

Belmont,
South 16th Ave.,
Nashville, Tenn.

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HABS No. TENN-56

HABS
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PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA
District of Tennessee

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
CENTRAL UNIT—ST. LOUIS

Historic American Buildings Survey
J. Frazer Smith, District Officer
Goodwyn Institute Bldg., Memphis, Tenn.

ADDENDUM
FOLLOWS...

"BELMONT"
(Residence of Col. and Mrs. J.A.S. Acklen)
Nashville, Davidson County, Tennessee.

Owner. Ward-Belmont School for Girls.

Date of Erection. 1850.

Architect. Unknown.

Builder. Col. and Mrs. J.A.S. Acklen.

Present Condition. "Belmont" is now only one part of a group of buildings comprising a girls' school. Wings for dormitories have been added on either end of the principal facade, and a large addition has been built to the rear of the building and connecting to the original building in such a way as to form an interior court at the rear of the building. Just how much, if any, of the original structure was torn away at the erection of any of these additions cannot be determined, and does not appear to be contained in any available records. There must have been some parts demolished for as the building now stands it is impossible to ascertain just where the kitchen and dining room were in relation to each other, or where the stairways to the basement were located. There seems to be indications that the kitchen was in the basement, and possibly one of the large rooms in the wings might have been the dining room. If this be true, there must have been some way of connecting the two by stairs. If this connection existed, it must have been in some extension of the principal building which was removed to make way for the wings and additions added later. Insofar as the principal part of the residence is concerned, it is in a large degree as it was originally. Suffice to say the most interesting parts are as they were. The large parlor, the grand stairs, the main entrance have not been altered, but, to facilitate its present usage some of the rooms in the wings to the left and right of the main parlor have been changed by partitioning. Due to the fact that it is under intelligent and interested care the part which was not changed

by force of necessity has been retained in excellent state of preservation, and is the source of much pride to the school and lends a very aristocratic atmosphere to this exclusive institution. The grounds and gardens have been changed somewhat, likewise by force of necessity, and some of the buildings have been removed, the most notable of which is the greenhouse which was a long structure terminating the vista from the approach of the house in such a way as to almost form a base for the water tower rising behind it. The water tower has been retained for sentimental reasons, but the greenhouse was removed to make way for club houses for the girls and administration building for the faculty. The summer tea-houses have been retained intact and quite a number of walkways have been saved. It has been impossible to maintain the grounds as they were beyond the central axis for while this axis was the center of interest originally it is now the treatment between the buildings on either side forming somewhat of a quadrangle.

Number of Stories. The central section is two stories and full basement with observation tower above the stair hall. The wings on either end are one story and full basement. The basement under the entire house is completely above ground forming, in reality, a three story building for the central part with two story wings.

Other Existing Records. There are, no doubt, countless records of "Belmont", but a very complete and well illustrated account is contained in the "History of Homes and Gardens of Tennessee" published by the Parthenon Press, 1926 for the Garden Study Club of Nashville.

Additional Data. The traditional environment of culture that followed inherently through the line of famous families and houses, beginning in the stirring rise to success and prominence of Isaac Franklin, reflects itself again in the personification of "Belmont". Mrs. J.A.S. Acklen, wealthy widow of Isaac Franklin, the builder of Fairview*, and daughter of a socially and culturally prominent family, carried

on the tradition that had been her former husband's, and, on moving to Nashville, where her social activities could extend on a broader horizon, built for herself and husband another and even more elaborate home.

"Belmont" is not comparable with the house she recently evacuated for it was not to serve the same functions, not to live the pioneer life, but, on the contrary, was to become, and did, the center of social life in a flourishing and cultural city.

In view of the fact that "Belmont" is now just a part of Ward-Belmont School for Girls, and consequently has been altered for use as such, we shall consider it in the following description as it was originally.

Situated on the side of a large rectangular tract of land, all completely and formally landscaped, the enormous facade looks down on the succession of diminishing circles toward the conservatory and water tower which terminate the magnificent vista.

