



To be Preserved for All Time
THE MAJOR AND THE PRESIDENT
SAVE BLAIR HOUSE

BY CANDACE SHIREMAN

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THE WHITE HOUSE HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION was founded in 1961, for the purpose of enhancing the understanding, appreciation, and enjoyment of the President’s House. Income from the sale of the association’s books and journals is used to fund the acquisition of historic furnishings and art work for the permanent White House collection, assist in the preservation of public rooms, and further the educational mission of the association.

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WASHINGTON, D.C.

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From its beginnings in the mid-nineteenth and into the early twentieth century, the historic preservation movement in the United States drew its leadership from private citizens, not government officials. Early local leaders were generally from well-established families, concerned about cultural values, more enthusiasts than activists, “busy recording history and, individually and as small groups, enjoying history.”¹ Witnessing the decline and loss of meaningful places in the country’s history and their own lives, through war, economic depression, and industrial progress some were compelled to action beyond personal and social club antiquarian interests. Those who succeeded were able to bridge private and public objectives and work cooperatively with authorities to repurpose rather than destroy historic structures, preserving their meaning and productivity for the benefit of their communities and the greater public.

An archival collection kept at Blair House, The President's Guest House, records the alliance of Major Gist Blair, the last family descendant to live there, and President Franklin D. Roosevelt to save it and other old structures in the White House neighborhood from demolition by the federal government. They illuminate a little-known success story in American preservation history. Covering almost a half century from the Progressive era through the New Deal, the documents reveal two political opposites whose shared passion for history transcended partisanship, saved significant architectural treasures, and produced America's first national preservation policy in the Historic Sites Act of 1935. The collection also provides a glimpse inside the administration of Franklin Roosevelt, his relationships with Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes and Secretary of State Cordell Hull, and their agencies' conflicting agendas influenced by unprecedented economic and social challenges, government growth, and global change. It confirms the president's leading role in the federal government's first official commitment to historic preservation in the United States, reveals his intervention in the planned destruction of the irreplaceable Blair and Decatur homes and lasting impact on the character of the White House neighborhood, and reinforces his legacy as a visionary protector of American cultural heritage resources for all.²

Between 1880 and 1895, several articles describing Blair House as one of Washington's "old historic homes" in the Lafayette Square area just north of the White House appeared in local and national publications. They coincide with post-centennial Americans' growing awareness of a common cultural heritage reflected in the lives of early patriots and their surviving homes and mark the transition of family ownership of Blair House from the second to the third generation. They also lament the passing of this neighborhood as the city's social, political, and cultural epicenter and its gracious Federal and Georgian style homes into relics of the past. All recount the Blair family's role in American history, other notable persons and events associated with the house, and the unique artifacts furnishing it as evidence of its historic status.³

When in 1824 Dr. Joseph Lovell, first surgeon general of the U. S. Army, built the house today known as Blair House at 1651 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W., across from the White House, for his wife and eleven children, the fairly new capital city was still an undeveloped settlement of transient officials who "came to the capital alone and, like a flock of all-male migratory birds, merely wintered along the Potomac."⁴ Family life was scarce in the town conceived solely to be the seat of the federal government, but the Lovells joined a few local families—notably the Tayloe, Van Ness, Carbery, Cutt, and Ewell families—who had formed a fledg-

ling “residential elite” who built fine houses scattered along the muddy, unpaved streets near the White House. The neighborhood was abuzz that year with renovation of the President’s Park directly opposite the White House for the upcoming October 12th celebration honoring the Marquis de Lafayette at the start of his American grand tour.⁵

Following Lovell’s death in 1836, the house was bought in early 1837 by Francis Preston Blair, a former circuit court clerk and newspaper editor from Franklin County, Kentucky, who had come to Washington with his family in 1830 at President Andrew Jackson’s request to establish a pro-administration newspaper. Blair’s insightful editorials and aggressive marketing made his paper *The Globe* widely successful. Partnering with John C. Rives, he acquired a printing house and received lucrative contracts from Congress. Their publication of the proceedings of Congress in *The Congressional Globe*, the precursor of today’s *Congressional Record*, cemented Blair’s reputation as an influential member of Jackson’s ad hoc advisory, known as the “Kitchen Cabinet” and continues his reputation as a respected confidant of later presidents through Ulysses S. Grant. The former Lovell home soon became known as “Blair’s House” and later, simply Blair House.⁶

Breaking with the Democrats over slavery in the Polk years, Blair and his sons Montgomery and Francis Jr.

(“Frank”), both West Point graduates and attorneys in St. Louis, helped form the Republican Party and promoted Abraham Lincoln into the presidency. After the senior Blairs retired to their Maryland farm “Silver Spring” (the site of the present suburb), in 1845, Blair House was rented to several important officials, including historian George Bancroft, President Polk’s secretary of the navy and founder of the U. S. Naval Academy at Annapolis. Thomas Ewing, secretary of the interior under Zachary Taylor, was also a tenant; his daughter Ellen married his ward William Tecumseh Sherman in 1850 at Blair House in a ceremony attended by President Taylor, Secretary of State Daniel Webster, and Henry Clay.⁷

Montgomery Blair returned to Washington a judge and presented cases to the Supreme Court before President Lincoln made him postmaster general, then a cabinet appointment. He took over Blair House in 1855 and greatly improved it with a third and fourth story and east wing. Following the attack on Fort Sumter, he joined his father in the small study off the front hall to offer Robert E. Lee command of the Union forces. Frank distinguished himself fighting to keep Missouri a free state and as a general in Sherman’s campaigns. An outspoken Free Soiler and founder of the Wide Awakes, he became a Missouri senator and ended his political career as Horatio Seymour’s vice-presidential candidate on the unsuccessful 1868 Demo-

cratic ticket. Another son, James, served in the navy on America's first scientific expedition to the Pacific and Antarctica in 1838 under Captain Charles Wilkes, a later neighbor across Lafayette Square. After untimely death at age thirty-four ended his successful shipping business in California, his widow Mary Jesup Blair resettled in Washington in a townhouse on Jackson Place overlooking the square. Elizabeth, the Blair's only daughter, politically astute but deferential to the gender conventions of her day, headed several prominent local charities and clubs. A favorite of President Jackson and friend to both Varina Howell Davis and Mary Todd Lincoln, "Lizzie" defied her father by marrying navy officer Samuel Phillips Lee, a distant cousin of Robert E. Lee. They lived next door to Blair House in a home built in 1859 by her father and thereafter known as Lee House.⁸

A Family House

With this pedigree and publicity, Blair House's future as a significant historic site in the nation's capital seemed secure. But like other late nineteenth century American cities, Washington's character and landscape were rapidly changing. A population and building boom fueled by an expanding federal government was pushing it beyond the borders of L'Enfant's original plan. Local and federal authorities tried to regulate the unprecedented growth and develop-

ment with new laws and policies. As officials became concerned that Washington look like a national and international capital, city residents mainly cared that it be a healthy, hospitable, and pleasant place to live. The U. S. Senate, inspired by the approaching 1900 centennial of the federal government transfer from Philadelphia to Washington, established a commission to review old plans, address concerns, and create a new vision of the city's future.⁹

Presented by its sponsor Senator James McMillan of Michigan on January 15, 1902, the Senate Park Commission's report unfolded an audacious plan to physically transform the city. Among many changes—extending suburbs, restoring parks, expanding the National Mall—it also recommended replacing the early houses and other structures facing Lafayette Square with massive new Beaux Arts type buildings in neoclassical style to meet the need for more office space for federal agencies. The report further described this proposed "Executive Group":

For the sake of convenience these Departments should be accessible to the White House, which is their common center. The proper solution of the problem of the grouping of the Executive Departments undoubtedly is to be found in the construction of a series of edifices facing Lafayette Square . . . The execution of this plan may best begin by erecting on the entire square bounded by

Pennsylvania Avenue, Jackson Place, H, and Seventeenth streets a building for the use of the Departments of State and of Justice. The square opposite the Treasury Department . . . will be required before many years by the Post-Office Department.

Two other monumental structures to house the Commerce and Labor departments were planned for the square's north side.¹⁰

While President Theodore Roosevelt and other Progressive government officials saw their ideals of urban economic and civic reform in the plan, Washingtonians sharing a sense of community identity and pride in the neighborhood, especially those with family ties to the old buildings they considered landmarks of “their long and intimate connections with the nation and the city,” questioned the proposed alterations. They strongly criticized the required removal of St. John’s Church, popularly known as the “Church of the Presidents,” and changes to the White House, the neighborhood’s architectural anchor and national icon. Like their fellow “Cave Dwellers,” as heirs of the old residential elite were now known, the usually very private family members living in Blair House, facing its potential loss to a massive state and justice complex to be erected on their block through government intervention, joined their neighbors in publicly protesting.¹¹

By this time, the house had descended jointly to the four surviving children of Montgomery Blair and his second wife Mary Woodbury Blair: sons Woodbury, Montgomery II, and Gist, all attorneys, and their sister Minna Blair Richey. Less inclined to national politics than their father and grandfather, these third generation descendants of Washington “Antiques” were still active in local affairs and the White House social circle. Like Boston’s Brahmins, New York’s Knickerbockers, and “other old urban social and cultural elites,” they valued “the old over the new, the gentleman in business over the aggressive competitor . . . the patriarchal kinship group rather than the conjugal unit, ancestral homes to modern apartments, Henry Adams’s ‘Virgin’ to the ‘Dynamo’.” As each married, they brought their spouses to Blair House. Montgomery II soon moved his growing family to his father’s restored Maryland estate; Minna and Woodbury, along with their spouses, remained at Blair House with their unmarried brother Gist.¹²

Long noted for their fortitude, the Blair women launched the first salvo in what would become a protracted battle to save the historic home. On January 27, 1902, Minna Blair Richey accompanied her aunts Elizabeth Blair Lee and Mary Jesup Blair to the public hearings on the McMillan Plan. The next day Minna fired off a letter to the Senate Committee summarizing the family’s view of the proposed redevelopment. Printed in the next day’s papers,

it detailed the Blairs' long history in national politics and concluded:

There would seem to be no excuse for depriving a family of their home of four generations, sacred to the associations of parents and grandparents, as well as with many events that are now a part of history, and for which, in the future, patriotic societies may wish to preserve it. . . . During the Civil War, our country house, at Silver Spring, Maryland, was burned, in July, 1864, by the Confederates under General Early. . . . But in time of peace, and in the absence of any apparent necessity, or great public benefit to be derived therefrom [sic], it is cruel and unjust to demand the sacrifice of our home again.¹³

