

Blair House
Pennsylvania Avenue
Washington, D. C.

HABS No. DC-45

HABS
D.C.
WASH
27-

PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA
Washington, D. C. District

Historic American Buildings Survey

Prepared at Washington Office

ADDENDUM
FOLLOWS...

HABS
DC
WASH
27-

Blair-Lovell House
1651 Pennsylvania Avenue, N. W.
Washington, D. C.

HABS No. DC-45

The following special report on this building was prepared by Assistant Architect, Stuart M. Barnett, National Park Service, in 1937. Because of its high research value as a record of Blair House while still in private ownership, it has been prepared in this form for inclusion in the HABS Archives.

The stately residence of Major Gist Blair located in the city of Washington, at 1651 Pennsylvania Avenue, is at once architecturally charming and a veritable treasure house for cultural antiquities. Dr. William Thornton is purported to have been the architect for the original building although to date no documentary proof to support such a supposition is available.

Since 1824, when the earliest section of the house was completed, it has undergone many changes which have unfortunately altered although probably improved its original appearance. The observations set forth in this analysis are based solely on evidences of change and period identification traceable in the architectural fabric of the house. Assistance was enlisted from among the best minds in the architectural profession in making these alterations, so they are neither abrupt nor inharmonious. Most notable among the earliest of these changes which took place prior to the War Between the States was the addition of a

HABS
DC
WASH
27-

third story. About 1860 another two-story bay was added on the east end of the house and the roof was raised a second time to provide for a fourth floor. When the house was first built it probably had an "A" roof and dormers and during the first roof raising operation of this nature necessitated the change in the roof to one of almost flat contour. At this time the main cornice was raised from its position above the third story windows and installed above the openings of this later fourth floor addition. It remained at this height until the time the portico was put on when it was restored to its second position.

Originally the front facade was of brick laid up in a pattern the bond of which has not been ascertained. The present stucco finish, with its broad quoins, and pleasing color combinations which now conceal the original brickwork, made its original appearance about the time of the War Between the States.

The front portico, while attractive and fairly convincing, is, as far as it has been able to ascertain, a conjectural restoration. The portico of the Octagon House seems to have been the chief source from which the details were drawn. The doorway with its fan and sidelights while not anachronistic is also probably conjectural. The presence in the original brickwork of a structural semi-circular arch is, I understand, the evidence upon which the design of the present doorway is based. The authentic character in the details of this restoration

are, however, less convincing than that of the portico.

At the time the doorway and portico were added the windows on first floor were composed of two double hung sashes divided by a single mullion. Using the windows on the first floor rear as patterns, the present windows were installed, and are generally quite satisfying restorations.

The iron fence across the front of the house, as well as the rail and balustrade on the front steps are of a character contemporary with the earliest part of the house.

The two lower granite treads of the front steps are more recent innovations and were installed when Pennsylvania Avenue was lowered to its present level.

On the rear a modern extension of the extreme east bay connects the main house with the much altered remains of what is believed to have been an old stable or a green house. This was at one time probably a story and a half building with an "A" roof. The break in the brickwork at the level of the second floor joists supports the former theory. The structure throughout has lost much of its original appearance due to the changes in its fenestration. These changes are very obvious in the masonry.

The alterations to the rear facade of the main house are similar to those which took place on the front. The two uppermost

HABS
DC
WASH
27-

stories have been added and in addition several windows have been sealed up.

Within the house the architecture is obscured by the richness and refinement of the appointments. Fortunately, alterations in its original appearance are primarily superficial for the original doors, hardware, most of the trim, and the plan have been little changed.

In the entrance hall modern applied mouldings break up the one-time plain wall surfaces into panels. The chair rail is also a modern addition contemporary with the paneled wall treatment and the original plaster cornice and adjacent ceiling surfaces have been richly embellished by the addition of modern compo.

In the office and the dining room the mantels, cornice, door enframements and other trim, with the exception of the base, were removed from the Churchhill House which once stood in Portland, Maine. The Georgian character of the details of the carving and compo, while beautifully executed, are not quite sympathetic with the more robust feeling found elsewhere in the house. The single leafed doors of the dining room, living room, which originally separated these rooms have been replaced by multiple doors of similar design.

In the drawing room and in the reception room, as in the entrance hall, the applied panel treatment on the sidewalls, the base, chair

HABS
DC
WASH
27-

rail and compo embellished cornice is the result of modern architectural redecoration. It is believed that concealed in the partition are the doors which once separated these rooms.

The stairhall is the least modified room on the first floor. The cornice, stairs with its complementary features, and the original side door and transom have been untouched. The stairs comprise two straight runs broken by an intermediate landing lighted by a new Palladian window. The only change in the stairs is that the size of the landing is considerably augmented by the addition of the room afforded by later extreme east bay referred to earlier in this report.

The plan of the second floor provides for two bedrooms on the front of the house. Each bedroom has a dressing room (now bath rooms). Each bedroom has a fireplace with a simple mantel and coal burning grate. With the exception of the addition of modern plumbing and the space provided in the eastern-most bay for same, these sleeping quarters are little changed.

The whole space across the back of the house is devoted to a very generous library or living room with fireplaces at each end. Major Blair at one time removed the entrance doorway of this room and replaced it with three doorways copied from similar features originally in Gadsby's tavern in Alexandria. The mantelpiece at the west end while not out of character was installed within the last fifty years. The fireplace at the east end has been sealed up. The decora-

HABS
DC
WASH
27-

tive compo ceiling is also a modern addition.

The stair hall and stairs leading to the third floor as below, are much as originally designed. The southeast room on this floor has been entirely retrimmed and only the entrance door and window trim remain as original. The rest of this floor is devoted to the apartments of Mrs. Blair and to date it has not been feasible to request an inspection.

On the fourth floor few vestiges of the original attic remain. It has been almost completely redecorated and finished for servants quarters and storage space.

The basement of the house has been modernized to meet the requirements of present day living standards and includes a servants entrance hall, a furnace room, kitchen, servants bedroom and servants dining room. This latter room was at one time the old kitchen, but the only evidences of this fact are shown by the presence of the old fireplace now enframed by a sophisticated compo decorated mantel.

It is unfortuante that these pages are not concerned with the charm and intellectually stimulating character wrought into the much modified architectural fabric of this fine house. As a fine record of the architecture of the houses of the early republic, it falls short of being an outstanding example. As a record of philosophies and tastes of the type of gentlemen who built and guided the early

republic, its worth cannot be overestimated, in the opinion of
the writer.

HABS
DC
WASH
27-

Suggested Reference: Harold Donaldson Eberlein and Cortlandt Van
Dyke Hubbard, Historic House of George-Town
and Washington City, Richmond, 1958, pp. 292-
300 inc.

Prepared by: Worth Bailey, HABS Historian, June, 1961

Approved by

Robert E. Smith
Chief Architect

Date 7-7-61

ADDITIONAL
12-1-61

Addendum to
Blair House (Joseph Lovell House)
1651 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington
District of Columbia

HABS No. DC-45

HABS
DC,
WASH,
27-

PHOTOGRAPH

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

ADDENDUM TO
BLAIR HOUSE
(JOSEPH LOVELL HOUSE)
1651 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington
District of Columbia

HABS No. DC-45

HABS
DC,
WASH,
27-

XEROGRAPHIC COPIES OF COLOR TRANSPARENCIES

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20013