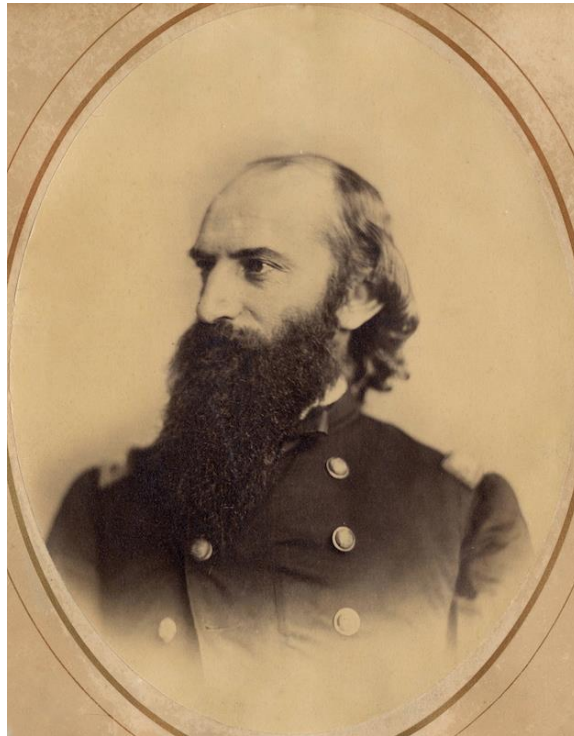


**Thomas B. Van Buren:
General, Diplomat, Winter Season Visitor 1882-1883**

Terence Walz

Thomas Brodhead Van Buren rented Mrs. Carroll's house at 1801 F Street for at least two months during the 1882-83 winter season when he was on home leave from his post as consul general at Kanagawa, Japan. Thirty years earlier, Commodore Matthew Perry had landed there in 1854 and forced the country's rulers to open its doors to trade. Van Buren, a relation of President Martin Van Buren,¹ had been a general in the Civil War and been appointed by President Grant as consul general to Japan in 1874. He came to Washington for consultations with the State Department and needed a place to stay.



Gen. Thomas B. Van Buren. Image: New York State Military Museum

He arrived in November with his wife, Harriet, and daughter, Edith, and took rooms at the Arlington Hotel, then the most fashionable in the city. He could afford it – his wife was Harriet Sheffield, the daughter of the cotton broker and railroad financier Joseph E. Sheffield, who endowed the Sheffield Scientific Institute at Yale University.² Her sister was married to William Walter Phelps, congressman and later ambassador to Germany and Austro-Hungary.³ It was probably through Mrs. J. F. Cake, who had a career running and managing hotels, that he heard of the availability of the house on F Street. Mrs. Cake had come to an agreement with Sally Carroll a few months before to rent out rooms in her house or even the whole house if it was wanted.⁴ Given its location so close to the newly constructed State, War and Navy

Department on 17th Street where he would have had debriefings and daily business, he was easily induced to stay at the Carroll mansion for the duration of his leave.⁵

The Van Burens probably moved into the house in December 1882. The papers listed “Mrs. Van Buren, wife of Gen. T. B. Van Buren, Consul General to Japan, and Miss Van Buren, 1801 F St, corner 18th” among those who would be receiving callers on December 31, 1882. “Mrs. W. T. Carroll,” as the widowed Sally Carroll was known, was receiving guests at rented quarters on G Street.⁶

Washington society quickly embraced the Van Burens. Their daughter, Edith, then twenty-four and a strikingly good-looking young woman, was particularly welcomed. Both Fannie Ricketts, wife of Gen. James Ricketts, and Sue Field, wife of Stephen Johnson Field, the associate justice of the Supreme Court, quickly invited the young woman to teas and receptions. Both were great society hostesses, and Mrs. Justice Field had been acquainted with the General and his family when both were living in California prior to Field’s appointment in Washington. At a tea given by Mrs. Ricketts on January 12, the *Evening Star* reported that Edith “wore a marvelously handsome reception dress, of heliotrope *crepe de chine*, the polonaise covered with hand embroidery of Japanese workmanship.”⁷ Edith and the general were among the many guests of the Beales when they threw a glittering reception at Decatur House on January 23, 1883, attended by former President and Mrs. Grant and a host of other Washington notables.⁸ They were invited to a reception at the Japanese embassy honoring the former president and Mrs. Grant on January 19, and then hosted a reception at 1801 F Street the following evening in an effort to return all the invitations they had received.⁹

