

The President's Wife Comes to Lunch at DACOR Bacon House, 1891

Terence Walz

Caroline S. Harrison, wife of President Benjamin Harrison (1889-93), was a former music teacher with a great interest in history. As First Lady, she did much to upgrade the sad state of the White House, modernizing the kitchen, installing new electrical wiring, and repainting rooms. She had an abiding interest in the history of the house and often took people on tours. She also took an interest in women's health and helped raise funds for Johns Hopkins University Medical school on the condition that it admit women. She was also the first President General of the Daughters of the American Revolution when it was founded in 1890.



Caroline S. Harrison in 1889. Image: Library of Congress.

Mrs. Harrison was a genial hostess at White House levees, and among the hundreds of society ladies who attended them was Sally Carroll, Countess Esterhazy, whose first husband had been Maj. Gen. Charles Griffin of Civil War fame and whose second husband was Count Maximilian Esterhazy, a Hungarian nobleman who had been a diplomat in Washington when they married in 1870. She was widowed once more in 1883 and had returned to Washington the following year to live with her mother, Mrs. William T. Carroll. In the years that followed, Countess Esterhazy became a fixture in the social world of Washington, no doubt because she had married into European nobility and owned an exalted ancestry. Through her family connections, she was related to Charles Carroll, signer of the Declaration of Independence, and many other figures who participated in the American Revolution. She may also have told Mrs. Harrison – while chatting with her during a reception – that the house that she lived in with her mother, Sally Sprigg Carroll, and sister, Carrie Dix Bolles, was filled with antique furnishings, including portraits of several of their famous ancestors. Mrs. Harrison must have been intrigued, and the countess issued an invitation to come to lunch on January 26, 1891.

SOCIETY AT THE CAPITAL.

Mrs. Harrison the Guest of the Countess Esterhazy—Woman's Council.

[Special Dispatch to the Baltimore Sun.]

WASHINGTON, Feb. 28.—Mrs. Harrison was a guest, for the first time, today at a luncheon given by a hostess in private life. She was the guest of honor at a luncheon of fourteen covers, given by the Countess Esterhazy, daughter of Mrs. W. W. Carroll, of this city. Mrs. Carroll, with her daughters, the Countess and Mrs. T. Dix Bolles, still reside in the old family mansion, corner of Eighteenth and P streets, the walls of which are lined with old family portraits of the Carrolls, and in which there are so many interesting remembrances of the olden time. The table in the dining-room was set with historic china and decorated with La France roses. Countess Esterhazy had Mrs. Harrison at her right. The others at the table were Mrs. Field, Mrs. Stanford, Mrs. Island Stanford, Mrs. Cockrell, Mrs. Macallister Laughton, Mrs. Guzman, Mrs. McKee, Mrs. G. H. Loring, Mrs. Hammond, Mrs. A. Lou Knott, Mrs. Bowles and Mrs. Carroll.

The Baltimore Sun, February 27, 1891, Supplement, p. 2

The newspapers reported that it was the first time that Mrs. Harrison had had lunch in the house of a private individual. Other reports billed the affair as a “pink lunch,” reflecting the current craze of ladies’ luncheons that featured a particular color in the flowers or table arrangements of the hostess.¹

In addition to Sally Countess Esterhazy, her mother, and sister, ten other socially and politically ranking ladies were invited to join. Mrs. Carroll, then seventy-nine years old and infirm, rarely came downstairs from her upper-floor bedroom. She was looked after by her daughters and by a staff of three – a cook, a personal maid named Delia Noonan and a Black man from Maryland named James Jackson. Jimmy had been with her since the mid-sixties; Delia had been a servant in the house since the mid-seventies. Both would remain with her until she died in 1895 and would be remembered with bequests in her will.

It is likely that Mrs. Harrison was received by the ladies in the South Parlor Room on the second floor, as was Mrs. Carroll’s custom. Although elderly and often bedridden, Mrs. Carroll was known to receive her guests “standing up.”² This was a sign of her genteel Maryland upbringing.

The countess at the time was in great form. Letters from this period to her sister Alida Brown in Portland, Maine, are full of stories of her numerous engagements. She had been listed in *Titled Americans*, published in 1890, among “American Ladies who have married Foreigners of Rank.”³ In November of 1891, John Philip Sousa, commander and director of the US Marine Band, would perform a waltz written in her honor called “The Esterhazy Ripple.” The composer was a Washington-based Alice Hill, who also attended St. John’s Church on Lafayette Square where the Carrolls worshipped and must have admired the countess who was a parishioner.⁴ Sousa had scored the piano music for his band.⁵



Sally Countess Esterhazy as she may have looked at the time Mrs. Harrison came to lunch.

Image: Maine Historical Society, John Marshall Brown Papers.

Her sister Carrie was once again living at home, since her husband, Lt. Timothy Dix Bolles, had recently been posted to naval duty outside Washington after having been seconded for several years in the 1880s to the Smithsonian Institution as an expert in Asian and Alaskan artifacts. The lieutenant was her third husband after two marriages that ended in divorce. Both she and the countess would be described in an 1893 newspaper article as “belles of bygone days.”⁶

The countess and her mother must have taken Mrs. Harrison and the ten other ladies on a tour of the second-floor rooms of the house. They admired the portraits of Mrs. Carroll’s ancestors that hung on the wall – Col. Thomas Sprigg, the founding father of Sally’s father’s family, portraits of her father, Samuel Sprigg, former governor of Maryland, and her mother, Violetta Lansdale Sprigg, both done by Raphaele Peale; the portrait of her late husband, William T. Carroll, formerly the Clerk of the Supreme Court for 35 years, painted posthumously by Rufus Wright; of Howard Carroll, her beloved boy who had died at age five; and watercolor sketches by her son, General S. Sprigg Carroll, the Civil War hero.⁷ Sally Carroll’s mother had died in 1865, and her brother Osborn had predeceased her, so the furniture that had once been her mother’s was probably brought to 1801 F Street and were among the old-fashioned items that caught the attention of the luncheon guests, provoking memories of long-ago days. Mrs. Harrison, a history buff, must have been enthralled.

