

The Rambler Writes of Old Corcoran House

It is the fate of landmarks to pass. This reflection comes to the Rambler because of the news published in The Star some time ago that the United States Chamber of Commerce had bought the W. W. Corcoran house and its appurtenant land, and also because of the reproduction in The Star of recent date of a drawing of the great building which the chamber will erect on the site of the long-familiar red brick house, a house that has been a feature of the Jackson Park or Lafayette Square neighborhood for almost as many years as the oldest reader of these lines has lived. The coming change moves the Rambler to tell what he remembers and what he has lately learned of the land and building at the northeast corner of Connecticut avenue and H street.

The house and various lots adjoining that on which the house stands were bought by W. W. Corcoran for \$14,000 from Moses H. Grinnell and his wife, Julia, of New York city under terms of a deed recorded at Washington, June 5, 1849. Moses Grinnell obtained this property, including lots Nos. 5 to 12, by deed recorded at Washington, December 17, 1847, from Richard Smith of Washington, Daniel Webster of Marshfield, Mass.; Thomas Swann of Baltimore and R. M. Blatchford and Prescott Hall of New York city. The consideration named in that deed was \$1.

The property stood in the name of Daniel Webster from June, 1844, until the date of the deed to Grinnell. The deed to Daniel Webster—who is described in that instrument as "Daniel Webster of the City of Boston in the State of Massachusetts"—was from Robert P. Swann of Loudoun county, Va., and Richard Smith of Washington, the latter being the trustee named under a deed of trust to secure certain sums of money advanced by the Bank of the United States and George Bomford to Thomas Swann. Thomas Swann took certain lots in the square as devisee of his father, Thomas Swann, who by deed recorded August 28, 1827, secured this land from Gen. James Breckinridge and his wife, Ann, who obtained it by purchase, under a deed dated February 17, 1817, from Mary Pattison, to whom the square was devised by Samuel Davidson, "original proprietor," by his will dated in 1805 and probated in 1810. This is a brief sketch of the line of descent of the parcel of land on which the Corcoran house stands, the house lot being now numbered 14, but in the original subdivision and a subsequent subdivision of the square it was lot No. 5.

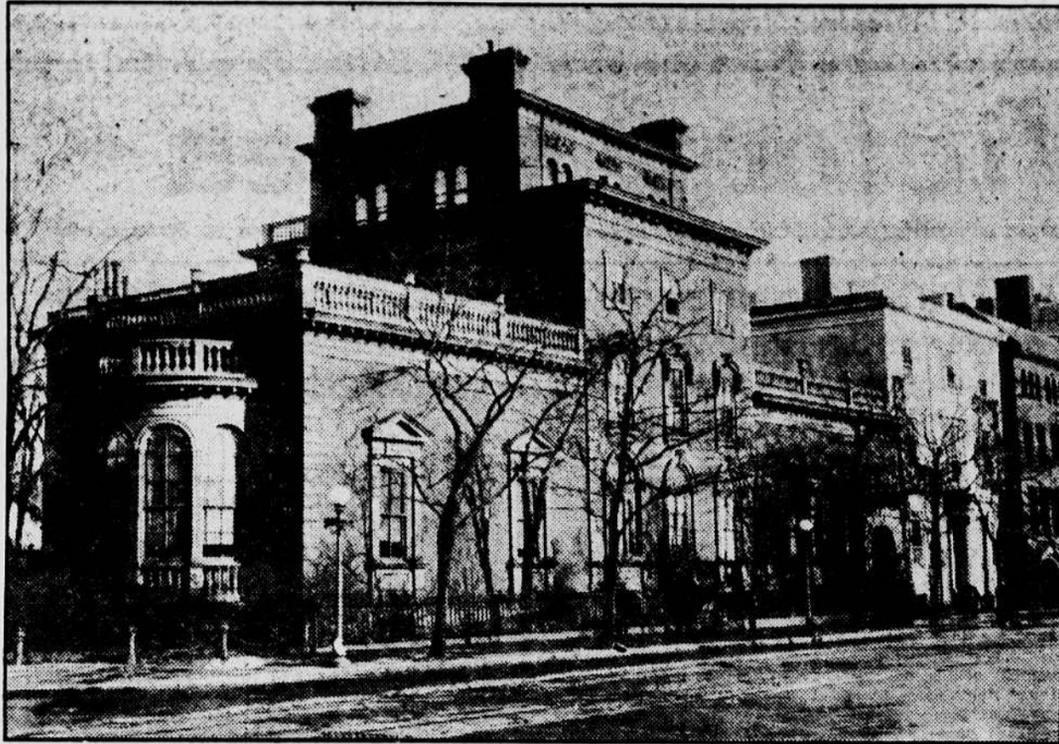
In The Evening Star of Friday, February 24, 1888, which was the day on which Mr. Corcoran died, there appeared the following:

Mr. Corcoran, the venerable philanthropist, was an intimate friend of Daniel Webster. The fine house on Lafayette square, in which Mr. Corcoran lived for many years, was once the residence of the great statesman, having been presented to him by some of his friends. When Mr. Webster retired from public life Mr. Corcoran purchased the house from him. In this elegant and substantial residence, surrounded by its spacious gardens, Mr. Corcoran formerly entertained in very handsome style. From 1830 to 1880 Mr. Corcoran was the gracious host of the public men of all the states. Mr. Webster, Mr. Clay, Mr. Calhoun, John Quincy Adams, Mr. Everett, Mr. Choate, Mr. Birney, Mr. Clayton, Mr. Buchanan, Mr. Sumner, Mr. Winthrop, Mr. Fish and, indeed, all the great leaders, north and south, came together under his roof. At one time Mr. Corcoran's mansion was the center of the most fashionable and distinguished society of the capital and his entertainments were of the most elegant and costly character.

Square No. 186, bounded by 16th, H and I streets and Connecticut avenue, is in the southwestern part of an old tract called Port Royal. When the District of Columbia, or the territory of Columbia, or the federal territory, or "the ten-mile square," as it was variously called, was surveyed in 1791 the eastern part of that tract appears under the ownership of two men, by name Lynch and Sands; the middle part of the tract was owned by John Davidson and the western part by Samuel Davidson. The south boundary of the tract extended from the corner of New Jersey avenue and L street to about what is now 18th and F streets, the line passing diagonally through the north part of the White House grounds. The north boundary of Port Royal extended from about 3d and Q streets to the west side of 18th between L and M streets. The east line of Samuel Davidson's part extended from 15th street and Pennsylvania avenue north along 15th street to Massachusetts avenue, and included Lafayette, McPherson and Faragut squares.

Any Washingtonian can think out for himself the number of imposing buildings that now occupy the east part of Port Royal, but the Rambler will suggest a few. The Riggs National Bank and the American Security and Trust Company rest on the southeast corner of Samuel Davidson's land. Farther north on 15th street the

The Fate of Landmarks—Early Property Holdings in the District. Some Old Wills on File—Question of Presentation to Webster—When Corcoran Mansion Was Constructed.



THE CORCORAN HOUSE, LOOKING EAST.

Union Trust building, on the site of Wormley's Hotel, stands on the Davidson tract. The site of the Shoreham was part of Davidson's farm. St. John's Church stands on that tract. The Treasury Annex, on the site of the Freedmen's Bank building, also rests on Davidson's land, as do the Arlington building and all the old homes on the east, north and west sides of Lafayette Square.

In the Washington assessment of 1802 this square was in the name of Samuel Davidson of Georgetown and the value of the land was put down as 2 cents a square foot. There was no house in the square and the land had not been divided into building lots. Under the assessment of 1807 Samuel Davidson still appears as owner of the square, and it remains undivided and unimproved. The square was subdivided by Davidson April 3, 1809. On the H street front lot No. 1 was at the northwest corner of 16th street, and counting west were lots 2, 3, 4 and 5, the last number being that of a small lot at the corner of H street and Connecticut avenue. On the Connecticut avenue front were part of lot 5, and lots 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10, the last number being at the corner of Connecticut avenue and I, where the old Army and Navy Club building stands. On the I street front were part of lot 10 and lots 11, 12, 13, 14 and 15, No. 15 being at the corner of 16th and I, occupied by the old and hand some Lucius Tuckerman home. On the 16th street front were part of lot 15 and lots 16, 17 and 18, which abutted on lot No. 1, at the northwest corner of 16th and H, the site of the John Hay house. The square was subdivided by W. W. Corcoran on August 20, 1866. The lines of the original subdivision were followed, in part, but lot No. 5, at the corner of H street and Connecticut avenue, was very greatly enlarged by reducing the lots on its east and north sides. The Davidson lots on I street were wiped out and Mr. Corcoran substituted one lot, No. 7, which extended nearly from the corner of Connecticut avenue and I to 16th street, with a frontage of 339.43 and an area of 22,644 feet. Mr. Corcoran made another subdivision of the square on March 6, 1880, making a survey of the lots as they are today. Original lot No. 1, which is the John Hay parcel, at the corner of H and 16th, became lot No. 10, and counting to the west are lots 11, 12, 13 and 14, No. 14 being the lot at the corner of H and Connecticut avenue. North on Connecticut avenue are lots 15 to 21; east on I street are lots 21 to 28, and south on 16th street are lots 28 to 34, which is on the alley at the north side of the Hay property. An idea of the lateness of the building up of the square may be gathered from the following, which appeared in The Star February 25, 1888, the day after Mr. Corcoran's death:

Perhaps the most valuable real estate owned by Mr. Corcoran in Washington is the house which he occupied and the grounds surrounding it. Until within the last two or three years he owned the entire square bounded by H, I, 16th and Connecticut avenue, with the exception of the house immediately adjoining his on the east. He has sold off the entire 16th street front. The residences of Mr. John Hay and Mr. Henry Adams occupy the northwest corner of 16th and H, and the residence of Mr. Lucius Tuckerman on the southwest corner of 16th and I. The ground upon which the Hay and Adams houses stand was purchased about three years ago, and the price paid was

\$6 per foot. Nearly the whole of the Connecticut avenue side and the I street front has never been built up, and this large tract of land in the heart of the city is laid out in lawns and winding walks.

The will of Samuel Davidson, "original proprietor" of this square, is of record in Washington. He describes himself as of Washington county and directs that he be buried in his grounds of Evermay, Georgetown, if he should die within sixty miles of that place. He bequeaths certain lands in square 221 to his nieces, Margaret and Mary, daughters of John

son of Robert Peter, and John Peter, son of John Peter of Georgetown. Edward L. Smith, merchant, of Georgetown, and John Hoge, merchant, of Georgetown. The will was probated in 1810.

In the assessment of 1819 Mary Pattison's name does not appear. The lot at the corner of 16th and H streets is in the name of Henry Davidson, the next lot on the west is assessed to Sarah Davidson and the next on the west to Justina Davidson. The rest of the square, excepting lot No. 18, and including the corner of Connecticut avenue and H street, had passed



OLD GARDEN GATE, TOPPED BY STONE DOG AND URNS, ON CONNECTICUT AVENUE.

Davidson of Annapolis, by Eleanor, his wife, and to John Harrison, son of John Harrison and his wife Eleanor of Annapolis. He leaves a lot in square 217 to Eleanor Davidson, orphan child of his nephew, William Davidson. He describes his niece Mary as being the wife of Henry P. Chapman of Charles county, Md.

In the matter of the Corcoran house square the will recites: "I give and bequeath to Mary Pattison, daughter of Archibald Pattison, late of Dorchester county, Md., in consideration of and in grateful memory of the many friendships and real service rendered me by her worthy father, all my lots of ground in square 186, to her, the said Mary Pattison, and her heirs and assigns forever." He names Lewis Grand, John Laird and James S. Morsell of Georgetown as executors, and the witnesses to the will are Thomas B. Beall of Georgetown, Daniel Peter,

to Gen. James Breckinridge. The lots on the H street front are assessed at 12 cents a foot except the lot at the corner of Connecticut avenue, which is assessed at 10 cents. The assessment of 1824 shows that the lot at the corner of H street and Connecticut avenue had passed from Gen. Breckinridge to Thomas Swann. James Breckinridge sold the small original lot at the Connecticut avenue corner to Henry Hunt on August 1, 1828, and under Hunt's will, recorded September 27, 1833, Richard Smith and George Gibson are appointed executors with authority to sell.

The first purchase which W. W. Corcoran seems to have made in the square was in 1845, when Henry Davidson and Justina Davidson Dallas deeded to him lot No. 1 (the John Hay lot), lot No. 18 and lot No. 3. The deed from Henry Davidson for lots 1

and 18 was recorded July 23, 1845. A part of that instrument follows:

This indenture, made this 13th day of June, in the year 1845, by and between Henry Davidson of the City of London, in the Kingdom of Great Britain, of the first part and William W. Corcoran of the City of Washington, in the District of Columbia, United States of America, of the second part:

Whereas, Henry Davidson, late of Tullock, in Rosshire, in North Britain, deceased, being in his lifetime and at the time of his death seized and possessed of lots, number one and eighteen in square 186, in Washington City, did, in and by his last will and testament in writing bearing date of the 9th day of February, in the year of Our Lord 1826, after specifically devising and disposing of various estates, plantations and property situated in Great Britain, South America and the West Indies, give and devise unto his wife, Elizabeth C. Davidson, and his son, above named, Henry Davidson, and his partners, Oneas Barkly and Hugh Barkly, to hold the same to them upon trust that they or their survivors, or the survivor, should make sale and dispose of the said estate at public or private sale.

