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A HISTORY OF THE DEANERY

BRYN MAWR COLLEGE
A HISTORY OF THE DEANERY

by

Ruth Levy Merriam, '31

Published by

The Deanery Committee

and

The Deanery Management Committee

Bryn Mawr College

1965
I am deeply grateful to Helen Taft Manning, Millicent Carey McIntosh, Katherine E. McBride and Gertrude S. Ely for their suggestions and information; and to Lelia Woodruff Stokes for her interest and support. I am especially indebted to Catherine Dean Strohkarck for her editing and encouragement.

RUTH L. MERRIAM

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INTRODUCTION

In the fall of 1885, Bryn Mawr College inaugurated its first academic year. Thirty-six young women had passed rigorous entrance examinations to become the class of 1889. The campus then consisted of Taylor Hall, barely finished; a physics laboratory, now the Book Shop; a small gymnasium, on the same site as the present building; "Cartref," President Rhoads' house, now the Comptroller's office; Merion Hall, the first dormitory; an old farm house, now torn down; and situated almost in the center of the campus, three small Victorian houses, the Deanery, the Betweenery and the Greenery. The Greenery and the Betweenery, where the faculty lived, were moved to Wyndon Avenue in the early nineteen hundreds to serve as faculty apartments, just as they do today, as Yarrow East and West.

The Deanery, now the Alumnae House of Bryn Mawr, was originally a five-room frame structure with a flat roof and long windows looking out on a wide veranda. From this modest nucleus grew, almost like Topsy, the sprawling mansion of today, commemorating even now the unique personality of its creator and former mistress, M. Carey Thomas, first Dean and second President of the College. Now almost a legend, she was one of the most celebrated women of her era. Even as an inquisitive, self-willed child, she was determined to break through the then almost impenetrable masculine wall of learning. Thinking harder, working harder, she emerged into the 20th Century as a consummate, forceful feminist, who saw the fruition of her dream of higher education for women.

Miss Thomas was born in Baltimore in 1857 of Quaker parents, Dr. James Carey Thomas and Mary Whitall Thomas. Her secondary education was mainly in Quaker schools; thence she went to Cornell University where she graduated with honors in 1877. Post-graduate schools, practically non-existent in America, did not accept women. By special dispensation, Johns Hopkins enrolled her as a student, but excluded her from attending classes. Even when she was allowed to attend a lecture, she was made to sit behind a curtain. She was dissatisfied with the course of study afforded her there, however special, and longed for the opportunity to study in a German university, the goal of every scholarly American young man at that time.

Arrangements were made for her to go to Germany, but Dr. Thomas, impelled by the shocked disapproval of his friends, forbade her going. Her mother, ever understanding, advised, "There is nothing for it, thee must cry
thyself to Germany.” Miss Thomas related in later years, “I cried all day and my mother cried all night.” Her father succumbed, and Carey Thomas, then twenty-two, embarked in 1879 with her friend, Mamie Gwinn, for the University of Leipzig. Despite her excellent scholarship during her three years of study, there too, her sex excluded her from sitting for a degree. Characteristically, she turned to and was accepted at the University of Zurich in the early summer of 1882. In November of the same year, M. Carey Thomas became a Doctor of Philosophy, SUMMA CUM LAUDE, an honor never before granted to a woman. Ten months later, after further travel and attending lectures at the Sorbonne, she returned to America. In 1885, she became the first Dean of the newly opened Bryn Mawr.

From then on Miss Thomas became a pioneer and leader in women’s education. As Dean under President Rhoads, she established the first graduate school for women as well as the first program of graduate fellowships. With the first graduating class, she inaugurated the Bryn Mawr European Fellowship; and in 1893 she, with Miss Garrett, was instrumental in opening the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine to women. Her concern for social betterment resulted in the establishing in 1915 of the first Graduate School of Social Economy and Social Research, and in 1922 in the founding of the first summer school for women workers in industry. She was a leader, too, in movements to gain women political and economic equality, and influenced many generations of Bryn Mawr students to work for the causes she held dear.

