

AT LARGE AND AT SMALL: A House in Foggy Bottom

Author(s): THOMAS MALLON

Source: *The American Scholar*, Vol. 73, No. 2 (Spring 2004), pp. 5-9

Published by: The Phi Beta Kappa Society

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41222311>

Accessed: 27-02-2023 18:56 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



The Phi Beta Kappa Society is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The American Scholar*

JSTOR

AT LARGE
AND
AT SMALL

—
A House
in Foggy Bottom
—

THOMAS
MALLON

Because I often write about history, real and fictional, friends used to find it odd that my home had so little of it. During seven years in Westport, Connecticut, my partner and I lived in a small condominium that had been built in 1988. Its only apparent history was of the Martha Stewart kind: a sort of “look,” old-fashioned, the result of clapboard siding, a wooden front porch, a couple of white columns.

Martha herself lived about a mile away. Everyone, including those who’d never seen her, called her by her first name and tended to delight in her recent troubles, even as they silently blessed her image for its contribution to property values throughout town. We did the same when we sold the condominium late last summer and headed to Washington, D.C.

There were all sorts of reasons for the move. Some of our closest friends were here, and so was half my subject matter. The city’s history had given me two novels, and as we got ready to move, I was catching the first mental glimpses of a third. My Brigham Young moment—*This is the place!*—had come a year earlier, when I spent a weekend in a hotel on New Hampshire Avenue in Foggy Bottom. I was across from a row of those brightly colored, if impossibly tiny, houses that make up, amid the loomings of academe and government and modern apartment buildings, the neighborhood’s snug, tenacious Historic District.

I knew more about Foggy Bottom’s past than its present, having written a book set here

Thomas Mallon, a member of the SCHOLAR’s Editorial Board, writes the “At Large and At Small” column each spring. His most recent books are *Bandbox*, a novel, and *Mrs. Paine’s Garage and the Murder of John F. Kennedy*, a work of nonfiction.

in the year 1877, when astronomers at the old naval observatory succeeded, against nearly laughable odds, in discovering the two moons of Mars. The scientists’ presence in the neighborhood could be counted an early instance of bad govern-

ment planning. The observatory had been placed in the capital’s most swampy, malarial, and fogbound district, and on many nights there was no point in even opening up the dome: like the alley-dwelling laborers of the “Bottom,” the astronomers just tried to keep their noses shut to the smelly river mists and industrial vapors.

In the spring of 2002, a century and a quarter after the observatory’s Martian miracle, the neighborhood I was walking through could hardly have seemed more salubrious or stimulating. But could the two of us really live in one of those Lilliputian houses along New Hampshire or Twenty-fifth?

A year later, we got lucky: a larger, yellow-brick house at the northeast corner of Twenty-fifth and H came on the market. Here was a structure that, in 1982, the *Foggy Bottom–West End Historic Architecture Survey* had pronounced a “major component” of the neighborhood and “the grandest among the remaining original buildings” of its time—though it will tell you something about the scale of things here that the house commanding these lofty compliments is all of 1,449 square feet, not much more than a walk-in closet for the newest McMansions in Westport.

But its six small rooms on three narrow floors could, we realized, work for us, so long as we put the living room one flight up (very old-fashioned, this) and I assembled my study in the third-floor turret, whose dormer looks out on the Watergate and the Kennedy Cen-

ter, those competing monuments, as I'm not the first to note, to the men who faced off in the 1960 election. This was the first great political event I can fully remember, perhaps the one that set me on a path toward making fiction about American history and politics. From the moment I climbed the stairs and walked into the turret, I liked the view.

In 1960, the current vista could not have been imagined. Someone writing about the house that spring noted its command of "an unsurpassed view of the Potomac and the hills of Virginia beyond." Lovely, I suspect, but only if the eye were successful in ignoring an awful lot between. For the first half of the twentieth century, my house—as I quickly determined to make it—had stood close to the giant Heurich Brewery, the local gasworks, and all the laundries and warehouses that had replaced what the neighborhood's chief historian, Suzanne Sherwood Unger, calls its "nuisance industries"—late-nineteenth-century operations ranging from the Clapp Ammonia Company to the Godey Lime Kilns. As Unger points out, things wouldn't change in the direction of the more refined and residential until the arrival of the State Department's new headquarters (1947) and the dismantling of the gas tanks (1954).