Minna's pointed reminder of her influential family's past sacrifice in the War to Preserve the Union, and its intent to fight again for their ancestral home, may have caused some committee members to reflect on history's future judgment of their actions. The family reputation for stubbornness and tenacity was well known—Blair Sr. was said to always be “in for a fight, in for a funeral.” Whatever the reasons, Congress never officially accepted the McMillan Plan and it faded with the senator's death months later. The plan also had reserved the area between the Mall and Pennsylvania Avenue, from 15th Street extending east to-

ward the Capitol, for “federal and municipal buildings . . . to be built in the classical style.” This alternative location just east of the White House would eventually redirect the Executive Group away from Lafayette Square, but not entirely.¹⁴

The *New York Herald*, March 13, 1904, trumpeted the alarming headline “Plan in the Senate to Destroy Historic Homes in Washington” above photographs of the Blair, Lee, and Decatur homes, St. John's Church, and other nearby buildings. This news further discouraged the Blair House residents, all of whom were weary of life together under one roof. Boxes and trunks of papers and objects from past generations of a family conscious of its place in history filled spare rooms and closets. The burdens of household management devolved to Minna as her brothers pursued their careers, traveled, and often stayed at their clubs. Matters peaked in 1912 when, at age fifty-two, Gist Blair announced his engagement to Laura Lawson Ellis and their plans to live at Blair House per family custom. After much discussion, the siblings agreed to a silent auction. Gist outbid the others and won the property with most of its heirlooms.¹⁵

The Major

Born in the house in 1860, Gist Blair literally grew up in history. As a boy, sitting in his father's study crowded with mementos, he absorbed the family lore of politics past while

holding Andrew Jackson's walking stick, the president's personal gift to his grandfather. He looked up at the framed cartoons from the old *Globe* skewering Polk and Pierce, Mathew Brady's photograph of his Uncle Frank with General Sherman, and A. H. Ritchie's engraving of his father with President Lincoln and other cabinet members reading the Emancipation Proclamation. He saw his father and Lincoln here, deep in conversation, lounging before the fireplace with their feet propped on the mantel. He tagged along with his older brother to play ball with Lincoln's sons and joined young Jesse Grant's secret club at their Saturday morning meetings in the White House guardhouse. Later, his good friend Teddy Roosevelt allowed him to learn to drive a car on the south lawn. He chaired William Howard Taft's inaugural committee and the president was his frequent dinner guest at Blair House.¹⁶

A Princeton graduate with a law degree from George Washington University, Gist fit the mold of the upper class Washington "Cave Dweller" gentleman of his day, balancing his career as a successful attorney and administrator of his part of the family estates with public service. He was elected president of the District of Columbia Board of Public Schools and served as Silver Spring's postmaster, an office he helped establish. He volunteered for World War I service as major-judge advocate in the provost marshal general's office at the War Department across the street from

Blair House. Known and respected for giving "ready support to worthy local movements of cultural and charitable purpose," Major Blair, his courtesy title after the war, was devoted to collecting, recording, and presenting history as a member of the Society of the Cincinnati, the Cosmos Club, the Columbia Historical Society, and other prominent organizations.¹⁷

Gist committed himself to the role of Blair House's protector. He and Laura set about redecorating it with an eclectic mix of three generations of family furnishings, to which they added as their shared interest in "antiquing" blossomed. They acquired Georgian and Regency pieces during several European trips to augment inherited furniture in American Federal, Empire, and Victorian styles. The couple favored the new Colonial Revival trend in interior design and created period room interpretations showcasing their treasures. Like Henry Francis duPont and Henry Ford, but on a far more modest budget and scale, he remodeled Blair House with historic woodwork salvaged from an eighteenth-century ancestral home in Maine, commissioned custom reproduction cabinetry and ornament, and developed the family heirloom collections with his own acquisitions of early glass, china, silver, books, prints, and other Americana.¹⁸

The report to Congress of the new federal Public Buildings Commission of 1916 again mentioned taking property around Lafayette Square for government use. Reminded of his legacy's vulnerability, Gist contacted representatives to discover any potential threat to Blair House and received a cautious response from J. H. Gallinger, U.S. Senate, Conference of the Minority, in December 1917:

Replying to your letter . . . the report to which you allude was made by a commission called the Public Buildings Commission, which I presume was authorized at the last session of Congress. The report was presented to the House and printed in the Record, but no action has yet been taken upon it. I understand that Senator Martin, Chairman of the Committee on Appropriations, is opposed to making the proposed outlay at the present time, and I do not believe there is any danger of the matter getting any further at this session of Congress . . . Of course I will do what I can to prevent your property from being taken for public use, but you know how difficult it is at this time to stop anything that is suggested. Seriously, I do not believe you need worry about the matter at this session, but I think it important that you should talk with Senator Martin about it.¹⁹

Over the next ten years, Gist further publicized the house in a broader national and presidential history context to strengthen its status in the public eye and influence authorities to leave it undisturbed. Using his club network and the media, he advertised in the *Washington Post* for more information and artifacts about his father and other family members. He encouraged Dr. Eleanor M. Hiestand-Moore of the Pennsylvania Historical Society to publish her book about early Blair family genealogy, and submitted his own article "Lafayette Square: Its Place in History and Society" to Charles Scribner's Sons for publication. When his Columbia Historical Society colleagues approached him to place a historic marker on Blair House, he personally contacted the Library of Congress for advice on its proper design and text. Additional publications he fostered spoke nostalgically of "The Major" conducting the reporters on personal tours of his now quasi-museum/family shrine and touting his preservation mission. Fellow local antiquarian and CHS member John Clagett Proctor titled his June 3, 1928, *Washington Sunday Star* article in the florid style of an earlier era: "Blair House Has Been Associated With Many Historic Events; Interest in Its Position as White House Neighbor Is Strengthened by Quaint Furnishings, Valuable Relics and Collections of Many Articles Which Recall Dramatic Incidents." A contemporaneous *Washington Post* art gravure supplement offered sepia-toned vignettes

of the treasure-filled rooms by local society photographers Harris & Ewing surrounding a cartouche-enclosed heading, “Where The Glorious Past Is Ever Present.”²⁰

Despite the media hype and the local commemorative plaque marking Blair House, alterations to Lafayette Square and new federal buildings acts in these years show the McMillan proposals gradually becoming reality. After a short business slump in 1921 “halted building, brought unemployment, and . . . severe cuts in District appropriations,” a revival was in full swing by 1922, “marked, as usual in Washington, by an expansion of private building . . . Two sides of Lafayette Square changed character completely.” Philanthropist Robert S. Brookings erected an office building for his center for economic research on the lots of two demolished Jackson Place townhouses. Architect Cass Gilbert’s massive new U. S. Chamber of Commerce headquarters, styled in the classical revival like his earlier Treasury Annex diagonally across the square, rose on the site of the old W. W. Corcoran mansion beside the Hay-Adams Hotel, itself replacing the 1883–85 H. H. Richardson-designed homes of Lincoln’s private secretary John Hay and American author and historian Henry Adams. Earlier, the Corcoran and Hay-Adams houses had respectively altered and removed the 1820 Thomas Swann and 1845–46 Thomas Corcoran-Thomas Ritchie homes.²¹

Additionally, the Public Buildings Act of May 25, 1926, gave the secretary of the treasury approval for publicly funded federal buildings in the District of Columbia and cleared the way for the new Federal Triangle construction. Weeks earlier, the May 7, 1926 Foreign Service Buildings Act had given the secretary of state authority to build and remodel facilities in foreign countries for government use, a sign of expanding American diplomacy. Finally, with the Act of Congress of March 1, 1929, C.416, called the Condemnation Act, the federal government could acquire property in the District, condemn structures on it, and erect buildings for its own use. The 1926 and 1929 acts would figure decisively in the future of Blair House.²²

Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s first inaugural parade broke tradition and marched down Constitution instead of Pennsylvania Avenue on wintry March 4, 1933. The century-old Blair House and its genteel peers around faded Lafayette Square stood apart from the celebration like forgotten wallflowers. The president, having pledged during his campaign a New Deal to *restore* America to its people, faced many pressing matters in the West Wing office, where the view overlooked the McMillan Plan’s reconfigured Mall and away from the aging buildings outside the White House front door. Even in confronting the issues of America’s staggering unemployment, declining natural resources, and public lands conservation the new president did not over-

look history in which he took a deep personal interest. Recruits in the new Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), the first of many “alphabet” agencies and programs created during Roosevelt’s first hundred days in office, set about “restoring the national domain” with a variety of projects under the Agriculture and Interior Departments, including development of national parks and preservation and restoration of historic sites.²³

The problem of tracking, repairing, and maintaining numerous historic structures found on public lands during CCC projects surfaced early. Three months after establishing the program, President Roosevelt issued an executive order to transfer oversight of all battlefields, parks, monuments, and cemeteries then under the War Department and the Forest Service to the Interior Department. Sometime later, Gist contacted Roosevelt and invited him to dinner at Blair House. They met again in November at the White House to discuss this preservation challenge. In a letter to the major following up their meeting, the president begins, “It was delightful to see you again the other day,” and refers to the need for “some kind of plan which would coordinate the broad relationship of the federal government to state and local interest in the maintenance of historic sources and places throughout the country.” Continuing, “I am struck with the fact that there is no definite, broad policy in this matter,” he asks Gist to speak with Interior Secretary

Harold Ickes, “who in the transfer of governmental functions has been given authority over national monuments. Possibly legislation will be necessary to carry out any new plans.” Blair’s meeting with Ickes was productive. A close friend via Gist’s work on conservation of parklands around his Maine summer home, the secretary authorized funding for the Historic American Building Survey (HABS) within a week. An ambitious project to document the country’s historic structures as the first step in federal commitment to their preservation, it signaled the administration’s willingness to spend emergency relief funds on the conservation of cultural as well as environmental resources. Blair House was included in this unprecedented inventory.²⁴

How did the liberal Democratic president and the conservative Republican major come together to produce action so quickly? They had other things in common: privileged upbringing and family heritage entwined with American history, Theodore Roosevelt’s early Progressive ideals, and a strong sense of responsibility to community approaching noblesse oblige—all fostered by parents who molded their sons’ personalities and characters by family example and encouraged their love of collecting, recording, displaying and saving things. Young Franklin, a “self-confessed pack rat,” a Delano trait, mirrored Gist, known all his life as the family “keeper” whose “reverence for objects

and their history had led most of the older relatives to will family furniture and mementos to him.”