THE REMODELING OF THE DEANERY

M. Carey Thomas, a young woman of twenty-nine, moved in 1885 into the five-room house which was to be her home for almost five decades. With her was Mamie Gwinn, her friend and companion from boarding school and Germany, who later became an instructor in English. Almost immediately, it was evident that the Deanery must be expanded to take care of books and records and the influx of students and visitors. In 1888, two small rooms were added to the rear of the house. In 1894, Walter Cope, the college architect drew plans for further enlargement. The original living room (the Blue Room) became Miss Thomas’ study. The room across the hall which was probably the dining room became Mamie Gwinn’s “small study.” The house was reoriented away from the veranda with a new entrance facing the campus. One entered a corridor with reception rooms on the right; a dining room was
built with a wing to the northwest to accommodate an adequate pantry and kitchen; a library and bedrooms were built on the second floor, and a third floor was added with guest rooms and servants' quarters. The remodeled frame house was encased with wooden shingles as one sees it today.

For proper furniture and fittings, Lockwood de Forest was consulted. An artist, he was a man who had traveled widely, had been affiliated with Louis Comfort Tiffany, and was imbued, as was Miss Thomas, with the Pre-Raphaelite ideal. It was he who planned the “blue study”, and his “decorative genius” was to permeate the Deanery.

In 1894 Miss Thomas became President of the College. In 1904, her friend, Mamie Gwinn, from whom she had drawn so much of her intellectual inspiration, left Bryn Mawr and was later married. Her life-long friend, Mary Elizabeth Garrett, heiress of a Baltimore railway magnate, came to live with her. Miss Garrett, ever a patroness of Bryn Mawr, felt that the Deanery should be further expanded on a lavish scale to fit the needs of its eminent President and the fast-growing college. Walter Cope, its former architect, had died in 1902 so Lockwood de Forest was called as a consultant. The plans were drawn by Archer and Allen, a Philadelphia architectural firm.

As one enters today, to the right of the corridor are the rooms built in 1896, now the cloak room, Faculty Dining Room and Dining Alcove. To the left were added in 1908 a room for a secretary, where the receptionist sits today; Miss Thomas' office, now the New Dining Room; a hall, now The Lounge; and the Dorothy Vernon Room copied from Haddon Hall in England. The north-west wing off the dining room was extended for further kitchen facilities and storage. On the second floor, Mamie Gwinn's small bedroom became Miss Garrett's huge room. Elaborate baths were built; and on the third floor further storage space and servants' quarters. An extensive garden was planned by John C. Olmsted. Mr. de Forest, Miss Thomas and Miss Garrett were responsible for the amenities of the garden.

The renovation of the building took an intolerably long time, and the cost was twice as much as estimated. However, when the forty-six rooms were completed, it fulfilled the President's ambition. Here was an elegant residence to which the most important guests could be invited; here were entertained such personages as Henry James, Eleonora Duse, Bertrand Russell, Anna Howard Shaw, William Butler Yeats, as well as other literary and political figures. No one who was present will ever forget the relish with which Miss Thomas presided over these events, nor the delight with which she led the "general conversation." The students, too, shared the stimulating atmosphere and hospitality of the Deanery, at Senior receptions, and at other important college occasions for which the house provided a glamorous background as it does today.
FRONT VIEW OF THE ORIGINAL DEANERY, 1885.

MAMIE GWINN'S "SMALL STUDY," 1896.
View of the northwest wing of the Deanery, 1896.

The Corridor between the Blue Room and Mamie Gwin's Study, 1896.
The Veranda, 1896.

Side view of the Deanery, 1896.
THE DEANERY'S TREASURES

With the completion of the new Deanery, Miss Thomas and Miss Garrett became avid collectors. They traveled widely and bought enthusiastically. The ensuing treasures today reflect not only the tastes of the period but also the flavor of an era that is now history. Indeed, with the renascence of "Art Nouveau," the Deanery's precious possessions may well represent the realization of André Malraux' *musée imaginaire*, a "museum without walls."

THO

As one enters the vestibule, the floor tiles imprinted with MAS are noteworthy. They were made by the Moravian Pottery and Tile Works, Doylestown, Pennsylvania. According to an old company catalogue, "The method of making the tiles is a development of ancient processes brought to America by German colonists in the 18th Century." The works and a museum connected with it are still in existence.

