

PLEASE NOTE: A fully illustrated article is available in the printed edition of *White House History* number 26. A collection of privately owned photographs have been removed from this web version of the article.



WHITE HOUSE COLLECTION

Isabella Hagner, orphaned at 16, supported herself and her younger siblings by putting her society contacts and good handwriting to use in a successful career as a social secretary. Her good humor and discretion endeared her to Mrs. Theodore Roosevelt, who employed her as the first salaried White House social secretary. Hagner later recorded memories of her life and White House years in several typescript memoirs, one of which is published for the first time in this issue. The West Sitting Hall of the White House is pictured above during the Theodore Roosevelt administration. The desk at the center may be the one where Isabella Hagner worked. In her memoir she describes her appreciation for the painting Love and Life by George F. Watts, which is partially seen hanging above the sofa at left. She also recalled that the children would play at the end of the corridor near her desk and considered her “a fair mark for any joke.”

MEMOIRS

The First White House Social Secretary Isabella Hagner

EDITED WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
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Isabella Hagner James, known to all as Belle, was the only daughter of Dr. Charles Evelyn Hagner and Isabella Wynn Davis. Her parents were “cave-dwellers,” as old Washingtonians styled themselves, and Belle’s reminiscences of her early life vividly resurrect the mores of late nineteenth-century Washington.¹ They also recount vicissitudes of fortune that rival the plots of Edith Wharton or Henry James, and that shaped the unique, indomitable woman who became the first White House social secretary.

At the time of Belle’s birth in 1876, Dr. Hagner was struggling to establish his practice, and the family lived at 10th and L Streets NW, which Belle described as a “distinctly unfashionable part of town.” When she was five, they moved to 1400 H Street, “a great step up in size and locality,” Belle says. Lafayette Square became their neighborhood park. The children played for hours along its gravel paths, in the shadow of ancient, gnarled pine trees and the equestrian statue of Andrew Jackson. One day, to the nurse’s horror, a newspaper photograph identified a habitué of the park who had befriended five-year-old Belle and her older brother: he was Charles Guiteau, President James A. Garfield’s assassin, who had amused himself with her charges while stalking his White House target!

Frequently the young Hagners made the lengthy trip to their grandmother Davis’s Georgetown house, 2017 O Street, which had an outdoor kitchen and an immense garden with a rear entrance on P Street. In summertime there were even longer excursions by car-

riage: along Georgia Avenue to the Soldiers’ Home, or out Woodley Lane to “Tenallytown [Tenleytown] Road” (now Wisconsin Avenue). They went to the Navy Yard for concerts and to the South Lawn of the White House to hear the Marine Band. Accompanying their mother to shop for groceries at the old Center Market was a special treat.

The Hagners were always well-connected, and during Belle’s childhood they became increasingly prosperous, by 1888 owning a house at 1507 E Street, and later an even more fashionable M Street house. When the children were old enough, their mother organized Friday dancing classes for them and their friends. As Belle entered her teens, these evenings included dinner and gradually became more elaborate. They were held at the participants’ houses; some, like the Hagners’, were relatively modest, but the list included the notable Washington mansions built for Henry Adams, John Hay, Nicholas Anderson, and Benjamin Warder. The offspring of these families were part of the social coterie with whom Belle danced, dined, and socialized during strolls along Connecticut Avenue between Farragut Square and Dupont Circle.

In 1892 when Belle was 16, this happy existence precipitously ended. Her mother died, her father soon followed, and Belle found herself responsible for her three younger brothers—Tom, Randall, and Charlie. The M Street house was sold to pay the family debts, though their uncle, Judge Alexander Hagner, helped Belle keep most of the furniture, and the orphaned Hagners moved

into a rickety, rat-infested house on Eighteenth Street between H and I streets. In her memoir, Belle never mentions any formal schooling she may have had and laments that there was now no money for her brothers' educations.

A faithful parishioner of Saint John's Church in Lafayette Square, where the Hagners had a family pew, Belle credits their gradual rise out of this marginal existence mainly to the Lord's guiding hand. Their social network was an enormous asset as well. Through friends, her brothers all found jobs: Randall at the Allegheny Coal Company, Tom at Riggs Bank, and Charlie, only 13, a job as telephone boy at the Department of Justice that brought in \$7.50 a week. The young Hagners wore their friends' hand-me-downs to work and somehow survived very hard times. Looking back, Belle reflected that "what we learned from adversity made us more real people than we ever could have been, if we had more comforts." She was justifiably proud that they had surmounted so many obstacles, and of the fact that "in spite of it all, [we] kept our friends."

Belle was handsome but not a beauty, and the family's reduced circumstances limited her prospects for marrying well, the usual destiny of genteel females in her era. Employment options were few as well, though secretarial work was both remunerative and socially acceptable. (Sending out invitations for large weddings was particularly lucrative, Belle notes.) Belle's friend Cornelia Hunt, whose deceased father had been ambassador to Russia, had followed this path, and she suggested that Belle apply to be Mrs. Cornelius Bliss's secretary, assuring her that her social connections in Washington and good handwriting were sufficient qualifications. Other friends offered her the clothes she needed for work and a helping hand. Mrs. Blair Lee, a friend from childhood, paid Belle to write the invitations for her own debutante tea in 1895. Belle was soon hired by other prominent women, among them Mrs. Mark Hanna, Mrs. Elihu Root, Mrs. Richard Townsend, and Mrs. William Sheffield Cowles, sister of Theodore Roosevelt.