Roosevelt studied history in college and wrote a paper about his family genealogy; Blair researched and saw his family’s history published throughout his life. Still strongly attached to his boyhood home “Springwood,” at Hyde Park, as Gist was to Blair House and “Silver Spring,” Roosevelt collected and documented its geology and cherished memories of the old ships at anchor in New Bedford harbor near the Delano home; he would see his youthful collections—rocks, stamps, ship models, military memorabilia, books, political cartoons—preserved in the presidential library which he created at Hyde Park; his White House desk was literally covered with personal knick-knacks. Gist Blair indulged his own love of ships and sailing at his Bar Harbor summer home, where he also enjoyed golf and hikes along trails he helped maintain as a member of the local conservation committee; stamp albums, books on American natural, geographic, political and military history, and curios filled the shelves and cabinets of his Blair House library and private study; numerous maritime and military prints and political cartoons from the *Globe*, *Judge*, *Harper’s*, and other publications, carefully kept by Gist, are displayed in Blair House today. In short, the president and the major were kindred spirits apart from their politics; they also shared an important colleague in Harold Ickes.²⁵

Fresh fears about government takeover of Square 167 for a new Department of State annex prompted another letter from Gist to the president shortly after the 1934 New Year holiday:

I little thought a few weeks ago, when you invited me to see you and asked me to make you a report on historic sites and sources I should so soon have to plead with you about the preservation of my own home, the ‘Blair House’ . . . My poor little [my humble purpose] has been to try to preserve these things and to bring into these walls, American silver, china, and furniture—memorials of our country’s art and craftsmen—so as to try and adorn this past.

Proud that he had refused large offers to sell during the earlier speculation years, he mentions having offered the house to the U.S. government “through Senator Lodge and Mr. Porter . . . subject to my life estate and that of my wife, to be preserved and used as a residence. ‘10 Downing Street,’ London, and ‘Checkers’ seemed good examples of such patriotic feeling.” Now doubtful of “the interest these subjects [Lodge and Porter] have for the average present day American,” and relieved that his offer was refused, he poignantly closes:

I know from my interview with you, however, and the letter you have written me [a copy of FDR’s

11/10/33 letter was enclosed], that you love our dear old historic American homes and I am told your wife loves American art and craftsmen and has done much to bring it to the attention of the public. I am credibly informed a strong effort is being made to induce you to have the Government condemn the block on which my old home stands, to tear it down and to build upon the site a new State Department or Government building. I beg you to prevent this or at least give us a hearing, and I shall feel for you a gratitude more lasting and deeper than can be understood by these people.

Roosevelt quickly responded, “I think that you can set your mind at rest in regard to your splendid house. There is no intention or prospect of buying that block—certainly at this time.”²⁶

The president made good on his promise about Blair House and similar properties across the country by signing two pieces of legislation forming the cornerstones of his comprehensive national preservation policy: the June 19, 1934, bill creating the National Archives to gather and store United States government records that might otherwise be lost or destroyed, and the August 21, 1935, landmark Historic Sites Act proclaiming “a national policy to preserve for public use historic sites, buildings, and objects of national

significance for the inspiration and benefit of the people of the United States.” The federal government finally “possessed enabling legislation” to support and guide “coherent planning” and a “coordinated policy that recognized the documentary value of buildings and sites” and their collections, like Blair House, “which combined patriotic, associative, and aesthetic content.”²⁷

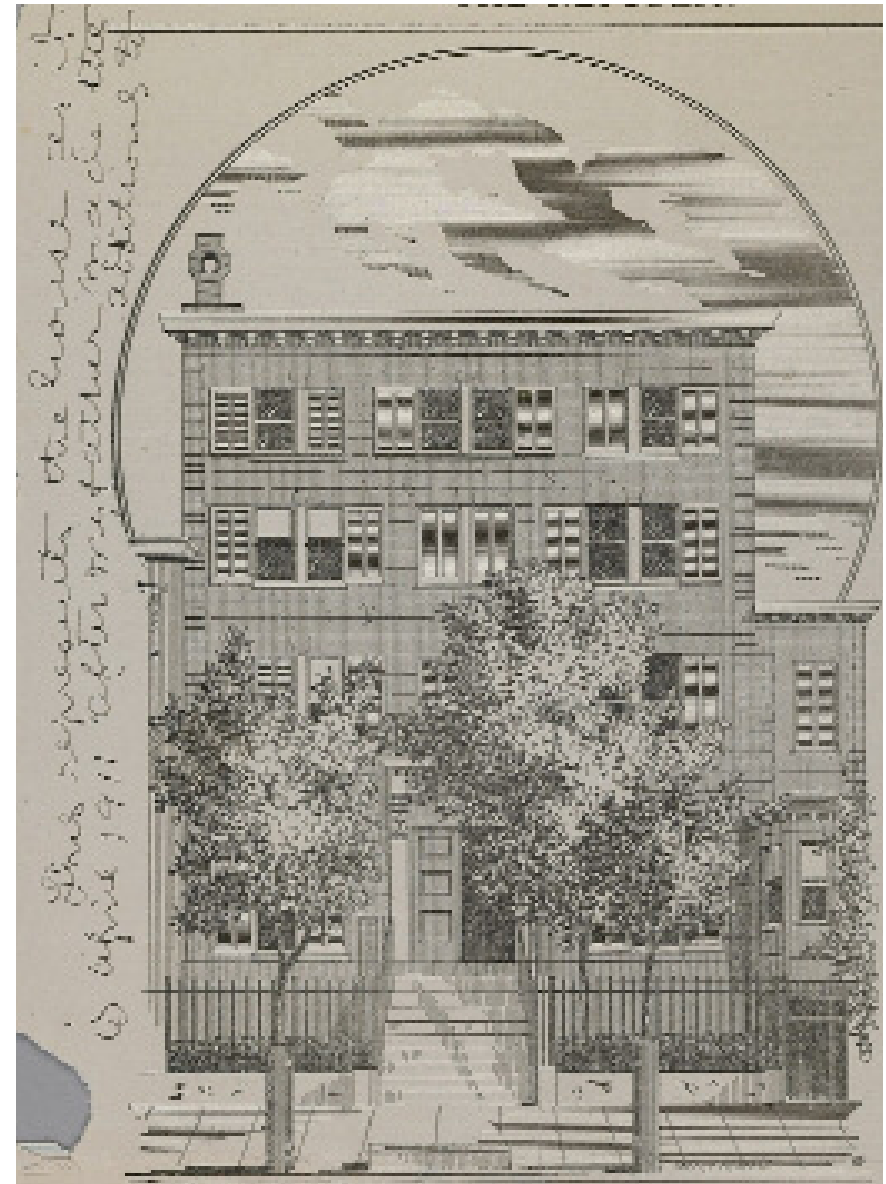
Over the next five years, Blair House served as one of a few examples for National Park Service officials working out the process of how to evaluate, rank, and mark sites seeking national historic designation. The Advisory Board on National Parks, Historic Sites, Buildings and Monuments was established January 30, 1936, to direct research on proposed buildings and sites, review reports, and recommend those eligible for designation. Per the major’s connections with the president and interior secretary, and his support of the Historic Sites Act legislation, NPS was directed to study Blair House. The first summary report deemed it

notable for its construction in which hand-hewn lumber and hand-made nails and hardware were used . . . built on ground once owned by Samuel Davidson, an original Proprietor of the District . . . one of 19 lots in that square [#167] bought by Commodore Stephen Decatur . . . now a treasure house of valuable documents, china, silver, Copley and Stuart portraits of national celebrities, a

priceless library and a wealth of unusual books and pamphlets, much of it relating to the Gist, Woodbury, Hancock, Quincy, Dearborn and Blair families and their participation in great events of American history.²⁸

A second, more critical report by NPS historian Alvin P. Stauffer followed and dismissed the Blairs as “at best minor leaders who never attained to truly first rank position” and “were scarcely important enough to warrant the federal government in declaring the Blair home a national historic site because the Blairs lived there.” He believed a stronger argument could be made based on its association with Andrew Jackson and, its collections included, as a representative site showing “the intellectual and artistic tastes and interests of an intelligent and well-to-do family of the past century.” Having reviewed the Stauffer report, an architectural survey by Stuart M. Barnett, Branch of Plans and Design, and other documents supporting the Blair House proposal, the Advisory Board determined “that the architectural value and the historical associations alone are not quite sufficient to justify its designation as a national historic site.” It also suggested, however,