As one steps inside the door, a glance at the ceiling with its original stencil design and Tiffany lights presages the decoration of the house in the
Pre-Raphaelite style which culminated in the so-called “Art Nouveau.” The chest to the right of the door illustrates the same exotic spirit. Elaborately carved and inlaid with mother-of-pearl, it was copied from an old chest from Damascus. The recently acquired limestone owl opposite the door was carved in 1963 by Charles Wallis when he was an art student.

Farther down the hall, over another Damascan chest are five oil sketches of the Grand Canyon, painted *in situ* by none other than our ubiquitous Lockwood de Forest. There is not too much information about this provocative man other than brief notes in *WHO WAS WHO* and old art annuals. Born in 1850, educated in New York and abroad, he studied art in Rome and traveled widely in Egypt, Syria, Greece and India. In 1879, he became affiliated with Tiffany in a company called Louis C. Tiffany, Associated Artists, an association which was to continue until 1883 when the company was disbanded.

In the meantime he had set up workshops at Ahmedabad, India, for the revival of wood carving and hand stenciling. This, of course, exemplified the Pre-Raphaelite credo, rebelling against the “Machine Age” and Victorian materialism and embracing an ideal of “back to nature” and the unmechanized way of life as expounded by Ruskin. His hand-carved furniture and hand-cut stencils were exhibited at the First Annual Indian Exhibition at
THE BLUE ROOM, 1896.

THE BLUE ROOM, 1896.
Lahore, in 1882; the principal pieces were purchased by the Indian Museum, South Kensington, which later became known as the Victoria and Albert. He won medals for “best carving” in exhibitions in London, Chicago and St. Louis. It would seem likely, then, that many of the Tiffany designs for walls, furniture and tiles were brought by de Forest from Ahmedabad and Damascus.

On either side of the Damascan chest with the de Forest paintings above are 19th Century Italian carved side chairs elaborately inlaid with ivory.

As one enters the Lounge, immediately to the left is an Italian secretary bookcase. Queen Anne style, it is handsomely inlaid with ivory, metal and colored woods. Interspersed through the Lounge, and unmistakable in style, is a series of Russian bronze statue groups, (one is on the chest under the de Forest paintings). Dating about 1870 to 1874, and signed by E. Nahoepe, they were no doubt collected by Miss Thomas and Miss Garrett. Miss Thomas and Miss Gwinn visited Russia in 1890, but since neither one had money beyond the exigencies of travel, the bronzes were probably purchased later in London or Paris.

From the Lounge and down the corridor, to the right, is the Blue Room which has been carefully preserved in all its fin du siècle elegance. Formerly President Thomas' study, this room with its “old blue” walls, hand-stenciled ceiling, fire-place and furniture has been compared to the famous Peacock Room by Whistler in the Freer Gallery of Art in Washington, D. C. They are considered the two best examples of Pre-Raphaelite interiors in the United States.

Hanging on the walls are contemporaneous etchings by James A. McNeill Whistler, all of which are signed with a stylized butterfly derived from his name; he was famous not only for his paintings, but also for being one of the great influences in the revival of etching in the late 19th Century. Equally valuable are the graphics of Charles Meryon, an important figure in French etching of the 19th Century. Precluded from painting by color-blindness, melancholy, poverty stricken, demented in later life, no other artist has depicted the streets and churches of Paris with such brilliance. Meryon said of “Le Stryge” (to the left of the porch window), “The monster is mine, and that of the men who built this tower of St. Jacques. He means stupidity, cruelty, lust, hypocrisy; they have all met in that beast.”

The portrait over the fireplace was painted in recent years by Frank Bensing from a photograph of Miss Thomas as a young girl.

One of the Deanery’s most fortunate and valuable possessions is the collection of Tiffany glass, the best pieces of which are displayed in this room. Louis Comfort Tiffany, like his friend and one-time partner, Lockwood de Forest,
The Dorothy Vernon Room, 1908.