Struck by all the history this house had witnessed and survived, I had to admit that its interior was as much of a historical cheat as the ornamental frills on my Westport condominium. In 1960, Melita Rodeck, an architect who had come to the United States from Austria, purchased 801 Twenty-fifth Street, NW; just as Nixon and Kennedy squared off before the voters, she set about making the house into what one local admirer called "a first-class example of mid-20th century functionalism," complete with central air-conditioning, a space-age kitchen, and bathrooms on all three floors.

Miss Rodeck made her home here for the next forty-three years, putting the tall, narrow house back on the market only as she neared ninety and needed to exchange its two flights of stairs for more level surroundings. She preferred to sell to someone who would live in it and appreciate its surroundings. She did not want, I knew, to sell to an investor. And so,

along with our bid, I sent her a copy of *Two Moons*, hoping the novel's local color would reassure her, just as I later asked if she would sign one of the blueprints she'd drawn in 1960 so that we might frame it and honor her as the house's rescuer. Even so, I winced when I overheard her tell my real estate agent that the closing, which took place the day after Hurricane Isabel tore through Washington, felt "like a funeral" to her.

Everything on the ground and in the skies contributed to my own feelings of upheaval that morning. The city was strewn with torn branches and uprooted trees, and Mars was reaching one of those perihelic oppositions that every fifteen to eighteen years return it, red and swollen, to the proximity that allowed Asaph Hall to spy its moons through his telescope in Foggy Bottom.

When I got the deed to this house on Lot 47, Square 29, I saw a reference to "John Paul Jones and others' subdivision." I imagined myself residing on land that had been a reward to the sailor's heirs for his early services to the Republic—until a more careful reading of the deed made me realize that this John Paul Jones was a latter-day namesake who had participated in subdividing the original Lot 1, a part of which is now Lot 47, more than a century after the Revolution.

Oh, well. The early federal days of Foggy Bottom—its time, in the words of one historian, as "a section of swamps and flats," with "a free and easy population, as full of feuds as the Tennessee mountaineers"—interested me less than its no-nonsense transition from the nineteenth century to the twentieth. This was the period when my own house rose amid the neighborhood's nuisance industries and the various ethnicities charted by Unger: the Irish who toiled in the gasworks, the Germans who manned the breweries, the African-Americans who labored for whoever would take them on.

I managed to locate the house's "footprint"—the pleasingly anthropomorphic term of art—on a diagram in the Hopkins real estate atlas of 1892. Five years earlier, on the same lot, there had been three frame buildings owned by a C. C. M. Loeffler, a clerk in the

War Department, but the color coding in the 1892 book shows a brick house whose small inked shape makes clear that it's mine. Even at the real estate closing, we'd believed the house to have been built in 1900, but a search through the building permits in the District's Martin Luther King Library, followed by a trip to the National Archives, confirms that Charles E. Burden filed his wax-paper plan for 801 Twenty-fifth and the surrounding houses on February 14, 1890, the year the census announced the disappearance of the American frontier line.

Gail Rodgers Redmann, who helped me out with the Hopkins atlas, directs the library of the Historical Society of Washington, D.C., housed at the new City Museum. We remembered each other from my *Two Moons* research, when the Society had its headquarters in the old Heurich mansion near Dupont Circle. I liked the Foggy Bottom legend that my house was part of a cluster whose "vernacular design elements"—the "bellcast roofs, lancet windows, Flemish gables, and peaked lintels" catalogued in the neighborhood's application to the National Register of Historic Places—had been built specifically for the workers in the Heurich Brewery, just across Virginia Avenue. But once I knew the house was from 1890, not 1900, things didn't add up. In 1890, the brewery was five fairly long blocks away, on Twentieth Street; Heurich didn't open it on Twenty-fifth until 1895, two years after his old facility caught fire.

And even if, as the National Register application states, the late-nineteenth-century "buildings that comprise this historic district are the legacy of the German and Irish communities that coexisted in Foggy Bottom for many years," they became, very quickly after their construction, homes to the African-American population that dominated the neighborhood during the first half of the twentieth century. Around 1900, Unger notes, the "increased use of rail service diminished the importance of the [Chesapeake & Ohio] canal and river to local business. Coal consumption declined as customers switched to gas and oil. Foggy Bottom's lack of rail connections placed it in a poor position to com-

pete with the Northeast railroad yards, and a number of businesses moved or closed. Many Foggy Bottom residents moved also, following jobs to other locations." The increasingly undesirable neighborhood, including many of those houses with the German vernacular touches, was left to the black working poor.