Having lived in Japan for eight years with her parents and equipped with a well-designed wardrobe and a famous name, Edith Van Buren presented an engaging persona. Her success in Washington was a harbinger of things to come. By the end of the century, she had traveled



Edith Van Buren in traveling costume, ca 1898. Image: Wikipedia.

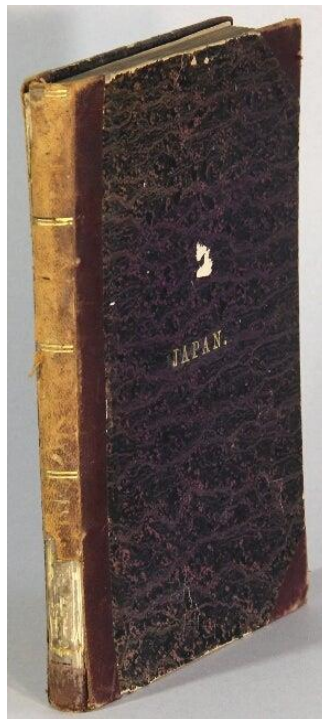
around the world, said to have been “showered with gifts and attention by King Leopold of the Belgians,”¹⁰ and set out with her friend Mary Hitchcock to trek into the Klondike. Their exploits

were written about by Mary in a book *Two Women in the Klondike* published in 1899. This is now considered a classic example of women's achievement and worthy of attention in a time more appreciative of women's place in history.¹¹

Edith did not stop there. She traveled often to Europe, and in Nice where her brother was consul, she met Gennaro Vessicchio, who claimed to be Count Gennaro di Castelmenardo, a titled Neapolitan, whom she married in 1900 and with whom she returned to live at her family home in Englewood, New Jersey with her mother. After her mother died and she received a substantial inheritance, she returned with the count to live in Italy, where she discovered he was not only a fraud and felon but also a philanderer. She divorced him in 1907 but negotiated with the real count's family to purchase the title for herself. Her efforts were newsworthy.¹² The Countess di Castelmenardo died in 1914.¹³

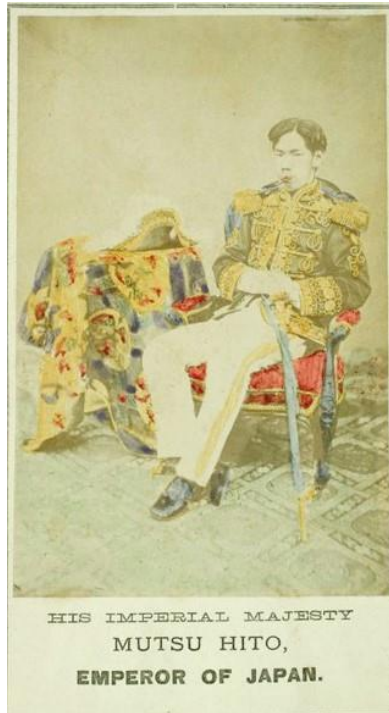
Thomas's eldest son was Harold Sheffield Van Buren had joined the diplomatic corps in 1893 and had served as a while in Japan as marshal of the consular court in Kanagawa and then appointed as American consul in Nice where he died in 1907.¹⁴ His son Charles Thorburn Van Buren died in Washington when he was 16 and is buried in Oak Hill Cemetery, and the family seems to have retained strong ties to Washington. His sister Edith often visited friends in the city. Van Buren's younger son became an importer of silks in New York City. It would seem the experience in Japan in the diplomatic corps had a profound impact on all members of Van Buren's family.