The Dorothy Vernon Room, 1965.
began his career as an artist, first as a student of George Inness, later an exponent of "Art Nouveau" and the American "Ash Can" school. In the 1876 Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia, fascinated by the ornamental objects from all over the world, he turned his attention to the decorative and applied arts. The subtle variations of glass as a material led him to study its chemistry and to experiment, first with windows, then inevitably with blown vases and bowls. His earliest pieces, many of which are in our collection, were marked "Favrile," derived from an old English word fabrile, meaning handmade. His inspiration was stimulated by the exotic shapes of the Orient and the brilliant colors of Roman glass, which was a result of the iridescence of the vase surface from centuries of burial in the ground.

Because of the superb quality of his glass, he was widely imitated here and in Europe; no one, however, achieved his delicacy of form or the rainbow-like nuances of color. As the recognized authority in his field, he was commissioned to execute windows designed by Bonnard, Vuillard and Toulouse-Lautrec. Early in his career he became a designer of interiors with such clients as J. Taylor Johnston, president of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Hamilton Fish and Mark Twain. One wonders whether he personally supervised the decoration of the Deanery with Lockwood de Forest, since most of our lighting fixtures and lamps came from the Tiffany studios, not only here in the Blue Room, but also throughout the house.

The porch directly behind the Blue Room, once a part of the veranda of the original house, was open and, therefore, not very usable during the college year. In 1959, it was enclosed to meet the growing need for a party dining room and a private place for the faculty at coffee hour. The idea of an extra dining room had long been a dream of Miss Adelaide Neall, who from 1945 until her death in 1957, was the mainstay of the Deanery Committee. It seemed appropriate, then, to use funds collected in her memory for this purpose and to name the new room the "Adelaide Neall Porch."

Looking through the porch windows, we are surrounded by the "green garden." In a letter written by Miss Thomas to an alumna, "John S. Olmsted planned it [the garden] as Miss Garrett and I wanted it. Lockwood de Forest, a decorative genius, designed the fountains." She adds that she and Miss Garrett found the little bronze figures around the fountains in Naples and had them copied. It is of some interest that John Olmsted was the nephew and stepson of Frederick Law Olmsted who had died in 1902. The latter was the leading landscape gardener of his time, designer of Central Park in New York, Fairmount Park in Philadelphia, and it was he who made the original landscape plans for Bryn Mawr's campus.

LOCKWOOD DE FOREST'S APARTMENT NEW YORK, 1885, SHOWING INDIAN FURNITURE SIMILAR TO THE PIECES IN THE DOROTHY VERNON ROOM.
The Dining Room, 1896, before the Lounge was added.

The Dining Room, 1896.

THE GARDEN, 1908.
Miss Thomas' Bedroom, 1896.

The two tone dogs of Foo on the main stone steps came from a Mandarin's palace in Manchuria. The two crouching lions and the two phoenix on the smaller steps were bought by Miss Thomas from a Byzantine cathedral on an island near Venice. The Palm tiles, symbolic of immortality, set in the walls over the fountains were from saints' tombs in Syria and were bought in Bagdad. The bronze cherubs around the two basins are copies of figures from Herculaneum now in the Naples Museum. The wall fountain on the right was copied from one in Assisi; its water spout, a stylized head, was copied from a 14th Century piece in the Germanische Museum in Nuremberg. The garden, designed in 1907, when the Deanery was being enlarged, was planned to preserve two trees, a cherry tree which unfortunately had to be cut down and a unique Balkan pine which still dominates the area.

Across the hall from the Blue Room is the Dorothy Vernon room. This was copied from the dining room of Haddon Hall in Derbyshire, England, which had been a romantic Mecca of Miss Thomas during her student days in Germany. The tiled floor came from the same Moravian Pottery and Tile Works as those noted in the vestibule. This company was founded by Dr. Henry Chapman Mercer. An anthropologist of national distinction, he became interested in the manufacture of pottery after examining the 18th
Century artifacts of Pennsylvania German settlers. In 1899, he set up his kilns in Doylestown, Pennsylvania, where he developed the Moravian processes of making and decorating pottery and tiles. Subsequently, he discovered a new way of manufacturing tiles for mural decoration and for mosaics. The existing Mercer Museum in Doylestown was built and endowed by Dr. Mercer for his collection of utensils and implements illustrating the industrial history of Colonial United States. Mercer tiles may be found in the corridors of the college library, dating about 1907 just before the final rebuilding of the Deanery.