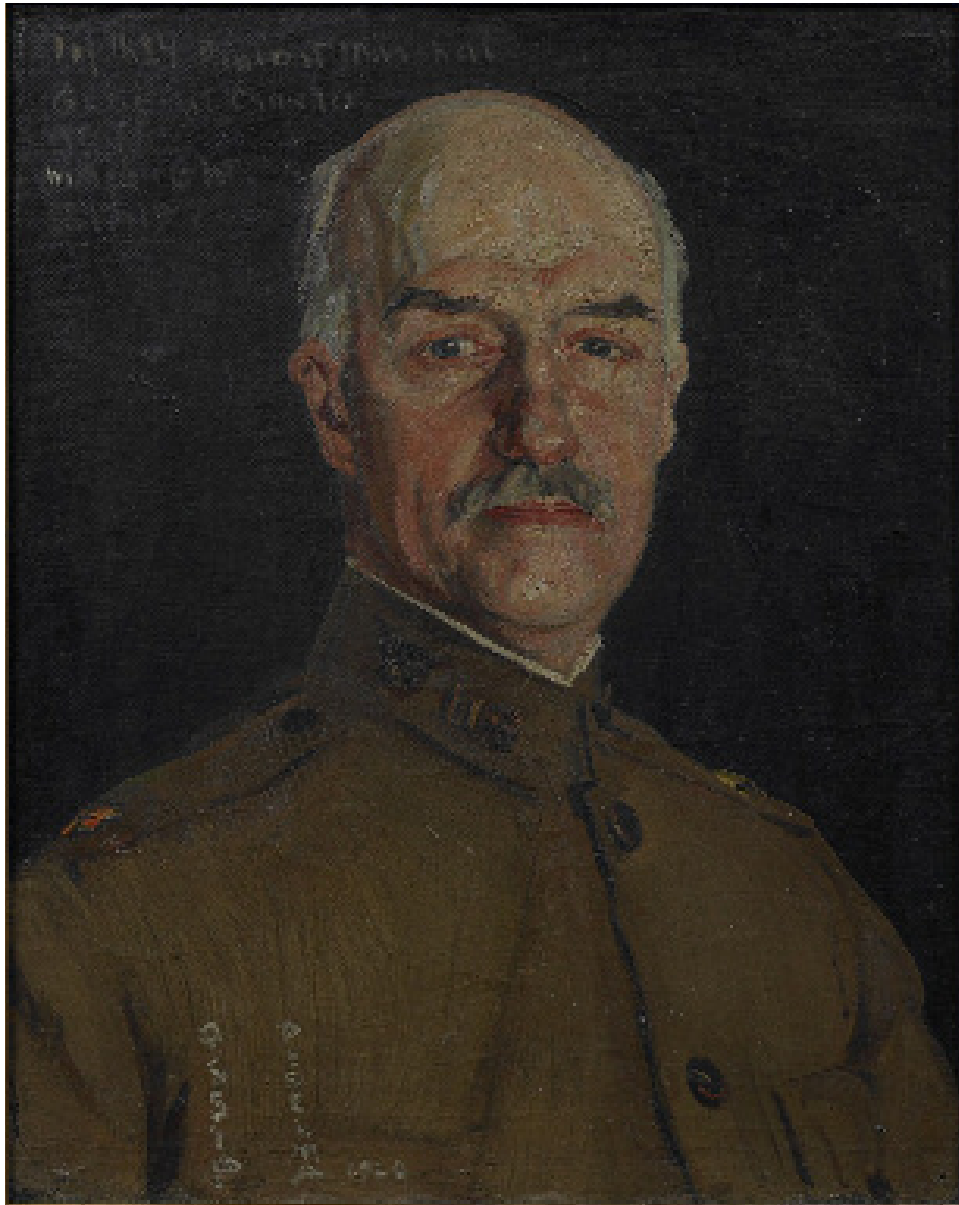
If the house, with its present furnishings, came into the possession of the Government, and were opened to the public as a museum exemplifying National Capital life in the Jackson-Lincoln era, it



Blair House c. 1880, with third and fourth stories and east wing added by Montgomery Blair.



The White House neighborhood from the west at the beginning of the Spanish-American War, Blair House on the left, Leslie's Weekly, c. April 25, 1898.



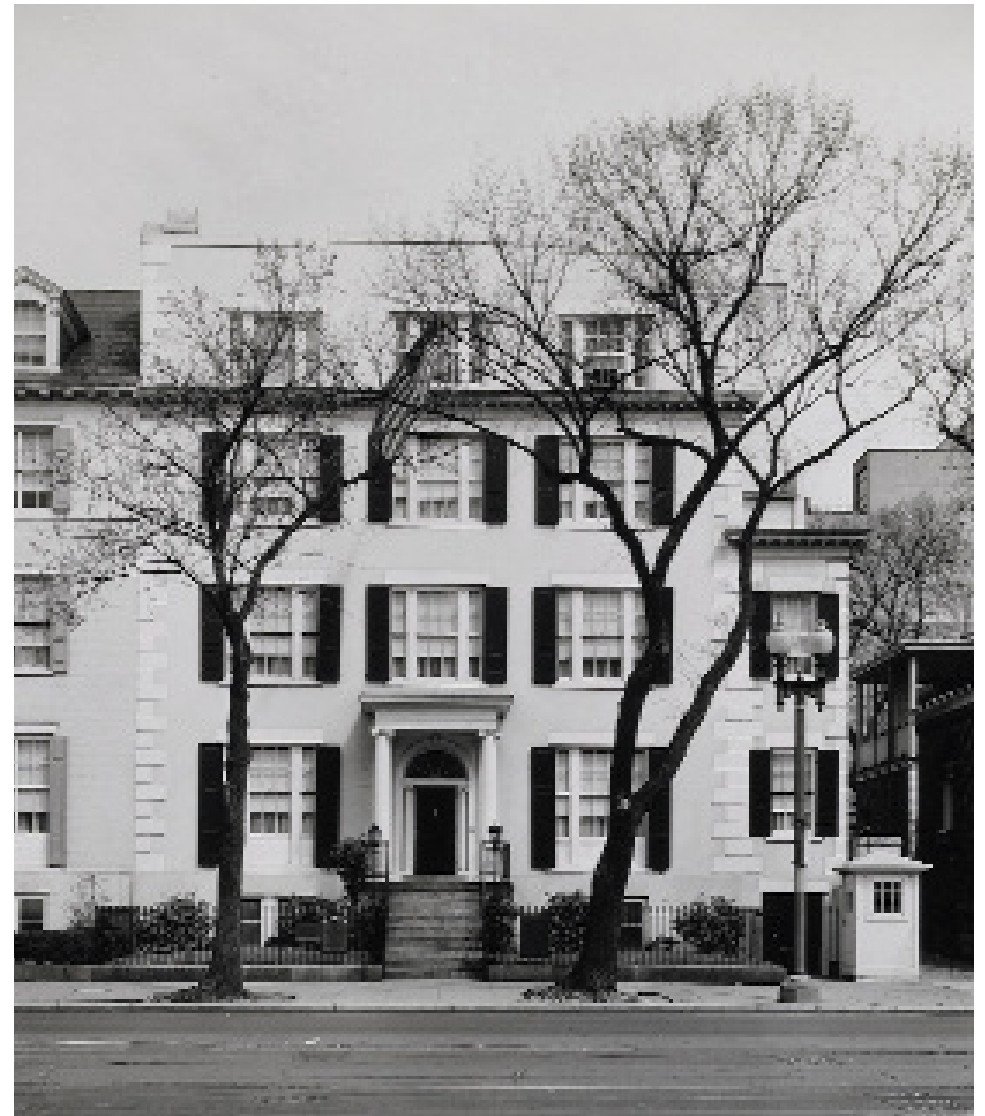
Portrait of Major Gist Blair by Ossip Perelma (American, 1876-1949), 1920.



President Franklin Delano Roosevelt at his desk, by Commander Edward M. Murray, USN, 1943. The artist was a navy adviser to the president.



The proposed new State Department annex at 15th Street and Constitution Avenue, later site of the Federal Triangle. Photogravure from Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, 1911.



Blair House, c. 1950

would serve sufficiently useful purpose, from the historical-educational standpoint, to justify its designation as a national historic site.

This judgment reflected the fledgling historic sites program's limited criteria and inability to recognize a significant property still privately owned and occupied, i.e. not on federal land, adaptable to a museum or site open to the public, and therefore generating income to offset the government's investment in its rehabilitation and on-going maintenance. Thus at its fifth meeting in October 1937, the Advisory Board found Blair House to be nationally significant but could not officially make it a national historic site at that time.²⁹

As NPS modified its criteria over the next two years, Blair House and similar places of "national and popular historical interest" that did not fit into the established government custodianship and development inspired a second category of national historic sites. In spring 1938, Gist pursued the elusive designation by again contacting his friend Secretary Ickes to request "the possibility of erecting a tablet" (an official government marker) in front of the house. Arno B. Cammerer, director, Branch of Historic Sites and Buildings, explained for the secretary that, although Blair House had been "declared to be of national signifi-

cance," the Historic Sites Act "carried no appropriation"; no funds were available for markers, but he would assist in marking the site if donated funds could be found. Meanwhile, the board urged Ickes to seek appropriations for "a uniform type of marker"; designs were drawn up incorporating the heading "National Historic Site." Gist's appointment to the Advisory Board on January 3, 1939, helped Blair House become the prototype for the first official markers for recognized historic properties. At their November meeting, they "informally approved the idea of a Blair House marker" pending final approval by Secretary Ickes of the general marker design.³⁰

The related issue of a secondary category for sites like Blair House headed the Historic Sites program agenda for 1940. Briefed by the Advisory Board, NPS Acting Director Arthur Demaray notified Secretary Ickes of the growing problem of places "falling outside Federal custodianship of officially designated national historic sites but still deserving of recognition and physical protection by local means," and suggested how to "fold them into the NPS historical conservation program." Beginning with official site designation, Demaray described a mutually beneficial partnership between NPS and local site owners and/or controllers to arrange for "adequate physical preservation," a marker "to record for all visitors the existence of a cooperative

Federal responsibility,” and inclusion on a “published list of such areas designated.” He concluded:

Such a program for a secondary category of historic sites would, I believe, have wide popular appeal; it would strengthen support for and arouse interest in the historical conservation program generally; and it would provide a means for giving constructive assistance to many groups interested in sites which must at present be flatly rejected from consideration.³¹

Ickes approved the proposal on March 25, 1940. Three months later Cammerer reminded him:

In view of the action of the Advisory Board in approving the erection of the proposed marker, it would appear reasonable to designate the Blair House a place of national historical interest under the Historic Sites Act. The house could then be given appropriate recognition by the erection of a marker, as it would fall in the second category of historic sites . . . approved by you on March 25. The National Park Service recommends that the design used for the standard national historic site marker be employed for markers on places like the Blair House which may be designated as of national historical interest.³²

Ickes again acted in favor of Blair House and approved marking the building on May 29. After confusion about how it would be paid for was resolved, plans for the marker proceeded. The first one arrived defective and could not be dedicated at the scheduled October 23 Advisory Board meeting; a recasting was ready by November 18. Gist requested that President Roosevelt dedicate it, but due to pressing tasks connected to the “national defense program and the international situation,” he was unable to attend. Secretary Ickes was deemed “extremely appropriate” to perform the honors and the dedication finally took place in early December. Major Gist Blair died at Blair House days later on December 16, 1940, of an apparent stroke. Laid in state in the rear drawing room, his funeral was held at St. John’s Church across the square and laid to rest in the Blair family vault at Rock Creek Cemetery. His goal for Blair House only partly realized.³³

The Department of State appeared unconcerned by the Interior Department’s designation of Blair House as a national historic site protected by federal act and to be preserved “for the inspiration and benefit of the people of the United States.” The Appropriations Act of April 5, 1941, provided for the acquisition of “land in Square 167 as a site for the State Department Annex Building.” Plans for that construction to replace the block’s historic buildings were moving forward, despite the DOS having nearly all of the State,

War and Navy building next door to the White House since removal of the War and Navy offices in 1939. Documents in the Blair House collection indicate that the government acquired Lee House (Lots 4 and 9) on December 1, 1941, by voluntary conveyance as a site for the annex. The remaining Lots 801–808 on the west half of Square 167 plus two alleys were acquired on December 15, 1941, through condemnation proceedings.³⁴

Percy Blair

In his will, the major had left Blair House and its contents to his wife Laura, at whose death the property would convey to his nephew, Dr. Montgomery Blair Jr., along with Gist's hopes for its future:

it is the wish of myself and wife to preserve the house, its historic associations and its accumulated treasures . . . expressing American life and craftsmanship . . . keep these articles together . . . [and form] an American museum, deeding it to the City of Washington or the Government of the United States³⁵

Their second cousin Percy A. Blair, representing the fourth generation of the family, proved best suited to take the preservation fight to the next stage. Percy was curator of Anderson House, headquarters of the Society of the Cincinnati on Massachusetts Avenue west of Dupont Circle, where

as a member he also lived. Anderson House was then occasionally used by the Department of State to house and entertain foreign dignitaries on official business to the United States.