The facade itself presents a formal composition, not unlike in silhouette that of Belle Meade, The Hermitage, Mercer Hall and others, in that it consists of a large two story central section with lower, nominally, one story wings on either side. These one story wings are, in reality, two stories due to the fact that the first floor of the central section is raised so high as to cause the basement to be completely above ground. Insofar as the mass is concerned, its only departure from the style as compared to the other houses named above is the addition of an observatory tower. This tower, though not exactly homogeneous as regards the style of architecture, completes the silhouette in a pleasing manner.

As soon as we have begun to take in the elements of the house, the architectural detail and the materials of construction, all of this association

with Belle Meade, The Hermitage, Mercer Hall, etc. is lost. The scene changes and we see that there is a strong resemblance in fenestration, columnation and detail with the PETITE TRIANON in the gardens of the Palace at Versailles, and we realize that again this little Palace has appealed to the discrimination of another great lady. The entrance feature consists of a recessed portico with two Corinthian columns forming three bays between the end projections that form the recess. These columns support a well proportioned cornice extending over the portico and completely around the building. Superimposed above the cornice is a low parapet wall, the corners of which being accentuated by marble statues.

On either side of the entrance motif there occurs a delicate one story projecting porch, done also in the Corinthian Order, and surmounted by a balustrade. The roofs of these porches form balconies for large windows opening out onto them from the second floor.

A light cast iron balcony is contained within the entrance recess at the second floor. This recess and balcony departs in plan from the PETITE TRIANON, though the partee is not destroyed in elevation. The second and most important departure is the addition of the observation tower on the top. While this tower completes the silhouette pleasingly from a distance, it is lacking in taste and refinement of detail; being surmounted by a crudely bracketed cornice.

The two wings projecting on both sides from the central section of the house carry out the same detail as to windows, cornices, etc., but here again we find another feature that characterizes "Belmont" as a house of the South. This feature is an addition of cast iron balconies of a very lace-like character. The detail of this cast iron, while it has been copied since, does not occur elsewhere in this section and much attention has been brought to the house by it.

On entering the house the visitor is admitted to a small formal foyer with a white Carrara marble fire-

place directly opposite the entrance and framed by two large doorways. Surmounting the mantel is an enormous gold-framed mirror and over the two doorways on either side occur transoms of lovely red etched Venetian glass. This whole form of composition, in addition to being a physical obstruction, is also a psychological barrier against entrance to the great hall, or atrium beyond, and at once is likened to the same treatment employed in one of Virginia's most famous houses, Clatsmont, on the James River.

Proceeding further into the house one passes under the grand stair case. This stair rises from the great hall, divides and passes over the two doorways leading from the entrance foyer. Emerging from under the stair one comes out into a great hall of magnificent splendor. A fluted Corinthian Colonnade borders the room on the stair side, supporting an elaborate plaster cornice of rich and almost baroque detail, that continues around the entire room. The hall is spanned by an elliptical ceiling, rising from the cornice and decorated only by a simple plaster ornament of leaf design. The chandelier hangs from the center of this ornament. Directly opposite the stair a large bay window projects to the rear of the house. On either side of this bay is a group of three arched windows set in deep paneled reveals. Of singular interest in this room is the absence of any apparent source of heat, there being no fire-places or flues.

The two rooms on the left, and likewise on the right, side of the entrance foyer are separated by a wall with fire-places on both sides, back to back, and the same composition of fire-places with doors on either side, employed in the entrance, is recalled in these rooms. They, too, are embellished with rich cornices, heavily molded doors, Carara marble mantels and great gold-framed mirrors. The remaining space of the first floor is divided into rooms which cannot be named as to usage, but must have served more personal or private functions. They are not treated with the lavish display mentioned above, but a more restrained dignity is maintained.

The grand stair giving access to the second floor rises gracefully to a center landing where it divides, passes over the doors beneath, turns and comes back to form a delightful composition. It is characterized by slender white ballusters supporting a mahogany rail, mahogany newels, dark oak treads and white risers and stringers.