Another unmistakable de Forest touch is the brass filigree panels between the beams in the ceiling which were probably cut from stencils in Ahmedabad, as well as the exotic swing-settee, the two sets of furniture in the alcoves and the occasional chairs interspersed throughout the room, all brought by him from India.

The set of furniture to the left of the fireplace is decorated with perforated brass plaques and painted stencil designs. The pieces in the right alcove are interesting for the amazingly intricate filigree carving and figures of elephants in relief. All the furniture is as carefully finished on the back as on the front.

The outstanding pieces of furniture in the room, however, are the pair of
tables on either side of the fireplace. Magnificent examples of the English Regency style, they are of rosewood, inlaid with brass and date about 1805. Unusual, too, are the old Korean chest and the floor lamp with a Rookwood pottery base in the far corner of the room.

The antique Kurdistan carpet in the center of the room, the antique Shiraz rug of museum quality in the far end, carved and inlaid tables from Damascus, tabourets of teakwood from Japan as well as teakwood tables from China blend happily with English and American furniture, and infuse the Dorothy Vernon Room with the rich elegance of American Victorian romanticism.

The decorative bronzes on the sills and tables are copies of Greek and Roman statues and works of Michaelangelo. The figure on the table in the center of the room is the "Pan of Rohallion," signed and dated, Paris, 1890 by Frederick MacMonnies, a student of St. Gaudens. His best known pieces are in New York City, three life-size figures of angels in the Church of St. Paul and a statue of Nathan Hale in the City Hall Park.

The Old Dining Room which was the original dining room is now filled with small tables; the carved, high-backed chairs, however, were Miss Thomas' own. The Dining Alcove and the Faculty Dining Room were
reception rooms on the architect’s plans. However, in the inventory list, dated 1917, they are called the “Book Room” and “Book Room Annex.”

If one is sufficiently imbued with the history of the Deanery and the peregrinations of Miss Thomas, the second floor is worth a visit. The lounge at the top of the stairs is extensively used for minor committee meetings and “elevenses.” (Since Miss Thomas imported the title of Dean from England and was ever an Anglophile, she would love this nomenclature for the “coffee-hour.”) The large room to the left was the Library and is now the Alumnae Office. To the right was Miss Thomas’ bedroom, her original room in the five-room house, and also Miss Garrett’s bedroom which was built in 1908.

Miss Thomas’ room is substantially the same as in 1885 except for the strips of Indian carving on the fireplace, an obvious de Forest touch; and in 1957 the end of the room was remodeled to provide a private bath. The brass bed with its filigree designs of birds and flowers could very well have come from Ahmedabad.

Miss Garrett’s room across the hall is virtually unchanged. The fireplace is of Mercer tile and was illustrated in the old Moravian Pottery and Tile Works catalogue. The 18th Century satinwood Adam secretary was probably
brought by her from Baltimore. One would think that the cherry wardrobe and dressing cabinet were especially made for this room, but their origin is unknown. The beds, of course, are Indian and are similar to Miss Thomas’.

In 1957 the gigantic Garrett bathroom was divided into two baths and Miss Thomas’ equally enormous bathroom just beyond was made into a double bedroom, thus adding an extra room to the Deanery.

Perforce, many changes have had to be made through the years to make a workable Alumnae House and Inn. Dark Victorian walls were brightened to create a more cheerful atmosphere, and, in some cases, furniture has had to be replaced. Despite the minor changes, however, the Deanery Committees have felt a deep and sentimental obligation to preserve and maintain its heritage.

In 1922, Miss Thomas retired at the age of sixty-five. The trustees of the College gave her life tenancy in the house which she and Miss Garrett had so enthusiastically filled with treasures. Ten years later, after a conference with the trustees, the Deanery and most of its contents were turned over to the Alumnae Association as a Center and an Inn. Committees were formed to preserve the flavor and the atmosphere created by Miss Thomas, Miss Garrett and Mr. de Forest. Thus, Bryn Mawr, today, is fortunate and unique in having an Alumnae Center not only overflowing with elegance and tradition, but also a living, useful memorial to the indomitable woman who contributed so much toward the greatness of Bryn Mawr College.