My own house, once I had a look at the 1900 census, proved to be a case in point. A decade after being built, it was tenanted by ten members of the Burdd family: Ruben Burdd, his wife, Hannah, and their four unmarried children, along with Clifford Burdd (probably Ruben's married son), his wife, Sadie, and their two sons. Ruben Burdd, unable to read and write, worked as a day laborer, while Clifford, who was literate, had employment as a waiter. Ten years later, the Burdds had been replaced by John and Mary Swann, a laborer and a laundress; their five children (among them Clarence, thirteen, already at work "setting ten pins"); and five in-laws, including a domestic, a carpenter, a cook, and a porter.

The house may have been full to bursting with life and striving, but outside there was a grim absence of the onward and upward. As Constance McLaughlin Green makes clear in her two-volume history of Washington, published forty years ago: "For Negroes the satisfactions of life in the capital diminished steadily after 1878." Enforcement of municipal and congressional protections that had been enacted during Reconstruction now relaxed to the point where "by the end of the 1880s Negroes in the District were adhering to the social pattern common in the deep South."

Much life slips away unrecorded during the ten years between censuses. But there are city directories to consult, and from 1914 to 1973 the ones for Washington not only alphabetize the District's inhabitants but also list each dwelling, block by block and number by number, allowing a reader to find out who was living at any given location. For this sixty-year span, the capital's houses seem to have real "footprints," to be somehow recognized as the bodies of whatever souls resided within. As the 1920s and '30s and '40s go by, I find 801 Twenty-fifth Street sheltering laborers and

messengers, a charwoman, a driver, and an undertaker.

In those days, the eastern portion of Foggy Bottom, closer to downtown, had its prosperous parts. An oral history made for the D.C. public library by Nora Drew Gregory, who grew up on the 1800 block of E Street, brings to life an African-American girlhood more secure and hopeful than many of those being lived just a few blocks farther west. A 1944 survey, cited by Unger, found that in “the triangle bounded by Virginia and New Hampshire Avenues and 23rd Street . . . one quarter of the buildings had no water, 55 percent had no inside toilet.” About 20 percent lacked electricity. As it happens, the malaria-ridden astronomers who left Foggy Bottom for higher ground during the 1890s would have a glamorous successor in Nora Drew Gregory’s son, Colonel Frederick Gregory, who grew up to command two space-shuttle missions.

It’s unlikely that 801 Twenty-fifth Street housed many sky-high dreams during the years of Colonel Gregory’s childhood in another part of Washington. Throughout much of the 1950s, Mrs. Louise Perry, a widow, managed to call the rapidly deteriorating place home. Between her death and the arrival of Melita Rodeck in 1960, the city directory lists the property as vacant.

These days, when I bicycle on the other side of the Potomac, my eye sometimes catches the dome of the old observatory, as bright in the sky as George Washington’s silver dollar may (or more likely may not) once have been. I’ll be riding to escape the clatter of our renovations. (We’re replacing Miss Rodeck’s space-age kitchen with something more modern.) I’ve also been enjoying the return of my life as a walker, stolen from me by the automobile during those seven years in Connecticut. Throughout these first months in Washington, out of sheer pedestrian pleasure, I’ve found myself prolonging on-foot errands, many of them accomplished at the now somewhat antiquated-looking Watergate, which still has everything from a bank to a post office to an old-fashioned barbershop.

(If it’s good enough for Bob Dole, it’s good enough for me.)

What I need to do now is get serious about the novel that was gathering in my mind just before we came to Washington. The problem with really digging in, however, may be more than the endless distractions of home remodeling. It may be that I’m already *too* serious about this novel.

