



## The James G. Blaine Mansion

James Gillespie Blaine was one of the most consequential American political figures of the 19th century. Coming from humble Pennsylvania roots, he embarked on a brief teaching stint after graduating college before becoming one of the founding members of the Republican Party. Working his way up the ranks, Blaine was Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives from 1869-1875, in the Senate from 1876-1881, then Secretary of State under President James A. Garfield. A three time presidential candidate, Blaine's final race against Grover Cleveland was the closest presidential contest in history until Bush v. Gore. Around this time, he commissioned John Fraser, a relatively unknown master architect with similar humble Pennsylvania beginnings, to design what would become a legendary home.

Washington was at the height of the Gilded Age. Blaine was a man who wanted to be seen as rich and powerful in light of his modest roots. He set his sights on Dupont Circle, a neighborhood originally overlooked as being too far out by Washingtonian power players. What began as the intersection of three of the city's grand avenues: Massachusetts, Connecticut, and New Hampshire — a mere square on Pierre Charles L'Enfant's 1791 plan for Washington, rapidly grew after the Civil War into a convergence of wealth, status, and power unparalleled in any other American city. It became the meeting point of Washington's high society, drawing in members of the nouveau riche with its elegant social life. It was the most exclusive neighborhood in the city. Soon, great mansions began to emerge.

Completed in 1882, Blaine's residence incurred a whopping \$48,000 in construction costs and comprised a stunning 25,000 square feet of living space, instantly becoming one of the city's most grandiose dwellings. Designed in a combination of the Châteauesque, Second Empire, and Fraser's signature Queen Anne styles, its intricate exterior detailing consisted of molded red brick and terracotta surrounding a mass accented by pressed tin dormers and seven chimneys protruding from different stories, capped by a slate mansard roof. An elegant porte cochere over the main entrance on Massachusetts Avenue afforded the most resplendent of entries. The end result was an imposing structure of great physical scale and vertical emphasis. The wedding of Alice Blaine to Colonel John Coppinger in February 1883 took place at the home and was the most lavish wedding ever to take place in Washington at the time. Soon after, the Blaine's found their new home too large and expensive to maintain, leading it to Levi Leiter by year's end.

At \$11,500 per year, Letier's rent was then the highest price ever paid for a private residence. Chicago-based Leiter, however, had earlier sold his interest in a department store he co-founded with Marshall Field and Potter Palmer — a store that would eventually grow into a retail empire. In 1894, upon completion of their own mansion, the Leiters moved out.

After sitting vacant for four years, the home was once again leased in 1898, this time to legendary engineer George Westinghouse, inventor of the railway air brake, and his wife, Marguerite. The Westinghouses entertained frequently and lavishly before purchasing the home from Harriet Blaine for \$150,000 in 1901. The home was eventually passed down to the couple's son, George Westinghouse III, becoming the headquarters for the United Service Club in 1917 before he sold it two years later.

In late 1920, in the hands of Henry B. Spencer, the home was converted into three large apartments with servants quarters on the top floor. Twenty years later, having gone through a number of tenants, the house was requisitioned by New York Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia as the headquarters of the Civilian Defense Office during the Second World War. Still owned by Henry Spencer, the home became the United Nations Information Center in 1955 and was passed down to Spencer's children after his death in 1958.

After a long tenure under the Spencer children, the home was finally acquired in 2009 by John R. Phillips, attorney and diplomat, and his wife Linda. A \$20 million renovation followed suit, adding an underground parking garage, adjoining six-story residential building, and 6,000 square feet of retail space.

Today, the Blaine Mansion is protected under the District of Columbia Inventory of Historic Sites, the Massachusetts Avenue Historic District, the Dupont Circle Historic District, and the prestigious National Register of Historic Places. Despite being totally modernized, the residence still retains all of its original charm and character. To quote Pericles: "Time is the wisest counselor of all." The Blaine Mansion has withstood the test of it, and now represents one of a few rapidly fleeting opportunities to experience Washington back in its glory days. If only the walls could talk, would they reveal a powerful lineage filled with history — and a truly unprecedented opportunity to rewrite it.