

## **Renters of DACOR Bacon House, 1913-1923**

### **Terence Walz**

Mrs. Alice Copley Thaw Whitney began leasing 1801 F Street in the fall of 1913, after her marriage to Geoffrey Whitney and subsequent move to Milton, Massachusetts. The first of her renters was Adolph Caspar Miller, then Assistant Secretary of the Interior under Woodrow Wilson and subsequently member of the newly created Federal Reserve Board. Brief information on renters of DACOR Bacon House is found in Calderhead's booklet on the history of DACOR Bacon House.<sup>1</sup> Here we focus on renters prior to Congressman Robert Low Bacon and his wife, Virginia Bacon. They were Senator Medill McCormick and his wife Ruth Hanna McCormick who rented the house from 1919 to 1923.

### **Ruth Hanna McCormick and Medill McCormick, 1919-1923**

Senator Medill McCormick and his wife Ruth Hanna McCormick were a political power couple in Washington during their time in the house. They had come to Washington around 1916, when Ruth McCormick, the daughter of Senator Mark Hanna of Ohio, was asked to succeed Mrs. Alice Paul as head of the National American Woman's Suffrage Association, with the aim of pushing women's suffrage in the halls of Congress. She had worked fearlessly and successfully in Illinois for the passage of the right to vote for women and is now recognized as one of the important political women in the state's history.<sup>2</sup>



Ruth Hanna McCormick

Medill McCormick, son of the diplomat Robert Sanderson McCormick,<sup>3</sup> was elected as a representative to the U.S. Congress in 1916 – another reason for their finding a home in

Washington – and then was elected senator in 1918. He came from the powerful publishing McCormick family of Chicago which owned the *Chicago Tribune*. As a newly elected senator, he was against the peace treaty proposing the creation of the League of Nations and therefore ranked among the “Irreconcilables.” In fact, both senators from Illinois were against the treaty. The first vote on the treaty in Congress, rejecting the treaty, was made in November 1919, just as the McCormicks were settling into 1801 F Street.<sup>4</sup>



Ruth McCormick with fellow suffragist Anna Howard Shaw, 1914.

The McCormicks had rented a number of houses in the District, including a house on Jackson Place on Lafayette Square, before moving into 1801 F Street. They stayed until June of 1923 when they decided to move to their winter residence in Chicago which became their base for the re-election campaign of Medill to his seat in the Senate. Ruth was asked to be his campaign manager. She was also an accomplished horsewoman and managed a farm in Byron, Illinois to which the family retreated most summers.



Ruth Hanna McCormick with her prized cows at her farm in Byron, Illinois.<sup>5</sup>

While at the house, she was the mother of two children, including Katrina McCormick, a champion horsewoman like herself. She had a third child, a daughter, in Chicago in 1921 when she was 41.<sup>6</sup>

Ruth McCormick and her husband entertained often. She is said to have introduced to Washington the concept of the “buffet,” which was already popular in the Midwest. Her Sunday “suppers,” sometimes for 20 guests, were often commented upon in the local papers and later copied by other political wives and society women. This is how the *Evening Star* described them:<sup>7</sup>

“The supper will be at any time one happens to drop in, and will be served in the English fashion, from the sideboard, where delicious Smithfield hams, a cold roast or fowl – in fact, many good things – will be placed so that the guest may help himself. The idea will prove a boon to the older men, colleagues of the host in the Senate, who are not over fond of formal dinner parties, especially on Sunday nights.”

Guests would fill up their plates and take a place at small tables in the dining room and parlors. In 1923, Vice President Calvin Coolidge was among the guests at the Sunday supper on January 13, 1923.<sup>8</sup>



Ruth McCormick and Alice Roosevelt Longworth, leaving Mercy Hospital after the assassination attempt on the life of Teddy Roosevelt, Chicago, 1912. Image: Library of Congress.

She had teas for small gatherings, such as the British ambassador Lord Reading in 1918 and the British ambassador Geddes and his wife with Lord and Lady Astor in 1922;<sup>9</sup> and dinners

for others in the foreign diplomatic community, such as Italian and Polish minister and their wives. She also hosted large gatherings at the house – delegates to the conference of the League of American Penwomen, 38 members of the National Women’s Party meeting in Washington, both in 1922, and less organized groups, such as young Illinois women working in Washington.<sup>10</sup>

Medill McCormick was defeated in the 1924 election, and he died the following year, by his own hand it is said. Ruth returned to Washington as a representative from Illinois during



Ruth McCormick in Chicago 1929.

Image: DN-0088613, Chicago Sun-Times/Chicago Daily News collection, Chicago History Museum.

1929-31 and ran for the senate seat in 1930 but was not elected. Had she won, she would have been the first women to be elected to the U.S. Senate. She remarried and moved to New Mexico with her new husband.

In 1923, when the McCormicks indicated they would be spending the following year in Illinois campaigning, the *Washington Herald* reported,<sup>11</sup>

“Mrs. McCormick will be greatly missed in Washington this winter, for her house has always been the rendezvous for the people most worth meeting. She has never gone in much for spectacular entertaining, but her Sunday – or was it Saturday? – evening suppers were famous and, although most informal, one was pretty sure to encounter a lion or two, political or social, each week and to have them roar amiably.

The McCormicks gave up their pleasant, old fashioned house on F Street when they left town in the summer, and it has been let for the coming season to Congressman and Mrs. Robert L. Bacon of New York, who, from all indications, should establish new traditions of hospitality.”

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<sup>1</sup> William D. Calderhead, *DACOR Bacon House* (Washington, 1999), 77.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/ruth-hanna-mccormick-simms>;  
<https://www.lib.niu.edu/1993/ii930728.html>.

<sup>3</sup> He began his career as second secretary in the London embassy under Robert Todd Lincoln; later he was ambassador to the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Russia, and France.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.senate.gov/about/powers-procedures/treaties/senate-rejects-treaty-of-versailles.htm>;  
*Evening Star*, October 10, 1919, p. 9: “Senator Medill McCormick and Mrs. McCormick have leased the residence at F and 18<sup>th</sup> Street for the season, and will be there after November 1. The new house is one of the landmarks of Washington, and known as the William S. Carroll house. Later it was the home of the late Chief Justice Melville Fuller.”

<sup>5</sup> Image source: <https://rockfordhistorywalks.org/?ait-item=rockford-news-tower>.

<sup>6</sup> She was Ruth “Bazy” Tankersley, who was famous for breeding Arabian horses. She said she “inherited her love for politics and horses, not necessarily in that order.”

<sup>7</sup> *Evening Star*, January 25, 1920, p. 33.

<sup>8</sup> *Evening Star*, January 13, 1923, p. 8.

<sup>9</sup> *Evening Star*, March 26, 1818, p. 8; *Evening Star*, May 1, 1922, p. 9; *Evening Star*, January 28, 1920, p. 9.

<sup>10</sup> *Evening Star*, May 14, 1921, p. 8; *Washington Times*, May 27, 1922, p. 17; *Washington Herald*, February 27, 1922, p. 3.

<sup>11</sup> *Washington Herald*, October 30, 1923, p. 19.