Henry Davidson, being the sole survivor, sold to Mr. Corcoran. The next deed, which was for lot No. 3, on H street, was made by Justina Dallas, formerly Justina Davidson, widow, of Park Square, in the county of Middlesex, England. The Breckinridge lots in the square were bought from Carey Breckinridge of Botetourt county, Va., one of the heirs of Gen. Breckinridge. A record of all the deeds which passed to Mr. Corcoran for lots in the Corcoran House square would make a long list.

The statement that the Webster house, which Mr. Corcoran purchased, was presented to Mr. Webster by friends, is probably correct, but up to this writing the Rambler cannot substantiate it. A mention of it, if it is a fact, ought to be found in one of the numerous biographies of Mr. Webster, or in some newspaper of the months of May or June, 1844. A search of the file of the National Intelligencer for several weeks before and up to the time of the transfer of the property to Daniel Webster in June, 1844, does not reveal a reference to any gift of real estate to Mr. Webster by his friends, though, of course, such a presentation may have taken place without being given mention by the Intelligencer.

The house which was taken over by Mr. Webster was at that time known as the Swann house. It was built by Thomas Swann, who was district attorney for the District of Columbia from 1821 to 1833, succeeding Gen. Walter Jones in that office and being succeeded by Francis Scott Key. The house was built between those dates, probably in 1825. There is no doubt that it was built before 1833, the date of the expiration of Mr. Swann's service as district attorney. In the assessment records of the District for 1824 no improvements are shown in the square. The assessment books from 1824 to 1829 seem to be missing. The assessment record book covering the four years from 1829 to 1833 inclusive shows that lot No. 5 at the northeast corner of Connecticut avenue and H was improved by a building assessed at \$10,000. That was certainly the house which passed from Robert Swann of Loudoun county, Va., whom the Rambler figures out was a grandson of Thomas Swann, district attorney, to Daniel Webster, and from Webster to Grinnell and from Grinnell to Corcoran. It was the first house, according to available assessment records, that was built in the square bounded by H, I and 16th streets and Connecticut avenue.

The Rambler has no facts at hand concerning the time of the building of the present Corcoran mansion, but no doubt there are some old Washingtonians who know about this matter. The Rambler is quite certain that Mr. Corcoran took up his residence in the Swann-Webster house soon after he purchased it in 1847, and his theory is that at a later period he remodeled it and added the wings on the east and west sides. The addition of the wings was for the accommodation of his art collection, which had outgrown the big rooms on the first floor of the house. Mr. Corcoran's art collection was a large one before 1859, for in that year he began the erection of that building at the northeast corner of 17th street and the Avenue which was the home of the Corcoran Gallery of Art until the erection of the present magnificent building on 17th street, below the Avenue. So the wings of the house were no doubt built before 1859. The large fortune of Mr. Corcoran was made between 1845, when the firm of Corcoran & Riggs purchased the old United States Bank at the corner of 15th street, and his retirement from the firm in April, 1854. Of course, Mr. Corcoran was "well-to-do" when he established a brokerage business on Pennsylvania avenue, near 15th street, in 1837, and he made money there. He made more money when he associated himself in 1839 with George W. Riggs and continued to make money when George W. Riggs retired from the firm in 1848 and was succeeded by his younger brother, Elisha.

The big stroke of the firm of Corcoran & Riggs was made in 1848 in connection with the United States loan. If the Rambler's memory is not creaking, Corcoran & Riggs took nearly the whole bond issue. At any rate, the Rambler knows that in 1848 the firm had \$12,000,000 of these bonds. The market for them in the United States was not brisk. Mr. Corcoran went to England, overcame the aversion to American securities with Haring Bros. & Co., George Peabody, Overend, Gurney & Co.; Denison & Co. and other banking firms. It was a transaction of considerable risk which returned a handsome profit. So, figuring that Mr. Corcoran made a large sum of money in 1848, that he retired from the firm of Corcoran & Riggs in 1859, the Rambler makes a guess that it was some time between 1848 and 1854 that he made over the Swann-Webster house, or tore it down and built the present mansion which is soon to go the way of all things earthly. The Rambler will continue the story of the Corcoran House Square and Mr. Corcoran next Sunday.