Working that connection in letters to various DOS officials throughout 1941, Percy promoted Gist's vision of Blair House serving the government and added his own idea of it as a possible residence for the secretary of state or some related purpose in keeping with its dignity and long-term preservation. Some of his contacts—Sumner Welles, under secretary of state; Breckinridge Long, senior assistant secretary of state; Mrs. Warren Delano Robbins, director of public buildings furnishing—were close to the president. All had been Gist's dinner guests at Blair House and shared his interest in old houses. All promised to do what they could to influence the president; Welles and Robbins contacted him personally. Responding for Welles, Assistant Secretary of State G. Howland Shaw informed Percy that the department had no authority to acquire property in Washington and directed him to the Federal Works Agency, under Secretary Ickes and responsible for selecting sites and constructing and maintaining government buildings.³⁶

America's entry into World War II dramatically changed federal priorities and impacted the future of Blair House. President Roosevelt phased out many programs, including

historic sites designation, and redeployed their personnel to the war effort. The Independent Offices Appropriations Act of 1942 channeled funding to agencies for reorganization and expansion, which strengthened the new State Department annex proposal. Dr. Montgomery Blair Jr. researched the fair market value of Blair House to compare with the recent government acquisition value for Lee House while Percy Blair further developed the idea of preserving it via government service as a hospitality venue for foreign delegations, now that Anderson House had been taken over by the Navy Department for the duration of the war. That spring, with only the housekeeper left as caretaker, the Blair House went on the market for rent, furnished, or sale. Percy directed his pitch to the DOS protocol office and also followed up with Assistant Secretary Shaw:

In view of the great need for all sorts of space at the moment possibly it might be opportune to bring this matter again to your consideration. Quite informally and unofficially, Mrs. Breckinridge Long told me that she had discussed this matter with the President and that he seemed very favorably inclined to preserve both the Blair House and the Decatur House.

This strategy, persistence, and name-dropping paid off. The State Department agreed to rent Blair House for an official visit by President Manuel Prado of Peru and his staff

in April 1942, and thus established precedent for its use for diplomatic hospitality.³⁷

The press was soon speculating about the government's negotiations to purchase Blair House for official entertaining and mentioned its recent use for the Peruvian visit. As wartime diplomacy increased, articles in the following months reported Blair House hosting King George of Greece, King Peter of Yugoslavia, and Foreign Minister Molotov of Russia. All of this publicity featured descriptions of the decorations, furnishings, and historic artifacts of the now part-time "guest house." Contemporary internal correspondence, however, shows DOS senior executives still resisting permanent acquisition, questioning the sale price as too high, the maintenance and staffing as too expensive, and the size and facilities as inadequate. Shaw had again rejected Percy's appeal in late May, reminding him that the current diplomatic use was only temporary:

the Department of State is without authority to purchase or lease this property on permanent or long-term basis. No action is contemplated by the Department to obtain legislative authority to permit of acquisition either through purchase or lease and you will wish, therefore, to make your arrangements accordingly. ³⁸

That the whole west half of Square 167 had already been purchased five months earlier via the 1929 Condemnation Act and the April 5, 1941 appropriations act for its new annex meant the DOS was determined to build it regardless of the DOI's, or the president's, opinions about keeping the historic houses. Undaunted, Percy sought an interview with Secretary Ickes to discuss the situation and details about the house—specifications, appraisals, available furnishings, suggested improvements—Percy had gained from the visit rentals and shared with DOS officials.

Ickes clearly had the president's ear. In a June 9, 1942, memo to his often-marginalized Secretary of State, Cordell Hull, Roosevelt directed:

Will you please prepare reply for my signature? I am inclined to think that it would be extremely difficult to get any money for this purpose from Congress, but if a somewhat lower price would buy the house and the furnishings, I would consider purchasing it out of my 'Special Emergency Fund' for the entertaining of the many distinguished foreign guests who are coming here in increasing numbers and will probably continue to do so for many years to come. Incidentally, the new plans for the State Department building should be so drawn as to exclude Blair House and I think the one next door to it [Lee House], and

also exclude the Decatur house on the northeast corner of the block. I should like to see the plans before anything is done.

Contacting Ickes on June 13, Hull outright rejected purchasing Blair House and cited his reasons: the asking price was too high; "Congress should not be asked at this time to appropriate funds for its acquisition and preservation as a historical and cultural landmark in the National Capital"; although used in recent months for "the entertainment of distinguished foreign guests . . . it is not altogether satisfactory for this purpose"; it would be more practical to make "other arrangements" at less cost and without "likelihood of embarrassment entailed in the maintenance of an official guest house"; "Its simultaneous use as a temporary residence for distinguished foreign guests and as a historic house open to the public . . . is impracticable." Hull finally got around to saying that plans for the "State Dept. annex" had been drawn to "exclude Blair House and Decatur House," and while he had not yet seen them, he "must have approval before anything is done. I shall see that no action looking to demolition of the Blair House is taken without weighing very carefully its importance from a historical and cultural point of view," he promised.³⁹

Seeing through Hull's resistance and skeptical that Blair House's historic value would be considered in any new

annex plans, Ickes knew it was time for a firm commitment and wrote the president that same day:

Mr. Percy Blair has informed me that the Blair House on Pennsylvania Avenue is available to the Federal Government at a price of \$175,000 and that the antique furnishings can be acquired for \$25,000 additional. This appears to be a reasonable basis for negotiations and I recommend that funds be sought for this acquisition so the Blair House may be preserved as a historical and cultural landmark in the national capital . . . Most of Washington's important historical landmarks are gone or are scheduled for demolition. Proposed plans for the new annex building for the State Department ultimately would provide for the demolition of the Blair House. I believe that it would be a grievous loss if this structure were demolished in order to replace it with another modern office building in crowded downtown Washington.

The Blair House is one of the few surviving historic houses in the city having a distinguished association of more than a century with the political and social life of the national capital . . . Through its architectural character and the interest and distinction of its furnishings, the Blair House perpetuates a cultural tradition significant in the life of the city and the Nation. The Advisory Board on

National Parks, Historic Sites, Buildings and Monuments of the National Park Service has recommended that the Blair House be considered as of national importance and eligible for acquisition as a national historic site. If acquired, the Blair House should be preserved and exhibited to the public as a historic house. This use could, however, be satisfactorily combined with a continuation of its use as a temporary residence for the distinguished foreign visitors.

Ickes enclosed an answer from the president with his own letter to Percy on June 16. Blair House does not have copies of these documents in its archives, but FDR's words are preserved in Percy Blair's response, which seemed the death-knell for the old family home: "I am very sorry that the president does not feel that it is possible to acquire the house for Government purposes because we had hoped it could be used to advantage at the present time, and, as far as we can see, in the future." Thinking the asking price of \$175,000 the sticking point, he compared it to the government's purchase price of \$145,000 for Lee House and cited the "difference in character between the properties," Lee being in practically useless condition and Blair excellent. "Under the circumstances," he sadly concluded, "we must now endeavor, to our great regret, to dispose of the property to the best advantage possible in order to settle the estate."⁴⁰

Rethinking his negative reply the day after his note to Ickes, the president sent another memo to Hull:

The more I think about the problem of the Blair House and the Decatur House, the more I am convinced that they should not ever be allowed to be torn down. That probably means eventual ownership by the Government. I hope you will keep this in mind and try to work out some method. Will you and Sumner [Welles] try to invent something?

Ickes continued to facilitate negotiations among the parties over the next few days. On June 24 the president urged Hull to “Please take the matter up again”:

I still believe we ought to get that Blair House for the use of the State Department. We shall continue to have a procession of distinguished visitors both now and after the termination of the present war. Also, in view of the fact that that whole block will be developed for the use of the State Department, I think we are fully justified in preventing transfer by the Blair family to private hands if their price is right.

Suddenly reversing himself, Hull replied affirmatively and enclosed the FWA appraisal reports from Ickes:

My dear Mr. President . . . with regard to the Blair House . . . The appraisal value of \$175,000 is ex-

actly the asking price for the property and I feel it would be altogether practicable, with minimum structural changes and replacement of certain of the old furniture and furnishings with new materials, to provide a suitable official guest house. . . . entertainment and subsistence for distinguished guests . . . would continue to be met from other funds. If, in your opinion, this price is not too high, I shall request an allocation of funds from the Budget for its acquisition, with the view to its preservation as a historical and cultural landmark and its use as a residence for distinguished foreign visitors. ⁴¹

What caused Hull to change his mind? Presidential pressure aside, the answer may lie in the racial implication found in a single intriguing document in the Blair House collection. A letter to the president by Laurence C. Frank, an executive assistant to G. Howland Shaw, recommends funds be allocated to the Public Buildings Administration, FWA, under the National Industrial Recovery Act of 1933 (NIRA) “to acquire, remodel and furnish the Women’s Club building at 736 Jackson Place per agreement of the secretary of state to accommodate certain foreign officials, particularly those of non-caucasian extraction, who visit Washington as delegates to conferences, or as leaders.” Frank’s request further explains the dilemma facing the

State Department in racially segregated Washington, D.C., in the 1940s, where “Jim Crow” still governed hotels, restaurants, shops, and other service facilities closed to people of color:

It seems evident that an additional guest house must be established by the Department of State if it is to be in a position to avoid a good deal of embarrassment in relations between the United States and certain foreign governments, and this is particularly true if the United States expects to be the host at further international conferences connected with the united war effort and post-war programs . . . Having in mind the proposed eventual development of the whole block on the west side of Jackson Place and the eventual construction of the State Department Annex, the purchase and renovation at this time of a building to meet the pressing need for alleviation of the unfortunate housing situation which confronts the Department of State in accommodating these foreign guests [is imperative].⁴²

Lacking hospitality such as overnight facilities of its own, and having to accommodate some delegation members in local establishments, the U.S. government was risking more than official embarrassment when diplomatic guests experienced racial restrictions first-hand in the so-

called capital of the free world. The copy of the Frank document in the Blair House collection is undated. If it predates Roosevelt’s following memo of August 13, 1942, to the director of the budget, it likely provided the final justification he needed to purchase Blair House as a war measure essential for future successful international diplomacy:

I have kept the matter of the purchase of the Blair House alive because, while the State Department did not consider that it could, strictly speaking, be called a war measure, nevertheless there is every reason to believe that this war has put the whole subject of distinguished visitors on a new basis.

