

Scenes from the Past



Built in 1893, today's official Vice President's residence was designed by architect Leon Emil Dessez as the residence for the Superintendent of the Naval Observatory.

While most of the focus of the 2009 Presidential inaugural will be aimed towards the White House, another white house in Washington will also witness a significant change in occupants; the official residence of the Vice President of the United States. Countless commuters travel by its location on Observatory Circle, noted by the curving of Massachusetts Avenue as it approaches Wisconsin Avenue, NW, without the fanfare awarded to 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. The white brick

Vice Presidential house was completed in 1893.

The current VP residence stands on what was a working farm in the country when it was purchased by Cornelius and Margaret Barber from Brooke Mackall in 1834. The modest brick house and barn were named North View, a foreshadowing of the eventual owner and use of the property by the US Naval Observatory. About 1851, the Barbers replaced their farmhouse with a grand Italianate villa, just before the death of Cornelius in 1853. At the time, the estate included 73 acres, 15 enslaved persons, and 20 men in residence working the fields.

Barber received compensation for her slaves in 1862, unlike the majority of her neighbors, when President Lincoln signed an act for paid emancipation for District residents a full nine months before the Emancipation Proclamation was signed into law nationwide. Margaret Barber sold the farm to the federal government in 1881, and later died of influenza, in 1892.

The lands sat vacant for some time, as plans were debated and additional lands acquired for the relocation of the US Naval Observatory from its prior location at 23rd and E Streets, NW. Founded in 1830 as the Depot of Charts and Instruments, the Naval Observatory is one of the oldest scientific agencies in the country. As a service organization, one of its first tasks was the calibration of ship chronometers, which was accomplished by timing

the transit of stars across the meridian. Scientists dropped a ball at predetermined times from a pole on the roof of the observatory at 24th and E Streets, NW, which would be visible to crews on boats then at the port of Georgetown.

Construction on most of the buildings of the new Observatory began in 1888, designed by noted architect Richard Morris Hunt. In 1893, the U. S. Naval Observatory moved to its present home on Massachusetts Avenue, and for the first time the Observatory had ample grounds to set up instruments far from the reach of city



Shown here at left is Margaret Barber, who, beginning in 1834 along with her husband Cornelius, operated a working farm on the land today occupied by Observatory Circle and the Vice Presidents residence.



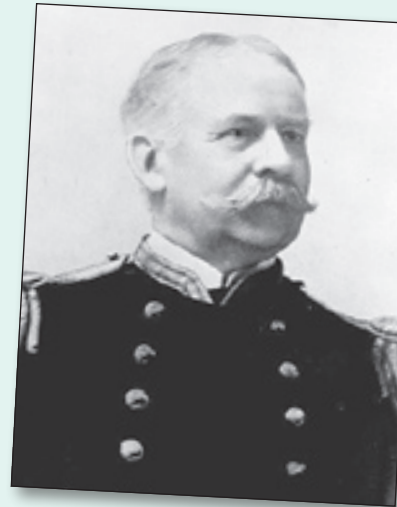
The Barber's wealth increased as land became more valuable in the mid-19th century, and about 1850 they built a lavish Italianate-style mansion on the highest part of the grounds. It is pictured here about 1890 behind what was to be known as the Clock House, then under construction.

lights, smog, and vibrations from roadways.

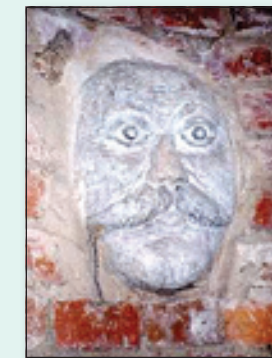
Several houses and duplexes were built on the grounds for personnel, along with a large house for its Superintendent, Frederick V. McNair, who served from 1890 to 1894. It was designed by Leon Emil Dessez (1858-1918).

The brick house was built at a cost of about \$20,000. In 1928, it became the official home for the Chief of Naval Operations (CNO). It remained a natural brick color until it was painted white in 1961. In 1974, the house was designated the official residence of the Vice President of the United States, who up until that point, was responsible for renting or buying their own residence in the capital (Gerald R. and Betty Ford were its first occupants).

Architect Dessez was born in 1858 in Washington, DC, the son of French-born Jean Baptiste Leon Dessez and German-born mother named Minna. Young Dessez began an apprenticeship in architecture in the office of Hornblower & Poindexter in 1877, at the age of 19. He worked as an architectural assistant on the Washington monument completion and on various jobs at the Navy Yard. He opened his own firm in 1886 and the following year, Dessez was one of



The first Superintendent to reside on Observatory Circle was Frederick V. McNair.



This facial likeness, discovered on the inside of the old 12-inch refractor pier at the west end of the main building of the Naval Observatory, is presumed to be that of Superintendent McNair, who oversaw the relocation and construction of the Observatory.

several architects to found the Washington chapter of the American Institute of Architects (AIA).

He married Dessie Semmes and they resided for most of their lives at 3815 Jennifer Street, NW; her married name of Dessie Dessez no doubt confused or amused many a stranger. Dessez served as the director and chief architect for the Chevy Chase Land Company when it was established in 1893 and would continue to serve in that capacity until his death on December 25, 1918.

Frederick Valette McNair (1839-1900) was Superintendent of the Observatory from June 28, 1890 to November 21, 1894. He had been born on January 13, 1839 in Abington, Pennsylvania, and was appointed a midshipman in 1853. He served on the Atlantic blockade stations and Mississippi River patrols during the Civil War, and eventually obtained the rank of Rear Admiral. His great-grandson, Frederick V. McNair IV, is a former professional tennis player who reached the World No. 1 doubles ranking in 1976.

The U.S. Naval Observatory today performs an essential scientific role for the United States, the Navy, and the Department of Defense. Its mission includes determining the positions and motions of the Earth, Sun, Moon, planets, stars and other celestial objects, providing astronomical data; determining precise time; measuring the Earth's rotation; and maintaining the Master Clock for the United States. This astronomical and timing data, essential for accurate navigation and the support of communications on Earth and in Space, is vital to the Navy and Department of Defense, and makes everyday GPS technology possible.

Tours of the Naval Observatory and a demonstration of the Master Clock are available on alternating Monday nights, by reservation only, although they may be cancelled at any time with little notice. Visitors can expect tight security and tours are often



The front parlor and dining room of the then new Superintendent's house are seen here about the time of its completion in 1893.



booked months in advance, but an online request can be made at www.usno.navy.mil.

—Paul Kelsey Williams
Historic Preservation Specialist
Kelsey & Associates, Washington, DC

Copyright (c) 2009 InTowner Publishing Corp. & Paul Kelsey Williams. All rights reserved. Reproduction in whole or in part without permission is prohibited, except as provided by 17 U.S.C. §§107 & 108 ("fair use").

all photos—courtesy, U.S. Naval Observatory Library.

In 1974, the former Superintendent's house was designated as the official residence of the Vice President of the United States when this photo, at left, was taken. The brick house had remained unpainted until 1961.



George Henry Peters (1863-1947) shown at the 12-inch telescope around 1920. This telescope is still used on public tours of the Observatory.