In 1898 Belle became a clerk in the Surgeon General's Office of the War Department (at half the salary of the "old boy" working next to her, she notes wryly), but she regularly took leave without pay to continue as social secretary for various ladies. Until her marriage Belle was also the first agent for the Social Register in Washington; she compiled the lists of the

socially eligible and decided which official, military, and diplomatic ranks should be included.²

Belle first met Edith Roosevelt, then wife of the vice president-elect, at tea at the Cowleses' home in March 1901. Undoubtedly at Mrs. Cowles's suggestion, Mrs. Roosevelt wrote a short time later to ask Belle for her help with her step daughter Alice's coming-out party the following year. President William McKinley's assassination in September brought the Roosevelts into the White House, and almost immediately Edith enlisted Belle to be her social secretary on a full-time basis.

Belle's abundant energy, loyalty, and discretion soon endeared her to Edith. Edith took Belle under her wing, shopping with her, stealing off to Belle's succession of tiny apartments for supper before theater performances, and often inviting Belle to join the family at Sagamore Hill. Belle was sociable and fun-loving, with a great sense of humor that quickly made her fast friends with the entire lively Roosevelt family. The steadiness under fire, good humor, and social aplomb Belle had applied to her personal predicaments stood her in good stead in her White House role, as demonstrated in one widely reported incident. At one official reception Belle and a diminutive European diplomat were dancing a bit too exuberantly. Suddenly one of them tripped, and both fell down. The assembled company, staring aghast at the jumble on the floor, could only see Belle, whose voluminous red velvet train totally covered the diplomat. Nonchalantly treating the mishap as if it were another dance step, Belle arose and stepped gracefully to the side, revealing the diplomat who, to everyone's relief, was grinning from ear to ear!³

Belle served as White House social secretary throughout Theodore Roosevelt's terms and was the first appointee of the Wilson administration. During Belle's White House tenure, her brother Randall started a real estate venture that profited from Belle's social contacts, including tips on the comings and goings of official Washington. Unmarried and in her 30s, Belle became a surrogate mother to Randall's son Alec, who lived with his father and Belle after his parents divorced. In 1915 Belle took Alec to recuperate from a tonsillectomy at the Homestead, a resort in the mountains of Virginia, and it was there she met her future husband, Norman James.

James, born in 1868 into a wealthy Baltimore family, was a widower with three children. He had gone

into the family business, the James Lumber Company—one of the largest in the South—at an early age and was a director of two railway lines and several large corporations. Upon their marriage in 1915 Norman persuaded Belle to give up her work to become mistress of Overhills, an estate in Catonsville, Maryland, with a large mansion, two greenhouses, and extensive gardens. Built in 1897, Overhills had been a wedding present from Henry James to his son Norman upon his first marriage. Norman was a well-known art collector, with a superb collection of prints and lithographs. Overhills also had a renowned library containing many rare and first editions.

In 1928, for reasons Belle does not disclose—possibly business reverses, or because James was already suffering from the prolonged illness that would claim his life—Overhills, the art collection, and the library were all sold, and the Jameses moved to a more modest house in suburban Baltimore. After her husband's death in 1939, Belle visited her Washington relatives periodically but remained in Baltimore until her death four years later.⁴ Both Norman and Belle are buried in the family plot in Loudon Park Cemetery.

In 1983, Alec Hagner's wife Virginia donated Belle's papers to the White House collection. The Isabella Hagner James Papers are a rich source for the study of social history in early twentieth-century Washington.⁵ Few of Belle's memoirs are dated. In all probability most were written after her husband's death, from her own recollections and the notes she kept while social secretary. Belle's reminiscences of her parents, brothers, particularly Randall, and early life are addressed to her family. But clearly she hoped that her White House experiences with the Roosevelts and Wilsons would have a larger audience. The portions published here cover the first four years of the Roosevelt administration, during which Belle was an active participant in shaping important and enduring elements of White House entertaining, procedures, and protocol, as well as carrying out other necessary secretarial duties. They are an insider's chronicle of a period of momentous change in the White House itself and in its social procedures, and of life with the Roosevelt clan. With few exceptions, the memoirs are accurate as well as entertaining. I have taken the liberty of correcting typographical errors, modernizing some punctuation, more fully identifying some of the many characters in the

saga, and weaving her stories of 1904 into a more coherent chronology. Otherwise I have let Miss Hagner tell the story as she saw it.

NOTES

I am indebted to numerous members of the Hagner family, most especially Courtney Hagner, John Sargent, and Bella Hagner Martin, for their contributions to Belle's story; to Sarah Williams Chapman for permission to reproduce Cecilia Beaux's portrait of Edith and Ethel Roosevelt; to Joanna Sturm for permission to reproduce Théobald Chartran's portrait of Alice Roosevelt; and to Archivist David Angerhofer and Senior Reference Librarian Francis O'Neill of the Maryland Historical Society, for information on the James family.

By way of explanation of the perhaps familiar tone of the article, the author wishes to note that she is married to Kermit Roosevelt, the president's great-grandson. Connections between the Hagners and the Roosevelts are warm and ongoing.

1. Belle Hagner, "A Cave-Dweller as Social Secretary," Isabella Hagner Papers, White House collection. All quotations in this introduction are from this source.
2. Belle's relatives founded and for two generations compiled the *Green Book*, a social register of Washington since 1930.
3. Mary Randolph, *Presidents and First Ladies* (New York: Appleton-Century, 1936), 184–85, cited in Sylvia Jukes Morris, *Edith Kermit Roosevelt: Portrait of a First Lady* (New York: Coward, McCann & Geohegan, 1980), 226.
4. Belle's last address was 853 West University Parkway, an apartment building in a nice part of town. In 1940 Belle donated papers relating to the James family to the Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore.
5. Betty C. Monkman, "Research Sources in the Office of the Curator," *White House History* no. 9 (spring 2001) 56–57.