

Scenes from the Past...



Nearly 5,000 people gathered to watch the spectacular fire which destroyed the mansion in November of 1949.

photo—Washingtoniana Division, Martin Luther King, Jr. Library

The spectacular blaze that engulfed what was an estate coined "Clifton" on the evening of November 5, 1949 could be seen as far away as Alexandria. It was once located amidst Embassy Row, in the 3000 block of Whitehaven Street, with its surrounding six acres overlooking Rock Creek Park, not far from the Naval Observatory.

The mansion had been built in 1880 by Col. James Elverson, the publisher of the *Philadelphia Enquirer*. Its second owner, Mrs. Truxton Beale, had kept the mansion vacant from the mid-1920s until the fire broke out, apparently as a result of children playing in the house earlier that day. It was thereafter called the "Ghost Mansion" by many neighborhood children after its decayed condition following decades of abandonment.

Throughout the night of November 5th, flames leaped more than 100 feet in the air as the five-alarm fire was battled for more than nine hours. In all, over 34 pieces of fire equipment were put into action to fight the blaze.

Its builder, British-born James Elverson, had come to this country as a young man to work in his uncle's shoe business in Newark, New Jersey, began to study the great invention of the day, the telegraph,

and headed to Washington to be employed as a telegraph operator. During the Civil War, he managed the American Telegraph Company office here, where he got to know not only such political figures as Lincoln and Stanton but most of the war correspondents, including several from Philadelphia.

After the war, Elverson headed to Philadelphia and bought a small newspaper, the *Philadelphia Call*. Out of that purchase grew two profitable mass-circulation weeklies: *Golden Days* for boys and girls, one of the most popular publications of its kind ever circulated in the United States, and *Saturday Night*, a fiction publication for the adults. He was eventually able to purchase the *Philadelphia Inquirer* in 1889, and maintained Clifton as one of many residences owed in both cities. It was sold in the 1920s.

At the time of the fire, Clifton was owned by Washington socialite Mrs. Marie Truxton Beale, who then was residing at Decatur House on Lafayette Square, which had been purchased and restored by her father-in-law Edward Fitzgerald Beale (1822-93), and was eventually passed along to her husband, Truxton Beale (1856-1936),



photo—Washingtoniana Division, Martin Luther King, Jr. Library

Only the exterior walls remained following the fire that totally destroyed the interior.

Cont., SCENES, p. 13

RESERVATIONS RECOMMENDED

By Alexandra Greeley*

PERRY'S Redux

Word around has it that Perry's has streamlined and altered its main menu, one that now changes frequently, according to market availability and freshness, says the waiter earnestly. With all that a change—and market freshness—promise, Perry's new list of offerings seems too bare of kitchen finesse to warrant a return trip.

True, I last dined at Perry's rooftop several years ago, quite satisfied with its menu that held Asian and Southwestern promise and with a meal that came in abundant portions, but not abundant prices.

Frankly, then was better than now, and I should have simply stuck to the sushi menu recently, which also apparently gets a regular facelift. If so, too bad.

Either way, my next Perry's meal will be comprised of a sushi medley, and among them, if it still exists, will be the Perry's Roll, a rice-wrapped conglomeration of seared tuna, backfin crab, avocado, flying fish roe, and a spicy sauce—all served artfully in attractive arrangement on pretty pottery.

From there, I'd move on to the Dragon Roll with eel, surimi crab, cucumber and avocado—which if this runs true to Dragon form, will be ample enough for two.

Then to top it all off, how about chirashi sushi—fresh fish atop vinegared rice—or the sushi platter.

If it seems odd to come to a blatantly Western restaurant to order sushi, it is; yet the Asian chefs behind the counter seem equal to their fishy job, and I'm glad for it.

As for the Western menu, let's take a look: Appetizers included a miso soup (more Japanese influence), chilled zucchini soup, a summer vegetable roll with red lentils, and duck prosciutto, none of which made more impact than the sushi appetizer. The entrée selections, which rely much on fish choices, included a vegetarian sampler (eggplant, shiitake and quinoa), rockfish with beets, king salmon with cucumber, roasted chicken with potatoes, red snapper, and a filet of beef with grape

tomatoes.