For the three years since the war broke out, the American Government has been host to a succession of distinguished visitors—Presidents of other republics, Foreign Ministers, Prime Ministers, and a number of sovereigns. The reason for these visits is that the United States is more and more recognized as the leader in the world battle for democracy. These visits will continue during the war; but they will not end then. They will doubtless continue during the post-war period, if victory comes to us. We must assume that victory will come to us and that we shall continue to be one of the principal leaders against dictatorship and future threats of aggression.

I am, therefore, inclined to approve the purchase of the Blair House.

This reason is fortified by the fact that historically the Government should own and preserve the Blair House and the Decatur House on the northeast corner of the same block. Doubtless, State Department offices will cover most of the rest of the block, but these two privately owned homes are not only of historic significance, but are also excellent representatives of the architecture of their periods.

As to the cost, I am inclined to say that the appraisal value of the property—\$175,000—is not far out of the way, but I would like to know more about the collection of Americana, furniture, etc. which is offered by the Blair Estate at \$44,000. How can the property be paid for?

The president restated his reasons, in priority order, to Hull two weeks later:

I have put through the acquisition of the Blair House by the Government because first, I am convinced that the Government needs it and will continue to need it for the entertainment of distinguished visitors, and secondly, because it has been listed by the Interior Department as an historic monument to be preserved for all time.

Included in the purchase is a sum of about \$40,000 for the contents of the house of which I enclose a list. I think it is important that the contents be preserved practically in tact [sic] because they represent the furnishings of over a century . . . especially of the Nineteenth Century.⁴³

By fall, W. E. Reynolds, Commissioner of Public Buildings, and the Blair House heirs reached agreement on a final purchase price of \$150,000 with \$33,000 of that amount covering the furnishings and Americana collections. Mrs. Gist Blair's death October 8, 1942, finally put the process of government acquisition into motion. On October 29, 1942, the "Order For Forthwith Surrender Of Possession" and the "Petition For Condemnation" were filed with the District Court of the United States for the District of Columbia. The U.S. government received title to Blair House on December 11, 1942, through condemnation proceedings under authority of the War Powers Act and with funds made available by the president from NIRA. Renovations by the Public Buildings Administration, predecessor of the General Services Administration (GSA), and the DOS Foreign Buildings Office were quickly completed and the State Department officially assumed stewardship of Blair House at noon on Saturday, February 20, 1943.⁴⁴

President Roosevelt also saved Lee House and provided \$90,000 in NIRA funding for its rehabilitation into addi-

tional DOS press and office space supporting diplomatic functions at Blair House. Having directed Cordell Hull in late 1942 to ask the designer of the new annex, FWA Consulting architect Rudolph Stanley-Brown, to “work on some new approaches to the subject on the theory that I do not want anything resembling an office building of the commercial type on or near Jackson Place,” he monitored the Lee House work through 1943 to ensure his orders “that the Garden must be left on sides and at rear of Blair-Lee [Lee] and Blair Houses,” and the two-story extension on the west side of the Lee House be elevated to a more harmonious four stories, were carried out.⁴⁵

President Roosevelt died April 12, 1945, a little over a year after seeing the Blair and Lee houses restored and serving in a new, broader historical role on behalf of American international diplomacy. Because of him, President Harry S. Truman and family had Blair House as a residence for the transition. Within months, Truman’s comprehensive reconstruction of the White House and the joint Department of State-General Services Administration resurrection of the State Department annex plan, now projected to cost \$18 million and still sure to level all historic buildings on the same site, caused another public outcry. Percy Blair wrote the president in January 1946 as “a fellow member of the Society of the Cincinnati” asking for “reconsideration of the present State Department scheme before it is too late,” and

apprising him of his predecessor’s alternative vision of a “reproduction of an old Washington block facing Lafayette Square, to be anchored on the Decatur House at one end . . . and the Blair House at the other . . . thus presenting the traditional aspect of earlier Washington with other similar houses erected between them, and behind this façade including the rest of the block there would be ample space for a staggered building which . . . would easily and practically accommodate the new State Department offices.”⁴⁶

The cost overruns of the White House renovations and greater priorities deferred the annex issue to the next administration. In Eisenhower’s second term, the GSA actively pursued new office construction and submitted a design for a single high rise building on Jackson Place by two Boston architectural firms (Perry, Shaw, Hepburn & Dean and Shepley, Bulfinch, Richardson & Abbott) to the Commission of Fine Arts in 1959. President and Mrs. Kennedy’s encouragement of preservation and improvement of the quality of public buildings nationally, but especially their deep feeling for the historical integrity of the White House neighborhood, challenged GSA’s plan, since expanded into two massive modernist office complexes taking virtually all land on both east and west sides of Lafayette Square. A new design by San Francisco architect John Carl Warnecke, requested in 1962 by President Kennedy and inspired by the original Roosevelt-Ickes concept, was finally

accepted. Congratulating the GSA on “this fine start,” Kennedy echoed FDR’s perspective on reconciling America’s future progressive and preservation goals:

I have been reflecting on the significance of this work, not only in the terms of the importance of it to the environs of the White House and our capital, but to what it means in a broader sense to other cities and communities throughout America . . . I am fully cognizant of the progress made by American Architects and Planners in their contributions to our country in contemporary design. This coupled with equal progress made in our cities by their respective governing bodies in forging ahead with vast programs of urban renewal and redevelopment leads me to comment on the manner in which these plans are actually carried out. There are throughout our land specific areas and specific buildings of historical significance or architectural excellence that are threatened by this onward march of progress. I believe that the importance of Lafayette Square lies in the fact that we were not willing to destroy our cultural and historic heritage but that we were willing to find means of preserving it while still meeting the requirements of growth in government. I hope that the same can be done in other parts of our country. ⁴⁷

Still called the New Executive Office Building today, it was completed in 1970.

Blair House survived because concerned private citizens and government officials looked to the future and agreed to invest in rather than lose an important part of American history: Gist Blair and other family members of two generations who fought for it over forty years; Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes, who championed it through several cycles of government scrutiny; President Franklin D. Roosevelt who invoked four federal acts to acquire it; and others who saw its importance and potential and gave their support. This spirit of public-private partnership continues today as dedicated staff representing four State Department offices—protocol, diplomatic security, facilities management, fine arts—collaborate with the private non-profit Blair House Restoration Fund to manage, protect, maintain, conserve and renew Blair House to serve the U.S. president and the American people by extending the finest of our hospitality and culture to visiting heads of state and other official guests to the United States. Through this unique diplomatic mission, it has hosted people and events of profound significance and impact on American and world history for more than sixty years. With thoughtful investment of proper resources, it will serve with distinction for years to come.

A civilization's built environment is its most tangible legacy. America's driven, disposable culture continually challenges each generation to value and keep architecture emblematic of our shared national identity. Despite our efforts since the Historic Sites Act of 1935, "many think it is still easier to tear down and build anew than to evaluate the old, adjust plans, and adapt the existing structure or environment into the ongoing American scheme of progress." All things age over time but have qualities worth keeping for the contributions they still can make to our country's productivity and our quality of life. Preserved and made useful through shared stewardship and support, Blair House, the White House, and other sustainable historic buildings in their neighborhood and elsewhere are models to emulate as we work toward conserving and recycling all our resources—material, environmental, cultural—for a truly stronger, enduring America. They are "evidence of a new dream, that America's sensitivity for its past can be re-directed to intelligent historic preservation: a new building art achieved through the reclamation, rehabilitation or restoration of structures and areas for re-use and new life."⁴⁸

Honoring that rich and varied past by respecting and retaining our defining cultural heritage treasures is every American's responsibility, now that the threat of their, and our, destruction is more palpable than ever. The way to

begin is not complicated, as Gist Blair's adopted daughter Laura Blair Marvel reminds us: "In telling me his family stories, Uncle was doing more than providing a link to the past—as important as that was. Like his father and grandfather before him, he was passing on to the younger generation a sense of what history was about. In Uncle's stories, history wasn't battles and elections—it was people like you and me—people who might be called "Mr. President," but who still put their feet up on the mantel." President Franklin Roosevelt shared that belief in his endorsement of the Historic Sites Act, not long before he had to call his fellow citizens to arms:

The preservation of historic sites for the public benefit, together with their proper interpretation, tends to enhance the respect and love of the citizen for the institutions of his country, as well as strengthen his resolution to defend unselfishly the hallowed traditions and high ideals of America.⁴⁹

NOTES

1. Robert R. Garvey and Terry B. Morton, "The United States Government in Historic Preservation: A Brief History of the 1966 National Historic Preservation Act and Others," *Monumentum 1967–1984*, Vol. II (1968), International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), http://www.international.icomos.org/monumentum/vol2/vol2_1.pdf, 35, 1, 4.
2. Ibid: 8.
3. "Celebrities At Home, XX: Montgomery Blair . . .," *The Republic* (1880): 517–518; "The Blair Mansion: Who Have Resided There—General Sherman's Wedding," *Washington Post* (April 22, 1883): n.p.; "Carp's Letter: Old