Bed-rooms comprise the major portion of the second floor, but its most interesting feature is the stair leading up to the observatory tower. A unique treatment is resorted to in this stair. Reversing the system used at the first floor, this little stair is divided at the bottom, rises in the form of an arch, meets at a midpoint landing and extends up as a single stair at right angles to the stair arch from which it takes off. This stair hall is also treated with Corinthian columns supporting the arch over the stair well. After leaving the hall most of the detail is omitted, but that which remains is handled with the same care and workmanship that existed throughout the house.

And so we leave the house to find that this careful workmanship and studied plan does not stop with the house alone. The garden which afforded the setting for this lovely mansion was a spectacle of grandeur seldom seen anywhere, and it may be said that few, if any in Tennessee, either past or present, surpass it in size and splendor. There was originally a succession of three large planting circles, diminishing in size as they receded from the house in a series of lower levels.

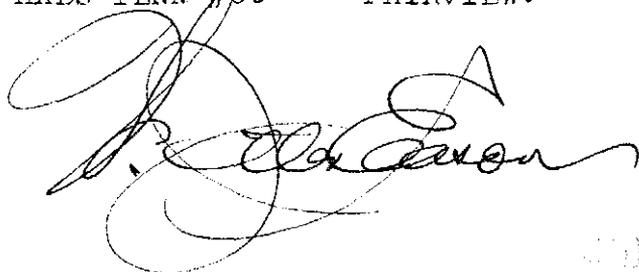
The circles are formed by walks and cross-walks dividing the planting areas. The first circle was a formal, severe lawn embellished with marble statues. Two tea-houses are between this circle and the mansion, one on each side of the walk to the steps. A single central walk divides this circle into two parts and a simple marble fountain occurs in the center. Two smaller walks lead off from this circle terminating with two more smaller cast iron tea-houses.

The second, or middle, circle was divided by flower bordered walks into three planting areas with points of intersection accented by boxwoods. In the center of this circle is located the largest of all of the five cast iron summer, or tea-houses, and affords the only major break in the view from the house to the conservatory.

Each succeeding circle becomes smaller and more complicated till the end -- and so the third and last is an involved mosaic composed of three circles with staggered cross-walks with more colorful and less formal flowers blooming therein. Terminating this procession of circles is the long botanical nursery, or conservatory, a tremendous glass building having a high central section and long lower wings on both sides. Immediately to the rear of this, is the water tower, rising one hundred and five feet on direct axis with the rest of the ensemble. As the grounds extended away from the central feature, smaller and less important walks and two major drives wound over the grounds through the boxwood lanes to the many lesser buildings, and to the highway at either side. As the distance from the main axis was increased so were the size of the trees till at the edges an almost natural heavily wooded condition existed, thus forming a gigantic amphitheatre of trees enclosing a garden of formal loveliness.

The other buildings in the group not mentioned before are: the art gallery, bowling alley, ice house, zoo, gardener's house, propagating house, small tower, bear house, large stables and small stables. A lake, an orchard and a deer park completed this, one of the most elaborate of developments.

* Reference HABS-TENN-#30 - FAIRVIEW.



Reviewed T.T.C. Nov. 5, '36

An Addendum to Belmont
(Col. J.A.S. Acklen House; now
Belmont College, Acklen Hall)
SE corner Belmont Blvd. and Wedgewood
Nashville
Davidson County
Tennessee

HABS No. TN-56

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PHOTOGRAPHS

HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Architectural and Engineering Record
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20240

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

BELMONT

HABS No. TN-56

(Col. J.A.S. Acklen House; now Belmont College, Acklen Hall)

Location: Southeast corner, Belmont Boulevard and Wedgewood, Nashville, Davidson County, Tennessee.

USGS Nashville West Quadrangle, Universal Transverse Mercator Coordinates: 16.518450.3998800.

Present Owner: Belmont College.

Present Use: House museum, with some administrative offices in the wings.

