, as near as possible to the tobacco fields, because of the cost of overland transportation, and serving as ports of trade through which the tobacco and other produce of the colonies were sent to England and manufactured goods imported in return.

Bladensburg was located on the Anacostia River, a stream which is so small today that the average person who crosses it scarcely notices it, although it still goes on a rampage occasionally and

floods the town, but which at the beginning of the nineteenth century was forty feet deep and of which a traveller records that in 1804, while crossing it, the stage coach driver pointed out a tree in which the passengers had taken refuge on a previous trip when the flood waters overturned the stage and drowned the horses.

But the deforestation of the upper reaches of this river led to erosion of the soil and the filling of the bed with silt. As the stream filled, navigation became impossible and the town, once flourishing, came to resemble Goldsmith's "Deserted Village".

It seems probable however, that this town would have declined even though the stream bed had not filled, for the growing importance of Baltimore and the decrease of overland transportation with the building of the railroads took away the trade of these small river stations and the founding of Washington tended to overshadow its prestige. The founding of Washington however, was a partial blessing, for many government officials and dignitaries preferring the country or a commercial town to the mud of the new Capital lived in

or near Bladensburg. The inns of Bladensburg were also frequented by Washingtonians, particularly those who ordered "coffee and pistols for two at dawn" and followed the coffee by a visit to the duelling ground near Bladensburg where the disputes of that day were settled and honor satisfied.

The oldest and most famous of these inns was the "George Washington House" built on the old Georgetown-Philadelphia post road a decade before the founding of Bladensburg.

HISTORY

This inn, which was built in 1732, is the oldest in the neighborhood although the Palo Alto Hotel across the road, built in 1737, runs it a close second.

This building seems to have been an inn from the beginning although there is no definite proof that it was built for that purpose. It is definitely known however that it was used for an inn a few years later, and inasmuch as it was customary to place private residences some distance back from the road, it seems probable that it has always been one.

The fortunes of this old inn have been closely linked with those of Bladensburg and consequently its history has paralleled that of the town.

It was at this inn, the oldest and best in the town, that the stages stopped while the horses were changed and the passengers refreshed themselves. And numerous indeed were the important persons who stopped here for food or lodging.

It is one of the traditions of this old house that George Washington often stopped here on his way to the Continental Congress in Philadelphia and this is not one of the legions of traditions which has placed Washington's headquarter's in every house old enough for this purpose, and many which are not that old, but an authenticated fact.

It is definitely known, for instance, that Washington and Patrick Henry stopped here on their way to Philadelphia in May, 1775, and that Martha Washington stopped here on her way North to join him in the fall of the same year, and we also know that General Washington also stopped here on his way to meet the Marquis de Lafayette.

Just when it was named the "George Washington House" is not definitely known, but we do know that this was its name by 1810, and that the long sign which was then hung from the front of the house was not replaced until 1914.

When Bladensburg was a flourishing port this was the stopping place of many visitors and many ships'

Captains spent the nights here while the ships were in port.

Later, when the new Capital of the young Republic was established, it became the stopping place of many of the notables and of those who expected to satisfy the code of honor on the duelling ground.

Gradually the importance of the town as a port diminished. Duelling was no longer in style, and Bladensburg was no longer a fashionable place to which to drive; and hard days had come upon the town. The old inn was particularly hard hit by the cessation of stage traffic which came with the advent of the railroads which were providing cheaper and better transportation.

The proprietor built a bar on the south end of the old inn and began to cater to the carters and teamsters who travelled this road.

These men had formerly gone to the Palo Alto Hotel, where a more enterprising and less proud owner kept a cheaper inn than the George Washington House

and where the familiar "First Chance" and "Last Chance" signs of the outskirts saloon attracted the attention of the thirsty traveler.

Still, however, business was not very brisk, and at the beginning of the twentieth century a traveler who passed would have decided that both the town and the hotel were hibernating.

The salvation of both however, was already in sight; the automobile had been invented and the dawn of the Tourist Era was drawing near. Travel along the roads again became popular and refreshment stands and tourist homes have sprung up over the country like mushrooms, and the once famous old inn has again come into its own and a new era of prosperity has dawned for Mrs. Mary J. Gafford who has owned the inn for the past thirty-five years, since the long weatherbeaten "George Washington House" sign has been replaced by one reading "Rooms for Tourists".

With the passing of the Eighteenth Amendment the bar was changed to a pool room and soft drink stand and finally torn down and replaced by a larger

refreshment stand farther to the left in front of the old stables in which the coach horses were formerly kept.

CONSTRUCTION:

There are two distinct parts to this house. The original inn which is built of brick, and a wooden part at the back which has been built on and added to at various times since the construction of the original inn. Since the construction of this wooden addition is so recent, some of it having been built within the past year, that it follows modern practice very closely and offers no points of interest to us, it will not be treated in this paper. It is interesting, however, to note that the first floor of this addition is one step below the level of the ground floor in the original inn and that the second floor leads off from a landing in the stairs by a short flight of steps again one step below the old floor level, and that no third floor has been built on

this part of the structure although there is one on the original inn.

The inn proper was built of bricks brought to Bladensburg from England. It is three stories high and has no cellar. The roof is of gable type and has an unusually high pitch which can be noticed in the pictures. The present roofing material is tin, but wooden shingles were originally used.