- Homes in Washington—The Blair Mansion and Its Great Inhabitants . . . ,” publication not noted, possibly the *Washington Post* (November 2, 1884): n.p.; “The Blair Mansion: One of the Historic Homes of the City and Its Occupants,” *Washington Star*, October 23, 1885: n.p.; “Mines of Romance: Old Homes of Washington Might Tell Stirring Stories . . . The Blair Mansion and Its Part in Our History . . . ,” publication not noted, reprint from Syndicate Press, Boston (December 1895): n.p. All in Clippings File, Office of the Curator, Blair House.
4. Kathryn Allamong Jacob, *Capital Elites: High Society in Washington, D.C., after the Civil War* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995), 5.
 5. Ibid: 8, 29. Jeanne Fogle, *Proximity to Power: Neighbors to the Presidents near Lafayette Square* (Washington, D.C.: A Tour de Force Publications, 1999), 1–35.
 6. The seminal biography of the Blair family remains William E. Smith’s *The Francis Preston Blair Family in Politics* (New York: MacMillan Co.), 1933, 2 vols. Other monographs drawing upon the Blair family papers and other primary sources are: Elbert B. Smith, *Francis Preston Blair* (New York: Free Press, 1980); Virginia Jean Laas, *Wartime Washington: The Civil War Letters of Elizabeth Blair Lee* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press), 1991. Lovell possessed the wealth and status to have his residence built opposite the White House on land purchased from Stephen Decatur. Dr. William Thornton has been mentioned as possibly the architect of Blair House in reports going back to 1937, but supporting documentation has not yet been found. Originally a two-story, 8-room structure with basement kitchen, it more than doubled in size with Montgomery Blair’s renovations of 1855–1866.
 7. Katherine Elizabeth Crane, *Blair House Past and Present: An Account of Its Life and Time in the City of Washington* (Washington, D.C.: United States Department of State, 1945), 18–20. Crane’s is the first book published about Blair House generally. Others are Eleanor Lee Templeman, *The Blair-Lee House: Guest House of the President* (McLean, Va: EPM Publications, 1980); Mary Edith Wilroy and Lucie Prinz, *Inside Blair House* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1982); Marlene Elizabeth Heck, *Blair House: The President’s*

- Guest House* (Washington, D.C., and Charlottesville, Va.: Blair House Restoration Fund and Thomasson-Grant, 1989).
8. Smith 1980: On Montgomery, I: 99, 210–215, 385, II: 17; on Frank, I: 216, 494, II: 22, 140–185; 399–430; on James, I: 206–210; on Elizabeth, I: 102, 158, 398, 502. Rita Lloyd Moroney, *Montgomery Blair: Postmaster General, 1861–1864* (Washington, D.C., U. S. Postal Service, 1989 reprint of 1963), 12–14. Fogle: 22. Moroney’s publication appeared with the issuing of the 15-cent Commemorative International Airmail stamp honoring Montgomery Blair. In his distinguished career, Blair served as co-counsel for Dred Scott and secured representation for John Brown in their respective historic cases. As postmaster general, he instituted systems for money orders, registered mail, and international mail exchange that continue today. In 1850, the controversial Captain Wilkes purchased the house once owned by Dolley Madison on the northeast corner of Lafayette Square and lived there between his travels until his death in 1877. “Wilkes’s obsessive behavior and harsh code of shipboard discipline reportedly shaped Herman Melville’s characterization of Ahab (www.historylink.org/index.cfm?DisplayPage=output.cfm&File_Id=5226). The building presently at 718 Jackson Place replaced Mary Jesup Blair’s original townhouse in the 1960s (Fogle: 40–41; 113–114; 231.) Samuel Phillips Lee was a shipmate of James Blair on the Wilkes Expedition; James introduced him to Lizzie.
 9. Laura Croghan Kamoie, “From the Editor,” *Washington History* (Washington, D.C.: The Historical Society of Washington, D.C., vol. 14, no. 1, Special Issue Commemorating the Centennial of the McMillan Plan, Part I, Spring/Summer 2002), 7.
 10. Frederick Gutheim and Antoinette I. Lee, *Worthy of the Nation: Washington, D. C., from L’Enfant to the National Capital Planning Commission*, Second edition (Washington, D.C.: United States National Capital Planning Commission, 2006), 154. Frederick Gutheim and Wilcomb E. Washburn, *The Federal City: Plans & Realities* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1976), 34–35. Mary Cable, *The Avenue of the Presidents* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1969), 183–185.
 11. Jacob, 204. Peter R. Penzer, *The Washington National Mall* (Arlington, Va:

- Oneonta Press, 2007), 25. Jacob, 232.
12. Laura Blair Marvel, *A Child in Blair House 1926-1942: A Personal Memoir* (privately printed by the author, 2002), 3–4. The author is Gist and Laura Blair's adopted daughter and the only surviving relative to have lived in Blair House. Francis Preston Blair and wife Eliza Gist Blair died in 1876 and 1877 respectively. James and Frank Jr. pre-deceased their parents in 1853 and 1875; Montgomery died in 1883 and his wife in 1887. Elizabeth Blair Lee retained Lee House until her death in 1906 at Silver Spring; it conveyed to her only son Blair Lee in 1916. In her study of post-bellum Washington high society, *Capital Elites*, Kathryn Allamong Jacob details the reality behind Mark Twain's cynical characterizations of the city's older residential elites, "the Antiques," whose socio-cultural hegemony is eclipsed by the nouveau riche outsider "Parvenus" in his satirical 1873 novel *The Gilded Age*. She describes the "old Blair family" as the "haughtiest of the Antiques" and includes their grandchildren among the turn-of-the-twentieth century "Cave Dwellers" who "possessed the [Antiques'] own narrowly construed attributes of ancient pedigree and long tenure in the capital [with] all those who shared the old families' concern for the city, for personal integrity, and for subdued gentility." (12, 207, 225). On Washington "Antiques" and the third generation Blairs' similarities to other old urban elites, Jacob quotes from Frederic Jaher's *The Urban Establishment* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982), 220.
 13. Minna Blair Richey to the Senate [Park] Committee, January 28, 1902, typed transcript; also reprinted in "An Eloquent Appeal," *Washington Star* (January 29, 1902): 9, and in "Spare the Old Home: Mrs. Minna Blair Richey's Earnest Appeal," *Washington Post* (January 29, 1902): 7. All in Blair Family Correspondence and Blair House Clippings files, Office of the Curator, Blair House. Montgomery Blair's summer home "Falkland" at Silver Spring was burned to the ground by General Jubal Early in the summer of 1864. He also used the senior Blairs' adjacent home "Silver Spring" as his headquarters for the duration of his troops' encampment outside the city. Montgomery Blair rebuilt Falkland and lived his final years there.
 14. Marvel, 36. John Claggett Proctor, *Washington Past and Present* (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing, 1930), v. IV, 628, 632. Cable, 184. Proctor says

Minna's "appeal had its effect, for the proposed 'great building for the Department of State, Justice, and Commerce and Labor' was not built, and the historic Blair House is still in excellent preservation and still occupied by a member of the Blair family." (631–632). Although the McMillan Commission dissolved after presenting its report, the plan was kept alive by three commission members: Senator McMillan's assistant Charles Moore; architect Charles McKim, then renovating the White House; Daniel Burnham, chief designer of the 1893 Chicago Exposition and translator of its architectural vision to the plan for Washington. Through their efforts and the support of their influential friends—President Theodore Roosevelt, his successor William Howard Taft, secretary of war and overseer of the Army Corps of Engineers Elihu Root—the plan continued to unofficially inform later building projects until President Taft's 1910 creation of the Commission of Fine Arts as the government's expert advisory group on design and location of buildings and monuments in the District of Columbia (See Penczer, 21–31). The plan's alternative site for federal structures east of the White House would ultimately accommodate the Federal Triangle construction in the 1920s and 1930s.

15. "Plan in the Senate to Destroy Historic Homes in Washington," *New York Herald* (Sunday, March 13, 1904), Clippings File, Office of the Curator, Blair House. Marvel, 4. Describing the family heirlooms filling Blair House, Marvel cites the papers of President Andrew Jackson, entrusted by him to Francis Preston Blair and bequeathed to Montgomery and Gist respectively (Gist willed them to the Library of Congress); Montgomery Blair's own papers and personal effects, and John Brown's bayonets from his Harper's Ferry raid found in the Blair House basement. Family correspondence in the Library of Congress refers to 121 boxes of mementos of Gustavus Vasa Fox, an uncle of Gist's and post-Civil War secretary of the navy and foreign minister to Russia; books and paintings given to Gist by his aunt Virginia Woodbury Fox; trunks in the attic full of more heirlooms from the Clapp and Quincy ancestors of Portland, Maine; and Gist's mother's possessions remaining after her death in 1883.
16. Smith 1980, 418. Marvel, II, 3, 30.
17. Proctor, 632.

18. Marvel, 4–5, 32–33, 38, 44–45.
19. J. H. Gallinger to Gist Blair, December 21, 1917, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, MSS 19,713: Blair Family Papers, Containers 21–22, Reel 14.
20. “Special Notice,” *Washington Post* (February 6, 1922): clipping, Library of Congress, Blair Family Papers, Reel 14. Gist Blair to Dr. Eleanor M. Hiestand-Moore, June 23, 1923; Charles Scribner Jr. to Gist Blair, January 17, 1925; Gist Blair to P. Lee Phillips, Esq., and Herbert Putman, Esq., Library of Congress, March 15 and March 29, 1918 respectively—all in Blair Family Correspondence Files, Office of the Curator, Blair House. John Clagett Proctor, “Blair House Has Been Associated . . .,” *The Sunday Star* (Washington, D. C., June 3, 1928, Part 7): 5; “Where The Glorious Past Is Ever Present,” *Washington Post* (Art Gravure supplement, June 5, 1928): 1. Both in Clippings Files, Office of the Curator, Blair House. Other related clippings in these files are: “Blair Mansion, House of Fame,” *Washington Times* (Thursday, October 27, 1927); “Where History Has Been Made” (unidentified publication). Dr. Hiestand-Moore’s book was never published. Gist read his Lafayette Square paper, rejected by Scribner’s as too “local interest” for their national magazine, before the Columbia Historical Society, May 20, 1924, and saw it excerpted in the April 21, 1924 *Washington Star* and published in full in the *CHS Records* (Washington, D.C., Volume 28, 1926), 133–173.
21. Constance McLaughlin Green, *Washington: A History of the Capital 1800–1950* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1962; first Princeton paperback printing 1976), 278–279. Fogle, 43–47, 106–109, 147–148, 29, 41–42.
22. John B. Miller, *Principles of Public and Private Infrastructure Delivery* (Springer, 2000), 156. Respectively: The Public Buildings Act, 5/25/1926 (44.St.630); Foreign Service Buildings Act 5/7/1926 (44.St.403); Condemnation Act of 5/1/1929 (45.St.1415). Ironically, in March 1929, when Congress passed the procedural condemnation act for the District of Columbia whereby the federal government could exercise its authority to acquire property through condemnation and tear down existing structures to build new projects, the Government Printing Office issued a booklet titled *Points of Interest in the National Capital* “for the guidance of persons who wished to see