As they sat down to lunch, Mrs. Harrison may have admired the China that it was served in. This was an old pattern called “La France” decorated with roses.⁸ Mrs. Harrison was a great fancier of China and made a point of identifying and safekeeping the China of the White House.

She herself commissioned a new set of China decorated with a pattern of her own design. Mrs. Carroll would also have insisted that her good silverware be brought out, her silver knives and forks engraved with her initials S S C, as well as the silver sugar dish and creamer.⁹



La France rose salad plate. The pink color of the China may have led to the event being called “a pink lunch.”¹⁰

Who were the other guests? Accompanying Mrs. Harrison, as often was the case, was her only daughter, Mary Harrison McKee. When Mrs. Harrison fell ill later in 1891, Mrs. McKee became the acting First Lady.

Following the list published in the *Baltimore Sun* (shown above), Mrs. Field was Sue Swearingen Field, wife of Associate Justice Stephen Field and a great hostess herself. She and Sally Carroll were also mutual friends of the noted Newport personality and author, Mrs. William Lamont Wheeler, who stayed with both Sally and Sue whenever she came to Washington. Her last novel was set in Washington, *A Washington Symphony* (1893), and finished shortly before she died as a result of a carriage accident. It was dedicated to Sue Field.

Jane Stanford and Anna Cockrell were wives of members of the Senate. Mrs. Stanford's husband was the immensely wealthy Leland Stanford, who served as senator from California. A few years earlier, they had founded a university to honor their dead son. They entertained lavishly at their home on K Street.¹¹ Anna Cockrell's husband was a long-serving senator from Missouri who had served in the Confederate army during the Civil War.

Mrs. Hammond also had a Civil War connection. She was the second wife of Dr. William Hammond, a Civil War surgeon and later in life established a hospital in Washington for neurological diseases. He built a great pile on upper 13th Street called Belcourt.¹² Anna Smith Loring was the second wife of the politician from Massachusetts George Bailey Loring, who served in the House of Representatives for two terms before being named US ambassador to Portugal 1889-90.

Lily Macalester Laughton was second Regent of the Mount Vernon Ladies Association, after Miss Ann Cunningham. She was responsible for donating a number of important pieces of furniture that had originally belonged to the Washington estate. Her second husband had been a Belgian diplomat, and perhaps through this connection she was acquainted with the countess.¹³ But Mrs. Laughton may well have been aware that Mrs. Sally Carroll had been an “Assistant Lady Manager” in the District in 1860, soon after the Ladies' association of had been formed.¹⁴

Mrs. A. Leo Knott was Reina Kenan Knott, founder of the Maryland branch of the DAR. Her husband was also related to the Spriggs and was postmaster general under President Harrison.¹⁵

Finally, there was the popular Mrs. Horacio Guzman, wife of the Nicaraguan minister to Washington. She was born May Ewing in Philadelphia, and she and the countess must have easily related to each other as wives of foreign diplomats.

The ladies had numerous ties through their interest in history, their shared experiences during the Civil War, their connections to the various branches of government and issues of the day. The President's wife must have enjoyed the company of these distinguished and capable women, but by coming to the house, she also paid tribute to old Mrs. Carroll, not only for her notable ancestors, but also for her long history of entertaining in her storied house on F Street.

¹ *Evening Star*, February 26, 1891, p. 3.

² Mrs. Marian Gouverneur makes this comment: *As I Remember: Recollections of American Society During the Nineteenth Century* (New York, D. Appleton, 1911), 215.

³ Recently republished by Old House Books, UK, with a forward by Eric Homberger (2013): Countess Maximilian Esterhazy-Galantha, a princely house that had held the title in 1626.

⁴ *The National Tribune*, November 26, 1891, p. 6

⁵ His score is not located in the various depositories of his music.

⁶ *Evening Star*, August 16, 1893, p. 5.

⁷ These portraits are included in a list of portraits to be distributed to her heirs after she died: Maine Historical Society, John Marshall Brown Papers, Box 11 (Estates), folder 15 (Estate of Mrs. Sally Carroll).

⁸ As noted in the Baltimore *Sun's* report on the lunch, above.

⁹ These and other items were given to her children and grandchildren according to codicils attached to her will made in 1894.

¹⁰ This particular plate is found on the Replacements, Ltd. website, and may have resembled an old pattern that Sally may have used.

¹¹ The other "Mrs. Stanford" mentioned as among guests at the luncheon is not identifiable and may have been an error.

¹² <https://www.instagram.com/streetsofwashington/p/C2XaLRosdW5/>.

¹³ <https://www.mountvernon.org/preservation/mount-vernon-ladies-association/past-regents-of-mount-vernon/lily-lytle-macalester>. Her daughter married a Spanish nobleman, Jose de Pedrosa.

¹⁴ *Daily National Intelligencer*, May 25, 1860, p. 1.

¹⁵ <https://baltimore.marylanddar.org/history>.