I’ve always taken comfort in the way historical fiction fulfills Eliot’s definition of poetry: an escape from personality rather than its expression. Of course, authors are always “in” their novels, even historical ones, giving expression to their own feelings and values through the words and actions of sometimes the least likely characters. But most of the places I’ve gone in my fiction, including the old observatory, could be reached only by truancy from the actual experiences and venues of my life. Something is different with this new book, if one can even give that name to a sheaf of notes and a few thousand words of text. Its era may not really be mine—I’m writing about adults of the 1950s, when I was only a child—but its two largest preoccupations, homosexuality and anti-Communism, have been central to my own life. My main characters, two young men involved with each other in a scarifying, one-sided romance, could scarcely be more different from each other: Hawkins Fuller is Harvard and handsome, dispassionate in religion, politics, and love; Timothy Laughlin is less polished, more sweet-natured, a Catholic cold warrior just out of Fordham, as fervent about the church and the anti-Soviet crusade as he is about the smoothly ungraspable Fuller. My notes give Laughlin’s birthday as November 2, 1931, exactly twenty years before my own, and I see him as what I might have been in an era when certain tensions in my life would have proved insupportable.

Even so, Laughlin knows himself to be, in some fundamental way, all of a piece. The world and his faith may insist that he remain unresolved and, despite a merry disposition, he may well be tormented. Still, his yearnings for God, for his own and others’ liberty, and for love proceed from a single passionate sense of what is right. Fuller, by contrast, may

be quite comfortable, at least moment by moment, inside his own skin, but his personality is a marriage of convenience between elements that don't truly consort with one another. Effortlessly self-protective, he makes more of an impression on the world than he allows the world to make on him.

The characters of my earlier novels rarely engaged my emotions until the very end, when I was ready to close the book on each one, having rounded them as much as I could, and then rewarded or wronged them as I thought fate might have. When composing the last pages of a first draft, I've even cried over a couple of them. But this time my emotions have been active from the very beginning. I'm *agitated* in a way I've come to think of as valedictory, though I'm sitting here with only fifteen pages of text and everything, good and terrible, yet to come for these two young men. Whether this full-throttle feeling will prove beneficial or bad for the book I can't now tell, but these two characters are swimming into my ken like those Martian moons at their perihelic opposition, ready to be grasped now or never, since fifteen or eighteen years from now will no doubt be, in all sorts of ways, too late.

If I want to write a novel about the difference between belief and accommodation, I also want to write a love story particular to a time and a place. And that place is Foggy Bottom, because the new State Department building is where Hawkins Fuller works, safe in his several layers of protective coloring against the large-scale dismissal of homosexuals from the foreign service of the early 1950s—a phenomenon well chronicled by David K. Johnson in his recent book *The Lavender Scare*. The neighborhood around the department was then at what we would now call “the tipping point,” warding off the destructive good intentions of urban renewal during a fast decade that would leave it racially reversed, gentrified, and once and for all deindustrialized.

Writing in the June 1959 newsletter of the Foggy Bottom Restoration Association, Rhea Radin recalls, with perhaps too much satisfaction, how just five years earlier “the dregs of the former population used to congregate

with floating crap games in the summer and their bonfires in the winter.” Ms. Radin, who sold renovated houses in the neighborhood, mentions that once things did their quick change, “the term Foggy Bottom was no longer a slur (in fact, I even had gone so far as to refer to it as ‘Fond de Brume’ in my advertisements).” She pronounces “the gay little painted houses” to be “a substantial improvement over the mementos of ashes and broken glass that menaced the legs and lives of ourselves and our pets.”

What's now my own house lagged behind this 1950s trend. In May of 1960, relieved at the arrival of Melita Rodeck, the *Foggy Bottom News* reported to its readers on just how bad things had been inside the neighborhood's “Charles Addams house”:

Those who borrowed a key from [the real estate agent] and entered cautiously found a shambles—rotted out floors, plaster falling off walls and ceilings, stairways narrow, creaky, and uncertain, and cobwebs everywhere. All three floors were served by a shabby, rusty bathroom squeezed into a former hall bedroom after outdoor facilities were no longer legal.

I can't tell you why, or exactly when, it came to me that the last days of Fuller and Laughlin's troubled romance, just before one of them betrays the other, had played out inside this abandoned house. But that's what I feel certain of now. If I've at last moved into a house with history, I realize that history, or at least historical fiction, has also moved in with me. My characters have taken up residence here at Twenty-fifth and H. I can tell you honestly that I've passed them on the stairs, seen them as the sort of silent, planar apparitions my mother sometimes suffers as a symptom of her Parkinson's disease. Soon, with any luck, these two young men will have a third dimension and deeper coloring; and they'll be talking. I'm glad they're here, but—however many Burdts and Swanns it once held—this house is not big enough for Laughlin and Fuller. And the only way to secure their eviction will be to put it in writing.