

## Deep Roots: Virginia Murray Bacon's Connections to DACOR and the Foreign Service

Elizabeth Warner, DACOR Archivist

“I shall be at 1718 H from this Wednesday evening,” the handwritten letter reads. It is from U.S. Ambassador Henry Prather Fletcher to Virginia Murray Bacon, and it is dated February 14, 1940. “Saturday evening could be devoted to you if you have no other swain,” it continues flirtatiously. “Awaiting your command.”



Virginia Bacon with one of her beloved “Westies,” at around age 30

1718 H Street, NW, Washington, D.C., was the home of “The Family”, an informal group of bachelors pursuing careers in politics, diplomacy and military service. They purchased the property in 1914 so they would have a place to gather and stay during their time in town. Over the years, members of The Family completed their careers and many of them joined DACOR, founded in 1950 for the purpose of supporting retired foreign service officers. 1718 H Street became DACOR’s official home in 1954 and remained so until 1985, when it moved to 1801 F Street, now known as the DACOR Bacon House.

Virginia Bacon, the subject of Ambassador Fletcher’s rapt attention 83 years ago, was the last private owner of 1801 F Street, and she donated it to what became the DACOR Bacon House Foundation because she wanted her home to continue to be “an informal meeting place where

statesmen and those who . . . devote their lives to civic service, can get together and exchange views on world problems.” As DACOR Archivist, I have been researching the life of Mrs. Bacon, and in addition to material we have at DACOR Bacon House, I have been examining the enormous collection of personal papers that she donated to Georgetown University upon her death in 1980. The letter from Ambassador Fletcher is just one of hundreds of letters in that collection, and they paint a portrait of a truly extraordinary woman whose relationship with DACOR, and the foreign service was deep, affectionate, and mutually beneficial.

Virginia was famous in her own right, in a way that reflected the limitations placed on women throughout much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. A *Life* Magazine article about women in politics from December 24, 1956 (36 years after women received the vote!) contains a photo of her; she is seated, along with two of her beloved “Westies” (West Highland terriers), behind an elaborate tea service. The caption above announces, “The Important Role of the Hostess” who provides “a social background for talking politics.” Virginia was known, of course, for being the wife and then widow of Congressman Robert Low Bacon, for her status as the grandest of *grandes dames* of Washington, D.C. society, and for her genius in getting together interesting people for great conversation. Lively debate, particularly on controversial issues, was Virginia Bacon’s lifeblood, and she was known to suggest topics of discussion for her dinner guests just in case they were insufficiently inspired. She was determined that her home continue to be a relevant forum to address the issues of the day, rather than being just another historic home open to casual visitors a few afternoons a week.

But Virginia Bacon was not just a celebrated society hostess. The people she met, the places she traveled to, the subjects she studied, the lectures she gave and the events she organized, all paint a portrait of a person with an unquenchable thirst for knowledge and experience, particularly as it related to the conduct of diplomacy and foreign affairs.

That Virginia chose DACOR to be the trusted steward of her wonderful House is no accident. She was well acquainted with The Family, as Amb. Fletcher’s rather saucy letter indicates. Two founding members of DACOR, Ambassador Robert Woods Bliss and Ambassador Joseph Grew, were personal friends of hers. Virginia appears on the DACOR record books as a member in the early 1950s, and she attended DACOR events throughout the 50s and 60s. A *Washington Post* article from 1958 lists her as co-chair of DACOR’s “Patroness Committee”, which organized speakers. Her appointment books include numerous references to DACOR-themed events.

It seems that Virginia knew just about everybody in the foreign service. Her archive bristles with engraved invitations to attend diplomatic events. Her longtime friendship with Winthrop Aldrich, U.S. Ambassador to the U.K., enabled her to attend a coronation ball in honor of newly-crowned Queen Elizabeth II in 1953. Wherever she went in the world, she would preface her arrivals with letters to U.S. Embassy officials, many of whom she knew on a first-name basis. Missives went back and forth from Beijing and Baghdad, from Bangkok and Bombay. Polite inquiries might be made about accommodations or road conditions or the proper

procedures at the border. Usually there would be a personal reference to a family member, and Virginia had many friendships with the wives of foreign service officers as well.

DACOR was just one manifestation of Virginia's interest in world affairs. She had always taken a keen interest in U.S. politics, and she recognized the threat that European fascism presented to the world in the 1930s. She was warning that the US would need to enter WWII long before Pearl Harbor, and she was honored by four countries for her fundraising and relief efforts. The War convinced her to champion the concepts embodied in the United Nations Charter, the international financial system, and organizations such as United States Information Agency and Radio Free Europe. She organized many lecture series on world affairs in the 1940s and 50s. And she continued to gather interesting people together in her home--visiting ambassadors and other dignitaries, politicians and artists and academics from around the world.



Virginia Bacon with President Uhro Kekkonen of Finland, October 17, 1961. The medals pinned to her dress represent honors she received from multiple countries for her relief work during WWII.

She also continued to travel multiple times a year, including such sojourns as a month-long tour of the Soviet Union in 1957, hiring a driver to take her through the Khyber Pass in 1953, touring Angkor Wat with her good friend Richard Nixon later that same year, and taking another road trip along the Dalmatian coast in Yugoslavia in 1958. She received special appointments to represent the United States in delegations to Ethiopia in 1955 and Nepal in 1956. She met several times with the Shah of Iran in 1949 during a tour of Persian antiquities led by a noted Harvard scholar. (She was nearly 30 years older than the Shah, and she took time to

write 20 pages of notes assessing his leadership skills and the state of the country.) This was not the first head of state Virginia had met face to face—Theodore Roosevelt’s daughter, Ethel, had been one of her classmates, and was used to receiving invitations from Presidents and other world leaders.

Virginia Bacon was brilliant, opinionated and fearless. She pretty much did what she wanted to do. And along the way she never lost her passion for gathering interesting people together in conversation. Had she been born a few decades later, she might have become an ambassador herself. She certainly had the talent for it. Her devotion to diplomacy and international affairs is a legacy that DACOR is proud to honor on her behalf.