- the historic places in the national capital while in the . . . city for the inauguration of Herbert Hoover as president. Six historic houses were illustrated in this publication. One of them was Blair House.” (Proctor 1930), 632.
23. John Salmond in *Franklin D. Roosevelt, His Life and Times: An Encyclopedic View*, ed. Otis L. Graham Jr. and Meghan Robinson Wander (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1985), 62–64.
 24. *William J. Murtagh, Keeping Time: The History and Theory of Preservation in America*, 3rd ed. (Hoboken, N.J.: John Wiley & Sons, 2006), 42–43. Franklin D. Roosevelt to Major Gist Blair, November 10, 1933, House History File, Blair House-Lee House Acquisition & Preservation Documents, File 1 of 2, Office of the Curator, Blair House (hereafter cited as BH-LH File 1 or File 2 as documents location specify.) Garvey and Morton (1968, 8) state, “The legislation had its beginning at the White House when in November 1933, President Franklin D. Roosevelt received Major Gist Blair, a neighbor from across Pennsylvania Avenue. Blair’s mission was directed to the need for a general plan to coordinate historic preservation activities of the federal government with those of the state and local government, and with private endeavors. Incidentally, he was concerned that the government not take over the block on which his house stood . . . The President invited Blair to talk legislation which might be needed to put a program into effect.” Gist prepared a report that Ickes forwarded to J. Thomas Schneider, who expanded it into his *Report to the Secretary of the Interior on the Preservation of Historic Sites and Buildings* (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Interior, 1935). Laura Blair Marvel recalls, “There was always the threat of the Government buying the property and tearing down all the lovely houses for office buildings. Later, when I was around 17 [ca. 1939], this threat almost became a reality during Franklin Roosevelt’s presidency. Uncle invited the President to come over for a visit and discuss the entire plan. Roosevelt was so impressed with the lovely 19th century house and all the beautiful furnishings that he promised Uncle that as long as he was in office he would see to it that nothing would happen to Blair House.” (Marvel, 64; on her uncle’s close friendship with Harold Ickes, 35, 67, 90.)
 25. Geoffrey C. Ward, *Before the Trumpet: Young Franklin Roosevelt 1882–1905* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), 157–163; 230–231. Marvel, 4, 35–36,

- 38, 44–45, 90.
26. Gist Blair to President Franklin D. Roosevelt, undated draft of letter written between November 10, 1933 and January 13, 1934; Franklin D. Roosevelt to Gist Blair, January 13, 1934, photocopy of signed letter on White House letterhead, BH-LH File 1. Gist's mention of Eleanor Roosevelt's love and promotion of American art and craftsmen refers to her Val-Kill Industries of 1926–1937. "Conceived as a social experiment, [it] was designed to provide local farmers and their families with the necessary crafting skills to supplement their income" by tapping "a lucrative reproduction furniture market generated by increasing interest in the nation's colonial heritage. Val-Kill craftsmen produced high quality replicas and adaptations of early American furniture and pewter." (See: National Park Service website at www.nps.gov/history/museum/exhibits/elro/valkill.html)
27. Murtagh, 43–44.
28. Edna M. Coleman, junior historian, to Mr. [Verne E.] Chatelain, acting assistant director, branch of historic sites and buildings, U. S. Dept. of the Interior, National Park Service, Washington, February 20, 1936. Verne E. Chatelain to A. [Arthur] E. Demaray, February 21, 1936, states, "It is thought that the information given below [from Edna M. Coleman's report] may be useful if the Secretary [Ickes] decides to make the proposed visit to Blair House." BH-LH File 1. Stephen Decatur bought 17 lots in square 167, not 19 as Coleman's report states. (Oral communication from Ben Kunkle, Education Coordinator, Decatur House Museum, March 4, 2009.)"
29. Alvin P. Stauffer, "Blair House," October 8, 1937; Branch Spalding, acting assistant director, to Arno B. Cammerer, director, branch of historic sites and buildings, NPS (November 2, 1937), BH-LH File 1. Barry Mackintosh, *The Historic Sites Survey and National Landmarks Program: A History* (Washington, D.C.: National Park Service, Department of the Interior, 1985), 22.
30. Mackintosh, 23–24. Gist Blair to Harold Ickes, April 20, 1938; Arno B. Cammerer to Gist Blair, May 6, 1938, BH-LH File 1.
31. Demaray to Ickes, March 16, 1940, BH-LH File 1. Also in Mackintosh, 23–24.
32. Cammerer to Ickes, May 23, 1940, BH-LH File 1.

33. Drury to Gist Blair, December 4, 1940, BH-LH File 1. Marvel, 109–110. Mackintosh incorrectly gives the date of Gist Blair's death as December 10, 1940, perhaps the actual date of the historic marker's dedication. Referring to the ending of the marking program at America's entry into World War II, and the confidentiality of designated sites up to that time, he states, "Blair House would remain the only recipient of a 'national historical marker' outside Park Service custody. But its plaque was prototypical of those that would proliferate across the nation beginning 20 years later, when the Service finally undertook to inform the American people of all their greatest historic places." (24–26.)
34. Jacquelyn M. Beauregard to Miss R. Constance Calenberg, office of the chief of protocol, Department of State (April 15, 1963), BH-LH File 2. This memorandum summarizes title research done on the acquisition of Blair House and Lee House by the federal government. It chronologically details the acquisitions process—dates, acts, etc.—in a fairly complete time line. It also includes four basic "Steps in Acquiring Land by the Federal Government" and a second summary of the acquisitions process with costs (3–4).
35. "Last Will and Testament of Gist Blair," March 9, 1934, 5–6, Family History File, Legal Papers & Related Documents—Blair Family, Office of the Curator, Blair House.
36. Percy Blair to Frederic A. Delano, Esq., National Resources Planning Board, State Department Building, Washington, D.C., October 20, 1941; Percy Blair to Mrs. Warren Robbins, Sulgrave Club, Washington, D.C., November 25, 1941; Sumner Welles (drafted by Howland Shaw) to Percy Blair, June 30, 1941, BH-LH File 1. On Gist's guests at BH dinners, see Marvel, 113.
37. Percy Blair to G. Howland Shaw, January 3, 1942; J. P. Story Jr. Story and Company, Real Estate, Washington, D.C., to Dr. Montgomery Blair, May 18, 1942; Marian T. Christie for Mr. Shaw to Mr. Harrison [State Department], April 17, 1942—all in BH-LH File 1. On Anderson House and the Navy Department, see *Massachusetts Avenue Architecture: Volume I, Northwest Washington, District of Columbia* (Washington, D.C.: The Commission of Fine Arts, 1973), 160.
38. G. Howland Shaw to Percy Blair, May 29, 1942, BH-LH File 1.

39. F.D.R. to The secretary of state, June 9, 1942; Cordell Hull to Harold Ickes, June 13, 1942, BH-LH File 2, File 1. Francis L. Loewenheim states, "It is known that Hull contemplated resigning shortly after Pearl Harbor, this time over Roosevelt's continued habit of carrying on important negotiations behind the secretary's back." (Graham Jr. and Wander 1985, 193). Shaw was not entirely forthcoming to Percy's inquiry. DOS itself did not have direct authority to acquire real estate in the city, but it could through specific legislation, i.e. its purchase of the Lee House property via an appropriations request approved by Congress in the April 5, 1941 act. DOS did not intend to do the same to acquire Blair House, as a later letter from Shaw to Percy states (see pg. 39 of this article), probably because the annex plan did not include preserving the old houses on the block. If a request for appropriations for land acquisition was approved, the process proceeded through the FWA, which then included the Public Buildings Administration, precursor of the GSA.
40. Harold L. Ickes to "My dear Mr. President," June 13, 1942; Percy Blair to Harold L. Ickes, June 18, 1942, BH-LH File 1.
41. FDR to Cordell Hull, June 17, 1942, copy; F.D.R. for the secretary of state, June 24, 1942, copy; Cordell Hull to F.D.R., copy of DOS #110.12/325A—all in BH-LH File 1.
42. L. [Laurence] C. Frank to FDR, undated, photocopy of DOS#110.12/356 1/2, BH-LH File 1. Linda J. Lear states, "Ickes also served Roosevelt's need to have within his official family a spokesman for policies with regard to civil liberties and protection of minority rights that the president himself declined to take . . . Ickes presided over the first integrated government cafeteria, recommended the first black justice for the Virgin Islands, and publicly snubbed the Daughters of the American Revolution by his sponsorship of Marian Anderson." (*Franklin Roosevelt, His Life and Times*, 200).
43. FDR to the director of the budget, August 13, 1942, secretary of state copy, DOS #110.12/322; F.D.R. to Cordell Hull, August 28, 1942, photocopy of original DOS 110.12/326, BH-LH File 1, Office of the Curator, Blair House.
44. "Order For Forthwith Surrender . . ." Docket 2627; "Petition For Condemnation," Docket No. 2827; both signed by Charles E. Stewart, Clerk; Reynolds to Summerlin, February 19, 1943, BH-LH- File 2.

45. F.D.R. to General Philip B. Fleming, FWA, September 29, 1943; F.D.R. to Cordell Hull, December 14, 1942 and December 20, 1943, BH-LH File 2: 2, 4.
46. Jane Eads, "Will These Famous Landmarks Be Saved?" *The Sunday Star* (Washington, D.C.: February 10, 1946): C-4, Clippings File; Percy Blair to Hon. Harry S. Truman, January 26, 1946, photocopy, BH-LH File 1.
47. John F. Kennedy to The Honorable Bernard L. Boutin, October 15, 1962, copy, President's Guest House Files—Kennedy Administration 1961–1963; Nancy L. Ross, "Work Nears End On Kennedy-Inspired Restoration of Park Near White House," *The Sacramento Bee* (Sunday, October 4, 1970), Clippings File, Office of the Curator, Blair House.
48. Garvey and Morton, 1, 35.
49. *Ibid*, 10.

About the Author

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