

# Scenes from the Past...



photo—courtesy, Washington Division, MLK Library

The Wylie mansion at 10 Thomas Circle was built about 1843, and stood on the circle for more than 100 years, until 1947.

The structures located at 10 Thomas Circle have had a long and varied past, from a regal dwelling believed to have first been built in 1843, to the large and streamlined International Inn, built in 1962 with an innovative pool enclosure, designed by controversial modernist architect Morris Lapidus.

Interestingly, while the mansion that occupied the site from 1843 to 1947 was elaborate, it was neither unique for the era nor a rare example of its style when demolished in 1947. However, the International Inn that replaced the dwelling, while not pleasing to every eye, has its own, more contemporary history that may be far more innovative and unique to the architectural historian. It often takes decades to develop an appreciation of architectural styles, and critics of today's designs often need to be reminded that the Victorians thought little of Greek Revival architecture, and routinely adapted and upgraded it to fit their more fanciful taste. All styles are subjected to this cycle, as periods of art nouveau, art deco, streamline, and even 1950s modern all went through periods where they are lucky to exist at all today.

In any event, the first house that is known to exist at 10 Thomas Circle was one built for Charles L. Coltman (1800-1862), an early brick-maker and builder in Washington.



photo—courtesy, Washington Division, MLK Library

The Wylie mansion suffered a devastating fire in April of 1947 that eventually led to its demolition.

It was believed to have been erected in 1843. However, the house was long known as the Wylie house when a later owner named Judge Andrew Wylie occupied it during a time when he presided over a sensational trial surrounding the Lincoln assassination conspirators. It sat prominently on the northeast section of the circle until a fire on April 20, 1947 destroyed a significant portion of the structure, and it was torn down a short time later.

In 1962, the International Inn chain hired architect Morris Lapidus to design a modern hotel at the site. It marked the beginning of the transition of Thomas Circle

from residential to commercial. Lapidus was a highly successful designer of a new form of hotel structures, albeit one that was panned by architectural critics for more than 40 years of his career. Born in Russia in 1902, Lapidus began his design career by revolutionizing retail store design from the previous tendency of large display windows and small signs to his concept of letting the stores' name become one with the building. His examples include the Florsheim shoe storefronts, where the "F" extends from the second floor to the sidewalk, and shoppers literally wander around the remaining letters to browse their way right into the entrance of the store.

Lapidus' big break came in 1954, when he was given *carte blanc* to design a hotel in north Miami Beach which was to be named the Fontainebleu. He chose to design it for the user, and not the critic, which would cost him dearly in the following 40 years of reviews of his work. However, the



photo—courtesy, CNN.com

Architect Morris Lapidus, designer of the International Inn.

user prevailed, and his hotel designs were highly sought after. Following the opening of the Fontainebleu, he became known as the architect of the "grand stairway to nowhere" for his elaborate, wide staircase overlooking the lobby and restaurant that simply led to rest rooms and a coat check room on the second floor. Women arriving in coats or headed to the "Ladies' Lounge" could then descend the staircase in their most recent fashions in an egotistical show for all those in the hotel lobby to gasp and admire. Needless to say, the staircase was very popular with users.

Lapidus designed the famed Eden Roc Hotel in Miami Beach in 1956, and the Lincoln Road Mall four years later, today a hot spot in trendy South Beach. He is responsible for more than 1,200 buildings during his long career.

The International Inn commission for 10 Thomas Circle came a short time later, in



photo—courtesy, Smithsonian Institution

Built on the site of the Wylie mansion, the newly completed International Inn was a popular modern hotel when pictured in the early 1970s.

1962, and was designed in a similar manner. It was originally painted with light and dark colors highlighting the bands of long balconies. At the center and facing the circle, the pool area was defined by a highly innovative feature for Washington's varied climate: a large, glass dome covering the pool which could retract to the open sky depending on the season. It was an instant landmark, and a hit with hotel patrons, as they could use the pool year round, and have the benefit of sunning outdoors or swimming on cold winter nights under a moonlit sky.



photo—courtesy, Washington Division, MLK Library

Young workers are seen here in October of 1962 assembling the retractable dome that once covered the swimming pool at the International Inn.

Lapidus also included one of his features in the International Inn that he himself created on a business trip during his storefront facade design days. Dreading the inevitable walk carrying luggage down endless corridors to the room at the end, he



The swimming pool dome existed as late as 1981, when this picture of Thomas Circle was captured, but has since been removed.

found that when one was faced with a curved hallway, they could only see a few doors at a time, and have no idea of how long the journey to the room would last; instead it became a bit of an amusement. With that easy design, Lapidus changed a frustrated traveler into one of complacency, pleasing most of all, of course, the hotel owners and management.

The International Inn retained the pool enclosure until well after 1981, and it was likely removed a short time later due to maintenance issues.

After a long and distinguished career, despite 40 years of criticism that almost led him to quit the profession, Lapidus died at age 98 in January of 2001. Before his death, however, Lapidus enjoyed a tremendous interest in his designs, often participating in their renovation and rejuvenation in hot spots such as South Beach in Miami. The hotel at 10 Thomas Circle is known today as the Washington Plaza.

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photo—courtesy, Washington Plaza Hotel (web site)

Today, with its new paint job and refurbished pool area, the International Inn on Thomas Circle is known as the Washington Plaza Hotel.