Significance: Built in 1850 by Col. J. A. S. Acklen and his wife, Adelia, Belmont was considered at that time to be one of the finest private residences in the south. Designed in the manner of an Italian Renaissance villa with Greek Revival details, the handsome structure is thought to have been designed by Adolphus Heiman. After 1890, the estate was converted into an institution for higher learning.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1850.
2. Architect: Although long thought the work of William Strickland, Belmont has recently been attributed to Adolphus Heiman.

This attribution stems from Haydon and Booth's 1860 map of Nashville, located in the Library of Congress. Inset views of certain structures are included on the map, and the view of Belmont credits it to Adolphus Heiman. Heiman, a local architect, is best known for his design for the University of Nashville Literary Department Building (HABS No. TN-18).

Agnes A. Gilchrist, in her 1950 definitive biography of Strickland, noted that "on internal evidence, the stairs and details of decoration, it would seem that Strickland was certainly the architect of Belmont" (p. 35). Ivar Lou Myhr Duncan's "A History of Belmont College" (n.d.) also attributes Belmont to Strickland. Mrs. Duncan's source was Mrs. Oscar Noel, granddaughter of Adelia Acklen Cheatham. Mrs. Noel's attribution was based on family tradition.

The History of Homes and Gardens of Tennessee, edited by Roberta S. Brandau in 1936, stated that "the house was built from plans drawn by an Italian architect" (p. 131). The previous HABS data, also written that year, said that the architect was unknown.

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While crediting Strickland with the design of Belmont has always been based more on style than on hard evidence, the recent attribution of Heiman should also be viewed as tentative. Assigning an architect is complicated by the fact that the house had an addition made almost as soon as it was built; two architects thus may have been associated with the original structure.

3. Original and subsequent owners: In March, 1849, Adelia Franklin purchased from William P. Downs a sixty-acre tract of land situated between the Hillsboro and Granny White turnpikes (R.O.D.C. Deed Book 12, p. 198). It was upon this property that she and her second husband, Col. Joseph Alexander Smith Acklen built their house, Belmont. Through subsequent purchases, the property was enlarged into an estate incorporating extensive parks and gardens (R.O.D.C. Deed Books 37, p. 280; 42, p. 697; 42, p. 701; 71, p. 136).

In 1887, this estate was sold by Adelia Franklin Acklen Cheatham to Lewis T. Baxter (R.O.D.C. Deed Book 98, p. 498), who in turn sold the property to Misses Ida E. Hood and Susan L. Heron, founders, joint owners, and principals of Belmont Junior College. (The subsequent transactions of charter and conveyance of title are recorded in R.O.D.C. Deed Books 139, p. 1; 159, p. 94; the property on which the water tower is situated, 7.57 acres, was conveyed through R.O.D.C. Deed Book 137, p. 278). In June, 1913, Belmont College was sold to the Ward-Belmont School (R.O.D.C. Deed Book 436, p. 441). In 1951, the Ward-Belmont School was conveyed to the Tennessee Baptist Convention (R.O.D.C. Deed Book 1728, p. 1). The property included other acquisitions made through the years (R.O.D.C. Deed Books 660, p. 610; 782, p. 610; 747, p. 750; 734, p. 347; 734, p. 348; 831, p. 326; 736, p. 538; 752, p. 263; 583, p. 212; 619, p. 301; 619, p. 305; 1579, p. 458; and 1562, p. 515).

4. Original plans and construction: No plans or drawings of any kind have been located for the original building. Apparently, the atrium or ballroom was an early addition. The narrow cross hall was probably originally a verandah, with an in antis portico, similar to the south front, where the stairway is now. This would explain the elaborate Corinthian columns in these interior spaces.
5. Alterations and additions: Most of the known additions were made after the house became a school. The first addition, attached to the original wings, was made in 1890. In 1903 an addition was made on the north side, obscuring the original exterior. In the 1910s, a three-story wing was added on the west, and a few years later a similar one was added to the east.