It has front porches at the level of both the first and second floors but I do not think that these are the original porches, for one of the two trees in front of the house grows partly under the porch floor and apparently has necessitated the changing and replacing of the porch supports.

The outer walls of the building are twenty-one inches thick at the base and decrease four inches at each floor, making them nineteen inches above the first floor and fifteen above the second. The entire four-inch ledge is on the inside and is used as a support for the floor beams, thus leaving a smooth wall on the outside. The bonding of the brickwork is

the Flemish bond of alternate headers and stretchers in the same course and apparently is uniform throughout. There are no noticeable cracks in the brickwork but the building is kept in excellent condition and a few may have developed and been repaired. It is interesting to note in this connection, that the bricks are of the same size and apparently of the same quality as the common bricks in use in this country today and that the bonding is accomplished by use of a flush joint about three-eighths inches thick, which is common today.

The inside carrying wall which is to the left of the hallway is fifteen inches thick, but all the other partitions have a thickness of only eleven inches.

As one enters the doorway which consists of a single wide door with a glass panel on each side, he enters a hallway. The right side of the hallway is taken up by the stairs; the left is a corridor leading back to the door. There are only two rooms on this floor, so the original inn must have had some

sort of outkitchen in the space now occupied by the wooden part of the building.

Each of these rooms originally had a large fireplace in the middle of the wall opposite the door, but the one in the South room has been removed and bricked up, and a Latrobe has been put in the one in the North room.

On the second floor there are three rooms, the space over the South room being divided from East to West and a hall leading along the front of the south half of the house. The fireplaces up here are smaller than downstairs and have Latrobes in them at present.

A door above the front door downstairs leads out onto the upper porch.

The writer has appended plans of these two floors showing the size of the rooms as nearly as it was possible to obtain them.

The third floor is reached by a stairway above the one leading up from below.

The attic, like the first floor, is divided into a hallway and two rooms; but up here the original

flooring remains and the fireplaces are small indeed but still intact. Light is furnished by three dormer windows in the front, one in each room, and one in the hall, and by a small window just in front of the fireplace in each end wall.

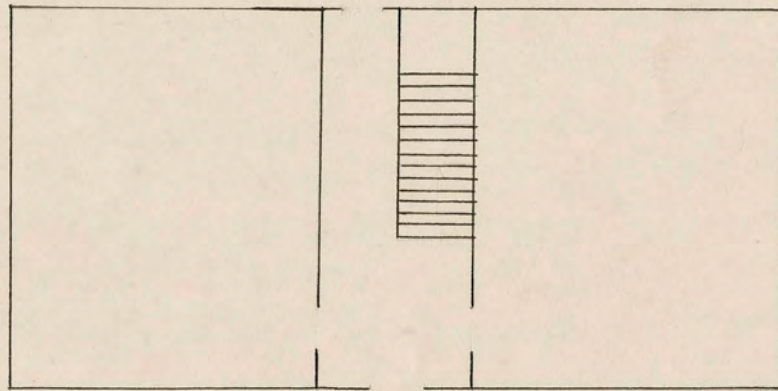
The roof joists are two inches by ten inches and are spaced twenty-four inches center to center. The sheathing is one inch thick. As I have mentioned before the present roof is tin, but the original one was made of wooden shingles.

The windows on the first and second floors are two feet, six inches by six feet and have wooden sills and brick arches above. In the attic they are smaller and are of the dormer type. On the first two floors there are two on each side of the front door and two in each of the end walls. There were probably windows in the back originally but the additions have necessitated bricking these up.

There is no cellar under this house and the foundation walls extend to the ground on all sides so that it is impossible to determine what size floor

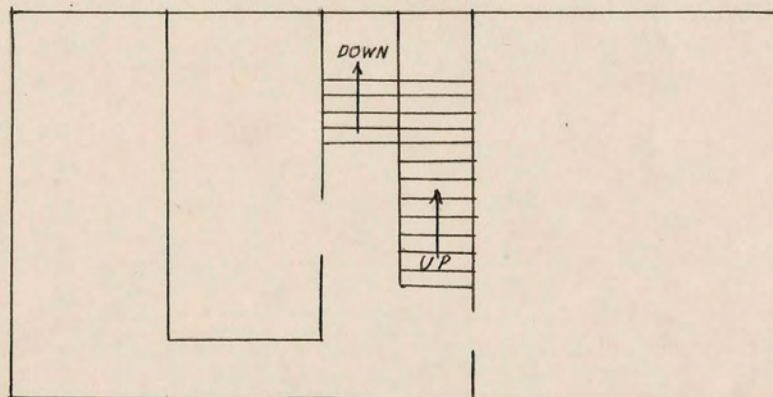
beams were used or to gain any idea of the condition of these beams, but the floor does not show any evidence of sinking, so it seems reasonable to assume that they are in at least a fair state of preservation.

In this paper the writer has endeavored to trace the history of this old inn as far as it is known and to give some idea of the construction of the inn with particular reference to the outstanding differences between this construction and modern practice, and he trusts that he has been at least partially successful in this endeavor.



FIRST FLOOR PLAN

GEORGE WASHINGTON
HOUSE
Scale 1" = 10'



SECOND FLOOR PLAN



South view taken shortly after the passing of the Eighteenth Amendment, showing the old bar as a pool-room and the old "George Washington House" signboard.



Front view today.



Left-General view
looking North.



Right-South view showing
inscription and
the tree growing
partly under the
porch.

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