

LITTLE KNOWN ROMANCES OF WASHINGTON HOMES

NUMBER TWO

THE BLAINE HOUSE: TOMB OF POLITICAL DREAMS



THE BLAINE HOUSE.

SECRETARY SEWARD.

ON this site Commodore John Rodgers built an elegant house in 1831. In it on April 14, 1865, an attempt was made to assassinate William H. Seward, Secretary of State, by one of the conspirators who murdered Abraham Lincoln the same night. The Hon. James G. Blaine afterward bought the house and died here.

This brief record is the chief feature of a handsome bronze tablet which adorns the front of the Lafayette Opera House. It outlines with the brevity of an index the remarkable history of one of the most notable houses in the American Capital. Behind that outline lie not a single story of great men and great events, but twenty stories. This article can present but one, and that imperfectly, but it will be well to approach that story with an understanding of the earlier chapters in the history of the house.

Lafayette Square is the oldest park in Washington. It is, moreover, the most conspicuously situated, with the White House and five important departments of the governmental service stretched along its edge for many years. There should be little wonder, then, that it has looked unmoved and complacent on several of the most significant meetings in the history of the American Republic. What should occasion surprise is this—that practically every house which borders this park has a pronounced historical interest and has been the scene of momentous historical events.

Thus, one house, at the corner of Vermont Avenue and H Street, was Sumner's home, and there he nursed his pride through all the troubled years of his service in the Senate. Another house near by was the residence of Sir Bulwer Lytton, and of Lord Ashburton, ministers to this country from Great Britain. A third building is a church, built after the war of 1812 with the earnest encouragement of President Madison, and for two generations the "court church." Several houses further along, at the intersection of Connecticut Avenue, lived Daniel Webster, and in a room which looks out upon Lafayette Square the Secretary and Lord Ashburton framed the treaty which defines our Canadian boundary. Across the street is the Decatur House, the home not only of the brilliant commodore, but of Henry Clay, Martin Van Buren, Edward Livingston, George M. Dallas, Senator Judah P. Benjamin, and General Beale, whose guest General Grant had been for weeks at a time. The mind is bewildered by the names which give this square its significance—Senator Benton, Admiral Wilkes, Senator Sibley, Commodore Morris, Secretary Spencer, Vice President Colfax, General Sickles, Colonel Ingersoll, Secretary Windom, and many, many others.

In such a neighborhood it is a remarkable house, indeed, which is the most conspicuous of all. Yet more than one historian has given that title to the building which the gallant Rodgers built as a home.

was a spacious dwelling—there were thirty rooms or more, of large size; it was notably situated, and large means were required to maintain it. Then it became the elite boarding house of the Capital. Among its guests

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Ten stirring years preceded the outbreak of the war between the Federal Government and the States of the South. They were years of speech-making, largely and "compromises," but the celebrated Washington Club, and Sickles and Key were both members of that body when the tragedy which associates their names occurred before its door. With the outbreak of the war the building became the home of William H. Seward, Lincoln's Secretary of State. Lastly it was renovated for the home of James G. Blaine, the third Secretary of State who dwelt within its walls, and the seventh who lived in Lafayette Square. In this building Blaine died, so recently that the suspense of the public mind concerning his illness is still well remembered. But the story for today concerns Seward and Seward only.



PRESIDENT LINCOLN.

given "the growing agitation against slavery. Nothing could be more characteristic of Seward than his treatment of that theme. Garrison and Greeley had made the country ring with abstruse discus-

This was only his starting point. His position found a further explanation in a speech delivered at Rochester ten years later, in which he argued that a system of free labor and a slave-labor system were absolutely irreconcilable and were increasing their interference and then he drew this inference: "There is here an irrespressible conflict between opposing and enduring forces, and it means that the United States must and will, sooner or later, become either entirely a slave-holding nation or entirely a free-labor nation."

From 1850 to 1856 Seward talked that doctrine in the Senate. At first he was practically alone. After five years he had allies strong enough to found a new party, and when the new party came into existence he joined it naturally, for it was to him only an anti-slavery Whig party.

When this new party convened in 1850 to nominate candidates for the Presidency and Vice Presidency, Seward entertained a human ambition to become its leader in the field, and it is not too much to say that the great majority of its members anticipated his selection. There was, of course, the obvious reason that he was the most successful exponent of its principles, and had served them, in politics at least, longer than anyone else. But there were more immediate reasons, also; for Mr. Seward's friends had organized in his behalf a "Know-Nothing" following. A fourth regards Lincoln as a much more adroit politician than Seward. More than one indicates that in spite of this Seward's defeat was due to Horace Greeley's spite. But none of them can explain away the fact that Lincoln, "a colorless and unknown candidate from Illinois," who polled only 102 votes in the first ballot against 173 for Seward, ultimately polled 233, and was duly nominated.

Here the tragedy of Seward's ambition begins to point to Commodore Rodgers' "elegant house."

Seward was greatly disappointed at his failure. His friends felt it even more deeply. All over the country men said for his hearing that the great man had gone down before the little. A powerful Democratic organ published a long editorial on the theme: "He is at once the greatest and the most dangerous man in the Government." Another paper referred to him as "Actaeon devoured by his own dogs." In his own town of Auburn the editor of the foremost Republican paper could not find the spirit to write a single sentence of indorsement for the successful candidate. Finally Seward himself wrote an article beginning: "No truer or firmer defender of the Republican faith could have been found." But he was moved to say as well that he felt himself "a leader deposed by his own party" (Continued on Twelfth Page.)



MARY TODD LINCOLN.



STEPHEN A. DOUGLAS.

ways, but harder to hold. What a tribute it was, then, to little Senator Seward when he found himself, not only the weightiest figure in the councils of the party, but the source of its spirit and the chief keeper of its principles. Seward had come to Washington with the first year of the ten which led to the war. He had been educated and bred among the homely thinkers of central New York. His spirit had developed on the theory that principle ought to govern action, and that all the special conditions in the world could not cloud true principle. This was only one of the effects of his life in that community. Another was that, being afar off from the South and unacquainted with the institution as it actually was, every impulse in his nature revolted against slavery. He was then of earnest, high principle, and unaffected loathing for

the great commercial establishment which characterized the South. But this was only the shot he had to fire. His powder consisted of an intellectuality which saw quite through the deeds of men, a vocabulary of forceful, elegant English, a self-possession which no quantity of personal abuse could upset, and a sort of political intuition of the right kind which made him a power in his party from the beginning. When the New Yorker entered the Senate he was already a national figure. He had served for four years as a Whig in the State senate. He had twice been the Whig candidate for governor, and had served for the four years ending in 1842. It was not this prominence among the Whigs of New York, however, which extended his reputation. It was, instead, the characteristic turn he had

slaves of it. The former treated it ethically, until no one who would read what he wrote or heard what he said could doubt the ugliness and sin of imprisoning one's fellow-man. Greeley had considered it philanthropically until every one who read the "Tribune" or saw extracts from it printed in other papers, appreciated in part, at least, the beauty of personal freedom for all men. But Seward saw the problem as a politician; and he developed it so exceedingly well on its political side that he struck at once the desires and prejudices of the great masses which were to take part in the ensuing struggle. "The party of slavery," he said in Cleveland, in 1848—the sentence is altogether characteristic—"upholds an aristocracy, founded on the humiliation of labor, as necessary to the existence of a chivalrous republic."

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