B. Historical Events and Person Connected with the Structure:

The history of Belmont revolves around the personality of its mistress, Adelia Acklen, a woman of extraordinary character. Her father, Oliver Bliss Hayes (1783-1858), a New Englander from South Rokeby, Massachusetts, settled in Nashville in 1808. Adelia was born in 1819 and died in 1889. She graduated from Dr. William Elliotts famous Nashville Female Academy. At the age of twenty, she married Isaac Franklin (1789-1846), thirty years her senior. As a bride, she lived at Fairview in Sumner County, one of the showplaces of the Nashville area. This home had been erected in 1832 by Isaac Franklin on a plantation of more than 2,000 acres.

By the time Isaac was forty years old, he had made a million dollars by his own efforts, mainly as a slave trader. Then he bought several plantations in Louisiana, Alabama, and Mississippi. When he married Adelia Hayes in 1839, she requested that he become known as a southern planter rather than a slave trader. Adelia brought social distinction, culture, and charm to Fairview. The Franklin winters were usually spent at Belleview in West Feliciana Parish or at their home in New Orleans.

In 1846 Isaac Franklin died, leaving a fortune which reputedly made his widow the wealthiest woman in the United States. In addition to Fairview and seven plantations in Louisiana, he left her some fifty thousand acres of land in Texas. She kept Fairview until 1882, except for small parts of the property of her daughter Emma and herself which she sold before marrying Col. Joseph Acklen in 1848.

Joseph Alexander Smith Acklen was a young, dashing lawyer from Huntsville, Alabama. He was the grandson of John Hunt, the founder of that city. Soon after his marriage to Adelia Franklin late in 1848, they set out for a nineteen-month honeymoon in Europe. With the beginning of the Civil War in 1861, Acklen was interested in making every possible contribution to the Confederacy. He contracted a fever upon a trip to his plantations in Louisiana and died.

The third chapter of Adelia's life -- and the second for that of Belmont -- began in June, 1867, when she married Dr. William Cheatham. The outdoor wedding which took place at Belmont is renowned. What is less well known but which illuminates this woman's strong sense of independence is the marriage contract which she executed with Dr. Cheatham to assure her the continuing right of ownership to all her properties, including Belmont (R.O.D.C. Deed Book 38, p. 287). Adelia died in 1889 and was buried in Mr. Olivet Cemetery in Nashville. Her life had been filled with drama and romance, and she was probably the only Nashvillian to be presented to Queen Victoria.

Adelicia Cheatham sold Belmont in 1887, two years prior to her death, to Miss Ida E. Hood and Miss Susan L. Heron, both of Philadelphia and both educated in the east. These two ladies were founders, joint owners and principals of Belmont Junior College which was established at Belmont after 1890. In 1911 Miss Hood and Miss Heron retired; in the following years Ward Seminary moved to the Belmont College campus, and the institution became known as the Ward-Belmont School (1912-1951), a junior college for women. In February, 1951, the school was sold to the Tennessee Baptist Convention for the consideration of outstanding indebtedness, and Belmont College, a co-educational, four-year college under the supervision of the Tennessee Baptist Convention, was founded.

Prepared by Anatole Senkevitch, Jr.
Architectural Historian
Historic American Buildings Survey
Summer, 1970
and
Alison K. Hoagland
Architectural Historian
Historic American Buildings Survey
June, 1981

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: This Italianate mansion, featuring an in antis portico and a cupola, has had many additions but few alterations.
2. Condition of fabric: good.

B. Description of the Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: Two-story central portion with set-back wings extending to the sides and to the rear.
2. Foundations: Tennessee limestone.
3. Walls: Stucco over brick. There are Corinthian pilasters at the corners and at the edge of the recessed portico.
4. Structural system: Masonry bearing walls.
5. Porches: On the center of the front is a two-story in antis portico featuring two Corinthian columns, 27" in diameter. The balcony at the second level has a cast-iron balustrade.

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One-story porches flanking the main entrance feature paired Corinthian columns 13" in diameter. The balconies at the second level have turned wooden balusters.

6. Chimneys: Four.

7. Openings:

a. Doorways and doors: The main door is paneled wood with narrow lights, set in a shouldered architrave supporting a denticulated cornice. Other first-floor openings are french doors with two-light transom windows, set in a shouldered architrave.

b. Windows: The windows on the second level have six-over-six-light double-hung sash set in a shouldered architrave.

