

Scenes from the Past

Washington, DC had thousands of practicing architects throughout its history, most of whom had storied and successful careers that have since gone unnoticed by current residents and family members alike. One such individual was Robert Isaac Fleming, who specialized in designing homes for the area's rich and famous.

Colonel Robert Fleming was born in Goochland County, Virginia on January 15, 1842 to a prominent family that was recorded as being early settlers of the United States. He received his early education from private tutors. At age 19, Fleming was called into service for the Civil War, enlisting on April 25, 1861 in the Richmond Fayette Artillery.

According to his biographical entry in *Washington Past and Present*, Fleming "was worthy . . . proved by the fact that he participated in thirty battles, rising through the grades of corporal, sergeant, and sergeant-major to the lieutenantancy, which he received in June 3, 1864, on the battle field of Cold Harbor, in recognition of distinguished bravery. Lee's surrender brought his service to an end, and his return to Richmond brought the young soldier his parole, April 18, 1865."

Thus began Fleming's architectural career, as he was soon after appointed assistant city engineer. He moved to Washington in 1867 to pursue the then vocation of designing buildings, in which he flourished.

He designed many of the new buildings at Howard University in 1885; the British Embassy; National Safe



photo—Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.

Shown here is the mansion built at 1400 New Hampshire Avenue, NW for Mrs. Phoebe Apperson Hearst, designed by Fleming in 1883.

Deposit and Trust Company's building at 15th Street and New York Avenue, NW; a mansion for Secretary of the Navy George M. Robeson at 16th and O Streets, NW; a residence for Senator Pendleton of Ohio at 1313 16th Street, NW; All Souls' Church at 14th and L Streets, NW; and many distinguished residences across the city, including his own at 1406 Massachusetts Avenue, NW, also pictured here.

Also in 1885, Fleming obtained a building permit for another large house for Curtis Hillyer located at the corner of 18th and Massachusetts Avenue, NW which cost \$16,000 to construct. Fleming was also a real estate agent for former Vice-President Levi P. Morton, and was said to have spent more than \$1 million annually at the peak of his career in building operations in Washington.

At the time that Fleming obtained building permits for the homes located at 1512-22 P Street in 1885, he indicated that his office was located in the Kellogg Building at 1418-20 F Street, NW. It was a twin building built by the Willard family, and for which he provided the designs prior to its construction in 1884.

And in 1887, he provided the plans for U.S. Navy Commander Henry N. Manney's house at 1629 16th Street, NW. By 1893, the success of Fleming's business was measured by his purchase of "Red Tops," President Grover Cleveland's former, large summer home in what is now known as Cleveland Park.

Soon after he moved to the city, Fleming was elected in 1872 a member of the District Legislature under

the territorial form of government then prevailing. Two years earlier, in 1870, he had joined the District National Guard as paymaster, advancing afterward through election to the rank of Colonel, when he became the senior officer commanding the First Brigade, National Guard, District of Columbia.

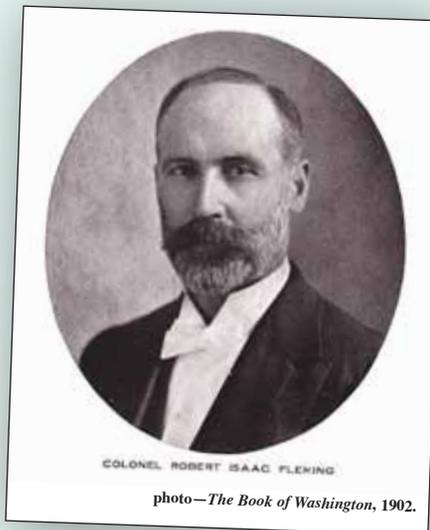
Appropriately, he supported the "lost cause of the Confederates" according to his bibliographical entry, contributing the amount necessary to build a third story on the Confederate's Soldiers Home at Richmond, which bears his name.

Robert Fleming married Bell Vedder, the daughter of General Sherman's chief paymaster Colonel Nicholas Vedder, in Washington on October 27, 1886. They had two children, including Robert Vedder Fleming, who eventually became President of Riggs National Bank.

Robert Fleming died in 1906. A biographical entry contained the following illustrious postscript: "One of the famous men of Washington and of the South, was the late Colonel Robert Isaac Fleming, Confederate veteran and noted architect. His was a vital part in the upbringing of the present beautiful city. Many of its noblest residences and public buildings were the outgrowth of his genius and understanding. He was a many-sided man, busy with a thousand projects for the development, first of his section, later of his city and country. His philanthropy was part of every worthwhile charitable endeavor, his influence widespread for wholesome progress along all lines."

—Paul Kelsey Williams
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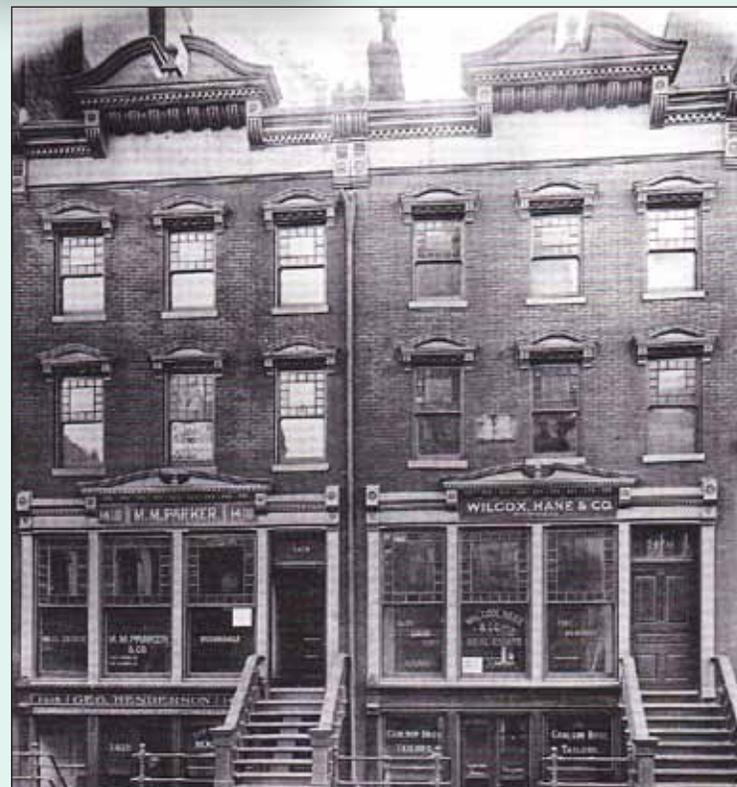


COLONEL ROBERT ISAAC FLEMING
photo—*The Book of Washington*, 1902.



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Col. Robert Fleming's residence at 1406 Massachusetts Avenue, NW.



photo—Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.

The Kellogg Building, a double set of commercial buildings located at 1418-20 F Street, NW, designed by in 1884.