While Gen. Van Buren was in the States, and later after he returned to the States in retirement, he lectured widely on Japan.¹⁵ His report to the State Department of economic conditions in Japan in 1880 was published by the Department under the title *Labor and Porcelain in Japan* and two years later in Yokohama by the Japanese Gazette Office. It



A first edition of Labor and Porcelain in Japan.

contained some 59 pages on the economic and labor conditions of the country and was illustrated with nine colorized photographs of various workers. In a second section of ten pages with two



From the frontispiece of the first printing of *Labor and Porcelain in Japan* (1880)¹⁶

colored photographs, he discussed the manufacture of porcelain. The two frontispieces of the book displayed photographs of Emperor Mutsuhito and Empress Haruko. Photographs of the royal pair were uncommon and to have them included in this volume made the book somewhat unusual. The author's interest in the pottery of Japan followed the new history of western admiration for Japanese pottery. The Carrolls had a Japanese punch bowl among their possessions when an inventory of the property was made about the death of William Carroll in 1863. It may have been in the house when the Van Burens rented it in 1882.



A Satsuma vase in the possession of the author.¹⁷

The *San Francisco Chronicle* reviewed the book in its November 4, 1882 issue, remarking that “if an official is charged to a certain extent by law to collect information concerning the laws, revenue, labor system, products, etc. of the country to which he is accredited, is to be judged by his work, then General Van Buren has well earned in this respect no small need of congratulation.”¹⁸ The review went on to praise Van Buren for his observant eye that filled the book with useful and relevant information about labor conditions and practices, noting in particular how the silk industry has developed. It also noted at the end that his appendix on the pottery industry of the country would certainly “fortify” the fashionable collection of Japanese pottery.

The Van Burens seem to have departed from Washington sometime in late February. They proceeded west to California where they remained for another several months before returning to Japan.¹⁹ He remained at his post until 1885 and then to retire to Englewood.

¹ Second cousin, twice removed: <https://politicalgraveyard.com/death/asthma.html>.

² On him, <https://frankantru.com/familyhistory/josephearlshffield.html>.

³ At the time of the Van Buren's time in Washington, Phelps was between terms in Congress and tours as a diplomat. He had resigned as minister to the Austro-Hungarian empire in June 1881 following the death of President Garfield who appointed him to the position.

⁴ *Evening Star*, October 21, 1882, p. 8. At this time, she was also renting out rooms at the Fish House (formerly owned by Hamilton Fish) on McPherson Square.

⁵ The construction was not yet complete in 1875 when the State Department moved into its new quarters: <https://history.state.gov/departmenthistory/buildings/section27>.

⁶ *Evening Star*, December 30, 1882.

⁷ *Evening Star*, January 13, 1883.

⁸ *Daily Critic*, January 24, 1883.

⁹ *Evening Star*, January 20, 1883, p. 2.

¹⁰ *San Francisco Call*, July 14, 1900.

¹¹ It is being republished by the University of Alaska Press in 2025.

¹² *Evening Star*, November 7, 1907, p. 15. The Star's caption under her picture was "former Miss Edith Van Buren and well known in Washington."

¹³ Obituary: *New York Times*, May 5, 1914.

¹⁴ He is the grandfather of several diplomats, including Harlan Cleveland and Harold Van Buren Cleveland, also a banker.

¹⁵ He talked on "Japan and the Japanese" at Pioneer Hall in San Francisco in 1887: *San Francisco Bulletin*, April 28, 1887, p. 2.

¹⁶ These reproductions are taken from the edition of the book published online by SP Lohia Foundation: <https://splrarebooks.com/>.

¹⁷ From http://www.baxleystamps.com/litho/van_buren_1882.shtml.

¹⁸ *San Francisco Chronicle*, November 4, 1882, p. 3.

¹⁹ *Evening Star*, February 19, 1883, p. 2; *San Francisco Bulletin*, April 6, 1883, p. 2.