8. Roof:

a. Shape: Shallow-pitched hip roof.

b. Cornice: Heavy cast-iron cornice with dentils and modillions below a parapet.

c. Cupola: Octagonal cupola centers on main hall.

C. Description of the Interior:

1. Floor plans: In the main block, the foyer, flanked by two rooms, leads past the stairway into the great hall or ballroom.

2. Stairways: Central stairway is Y-shaped, with turned balusters and octagonal newel. The stair goes straight up to a landing, where it divides and curves around. The stairway leading from the second floor to the cupola starts as two stairways which merge into one. The stringers are ornamented.

3. Flooring: Oak flooring, recently installed.

4. Wall and ceiling finish: Painted plaster walls. Barrel-vaulted ceiling in ballroom with ornamental plaster cornice.

5. Doors: Four-panel wood doors with two-light transom windows set in shouldered architrave.

6. Decorative features: Transom windows of both exterior and interior doors are red etched Bohemian glass. Fireplaces have elaborately ornamented mantels of what appears to be marble.

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D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: House faces south down gentle sloping gardens. Cast-iron gazebos, statuary, and water tower remain.
2. Historic landscape design: Present grounds follow some of the lines of the original landscape pattern, as seen in the photocopy of the historic photo included with this documentation. Garden was laid out in three circles of decreasing size. The grounds featured cast-iron gazebos and statuary.

Prepared by Roy C. Pledger
Project Supervisor
Historic American Buildings Survey
August, 1971

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

- A. Architectural drawings: Gifford A. Cochran, Grandeur in Tennessee (New York, 1946), contains a collection of photographs and drawings. A floor plan, partial elevation of the south front, and details are found on pp. 119-121.
- B. Early Views: A drawing of the house is found on the map "City of Nashville and Edgefield, Davidson County, Tennessee, published by Haydon and Booth, civil engineers and surveyors. Philadelphia: P.S. Duval and Sons, 1860. Located in the Geographic and Maps Division, Library of Congress.

An excellent etched plate of the exterior of Belmont is contained in Art Work of Nashville, Part 6 (Chicago: W. H. Parrish Publishing Co., 1894), unpaginated.

A ca. 1905 photograph hanging in the first-floor stair hall of the building has been photocopied for HABS and included with this documentation.

A 1911 photograph of the structure is included in Historical and Beautiful Country Homes Near Nashville, Tennessee, photographs by Marvin W. Wiles, engraved and printed by Brandon Printing Co., Nashville, 1911.

C. Bibliography:

1. Primary Sources: Register's Office for Davidson County, Tennessee, Deed Books.
2. Secondary Sources:

Brandau, Roberta Seawell, ed. History of Homes and Gardens of Tennessee. Nashville: Parthenon Press, 1936. pp. 131-136.

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Gilchrist, Agnes A. William Strickland: Architect and Engineer, 1788-1854. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1950. pp. 18, 35, 40, 116.

Graham, Eleanor. "Belmont: Nashville Home of Adelia Acklen." Tennessee Historical Quarterly 30 (Winter, 1971): 345-368.

Smith, J. Frazer. White Pillars. New York: William Helburn, 1941. pp. 42-44.

PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

This project was undertaken by the National Park Service in cooperation with the Tennessee Historical Commission and the Historic Sites Federation of Tennessee. Structures were measured and drawn in July, 1970, under the direction of James C. Massey, Chief of HABS, and Roy C. Pledger, project supervisor (Texas A & M University), Anatole Senkevitch, Jr., historian (University of Virginia), by student architects Donald W. Graham and William H. Edwards (University of Illinois), and Donna G. Woodrum and Robert J. Dunnay (Virginia Polytechnic Institute), at the Historic American Buildings Survey field office, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee. The photographers was Jack E. Boucher of the HABS staff. The written data were edited by Alison K. Hoagland of the HABS staff in June, 1981.