Although each meat comes with a vegetable garnish, you can also order more abundant sides such as mixed greens, butter beans and corn salad, leek salad with mustard, lemon Portobello mushrooms, and basil mashed potatoes. The last would have paired nicely with my roast chicken, better than the roasted potatoes that formed the chicken's bed and evidently had a parchment wrapper in the oven: a strip of parchment paper came with the potatoes.

In a city where roasted chicken is a standard menu item, Perry's version set no record for tenderness, succulence, or flavor. The chirashi sushi would have been a better bet.

Desserts also didn't present any must-have sweets: all priced at \$7, the recent offerings included ice cream, a summer pudding (no explanation), a pistachio torte, chocolate cake with raspberries, and melon with lemon sorbet—not ground-breaking treats.

Seated facing the bar may not offer patrons a rooftop view of the city—classy alfresco dining on its rooftop is one of Perry's greatest selling points, that and its Sunday drag brunch—but it will amuse people who can try to figure out the logic of combining what appear to be religious icons and Santos and a plastic globe with liquor bottles. □

Perry's, 1811 Columbia Rd., NW; tel., 234-6218. Price range: \$14-\$19; sushi entrées, \$12-\$22. Hours: Dinners only, Sun.-Thu., 5:30-10:15pm & to 11:15pm, Fri. & Sat; Brunch, Sun., 10:30am-2:30pm. Rooftop seating, first-come, first-served.

*Alexandra Greeley is a food writer, editor and restaurant reviewer. She has authored books published by Simon & Schuster, Doubleday, and Macmillan. Other credits include food editor of *Vegetarian Times*, restaurant reviews and food articles for *The Washington Post* and *The Washington Times*, as well as former food editor/writer for the *South China Morning Post* in Hong Kong.

SCENES

From p. 12

whom she had wed in 1903. They moved into Decatur House in 1912, and it was known as the site for lavish social gatherings for decades to come.

Marie (Oge) Beale was the second wife of Truxton Beale, his first being Harriett Blaine, the daughter of James G. Blaine, an unsuccessful candidate for president. After their divorce, Truxton returned to San Francisco and began a law practice. He eventually met a very attractive young woman from San Rafael, Marie Oge. She was only 23 years old, half his age, and their courtship led first to scandal and then to a long, successful marriage.

The marriage of Marie and Truxton Beale in April 1903 took place not in San Rafael or San Francisco, but in New York City, apparently to avoid what the newspaper called "notoriety due to the shooting last year in San Francisco." A magazine editor in San Francisco had been shot by Beale for defaming his mistress Marie. The *San Francisco Chronicle* reported as follows:

"The wedding took place so far away from the bride's home to avoid notoriety owing to the unpleasant incident attending

Beale's courtship. Last September Beale sought out and shot Frederick Merriott, proprietor of the *Overland Monthly* and the *San Francisco News Letter* for the alleged libel upon Miss Oge."

The story of the shooting was covered in minute detail on the front page of the *Chronicle* and for successive weeks in the local papers. They moved to Washington shortly thereafter.

The Beales had purchased Clifton from James Elverson, Jr. in the 1920s. At the time, they feared that the government might institute an eminent domain proceeding for the purchase of Decatur House, as the entire row of 19th century row houses was being considered as the site for a future Executive Office building, and if that was the case, they could relocate to Clifton and its six acres of lavish grounds. It was left vacant for over 20 years before the fire broke out in 1949. Its remains were razed a few weeks after the blaze.

In 1953, Beale gifted the Decatur House to the National Trust for Historic Preservation, an entity she helped organize; the Trust continues to operate it as an interpretive house museum to this day.

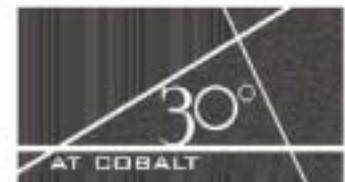
—Paul Kelsey Williams
Historic Preservation Specialist
Kelsey & Associates, Washington, DC

**TWO 4 ONE
MARTINI
DESTINATION**

**MONDAY - FRIDAY
5PM - 8PM**

**HAPPY
HOUR**

AN ENTIRELY DIFFERENT WAY TO CHILL



**17TH & R, NW
THIRTYDEGREES.COM**