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**Cosmos Club Legacies:
The Land and Townsend Decorative Arts**

by Laurence J. Aurbach

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Cosmos Club Legacies: The Land and Townsend Decorative Arts

by Laurence J. Aurbach ('86)

The Cosmos Club's physical environment includes the Club's buildings, land, and gardens, the interior design of its elegant rooms, and historic decorative arts, which embellish the property. This paper, prepared for the History Committee, documents the acquisition of the Club's land and early 20th century decorative arts, which are now over a hundred years old.

THE TOWNSEND HOUSE AND LAND

The Club's prominent physical legacy is the Townsend House at 2121 Massachusetts Avenue, which the Club purchased from the heirs of Mary Scott Townsend in 1950. Figure 1 is a topographic survey of the property. Just prior to the turn of the 20th century, the house originally built in 1873 by Judge Curtis J. Hillyer was extensively expanded by Mary Scott Townsend (daughter of a 19th-century railroad and industrial magnate from Erie, Pennsylvania) and her husband Richard. The couple engaged the architectural firm of Carrère and Hastings to create their new home. This partnership, which operated out of New York City from 1885 until 1911, was known as one of the outstanding firms in the United States for Beaux-Arts architecture. The New York City Public Library, Whitehall (the now-restored Flagler home in Palm Beach), and The Mall of Cleveland, Ohio, are several of its many commissions. The firm of Allard and Sons was chosen to design the interiors of the newly enlarged mansion. This Parisian firm had opened a branch in New York in 1885 and was noted for creating high-style French interiors for the elite of the new world. Allard and Sons provided architectural fittings, sculptures, furniture, carpets, curtains, and hangings for its various clients.

Much of what we know about the expansion of the mansion and the architectural and decorative details comes from documentation by Denys Peter Myers (CC1977-2003). His 1990 historic structures report was prepared for the Club and the Cosmos Club Historic Preservation Foundation. The Club has made a number of additions and changes to the Townsend House to adapt its reuse for the Cosmos Club.

Although Mary Townsend and her daughter Mathilde Townsend Welles had made the house a prominent part of the D.C. social scene, the property was not actively occupied by the family after the early 1930s.

A careful review of the current use of the land shows that no trees from the Townsend era survive. The ornamental fence from the Townsend era still surrounds the property.

THE NORTHERN TERRITORIES

Parking was a problem from the outset, so the Club looked to expand to its north. Figure

2 shows the property and its neighbors in 1957 before the acquisition of lands for expansion by the Club. Hillyer Court access from Florida Avenue was along the north side of the stable, now the Powell Room. Between 1959 and 1985, the Club purchased properties north of the Powell Room in three phases primarily for the purpose of parking. From 1959 to 1962 the Club acquired 2168 Florida Avenue, 5 Hillyer Court, 2156 Florida Avenue, a small triangle-shaped property with no street frontage, and 2162 Florida Avenue; in 1971 the Gray House at 2158 Florida Avenue; in 1985 the Hillyer House, 2164 Florida Avenue

After intensive analysis about how to deal with the newly acquired areas, the Club reconfigured the Florida Avenue access. Hillyer Court and the parking were changed in the late 1980s so the access via the alley to the Club was at the north end of the land rather than next to the Powell Room.

Hillyer House is historic, having been built in 1910, as is the Gray House, built in 1919. Both are listed as contributing structures in the Dupont Circle Historic District. Hillyer House was restored in the late 1990s, a process led by President Janet Norwood ('88). The Hillyer and Gray houses have been used for offices, overnight rooms, and residential suites.

Offers from outside the Club to acquire additional land or construct underground parking on our property were not accepted.

THE TOWNSEND DECORATIVE ARTS

When the Club purchased the Townsend land, a number of pieces of decorative arts from the Townsend era came with the property. These items, for the most part now well over one hundred years old, are in locations selected by the Club over the past sixty years. They are a legacy of the Townsend era to the Club today. Paul F. Miller ('07), Curator of the Preservation Society of Newport County and protector of the fabulous Newport "cottages," recently surveyed the Club's decorative sculptural holdings dating from the Townsend period. He explained, "The Townsends, Carrère and Hastings, and Allard and Sons left no records of the acquisition of these items, so we have no information about how, when, or why they were purchased. They could have been sold by a number of firms, bought through an agent including the architect, or purchased by the Townsends during European travels. In addition to antiquities dealers like Bardini in Florence, there were dealers in Venice, including the Venice Art Company and Guido Minerbi & Company, who were glad to make something up when originals were not available. Such Italian-made sculpture was also retailed in New York by Olivotti & Company, a well positioned venue for obtaining wellheads, a particularly popular form of Venetian architectural salvage."

THE LIBRARY FIREPLACE

The Club's Library is installed in the room the Townsends used for the same purpose. Figure 3 shows the room and the fireplace as they appeared in 1915. Later the Townsends purchased and installed the current cast plaster fireplace (Figure 4), which is modeled on the Gilded Fireplace in Blois Chateau, Loire Valley, France (Figure 5).

To learn more about the two fireplaces and obtain a better photograph of the one in Blois, Sylvain Bellenger, then Curator of Blois Chateau, was invited to visit the Club in 1999 to inspect

the Club's fireplace. On viewing the fireplace in the Club's Library, Bellenger registered amazement, "Zut alors, you have mirrored fire-breathing salamanders!" Following a brief moment of stunned silence, Bellenger explained that the Blois fireplace design is centered by two bas relief carved panels that celebrate the marriage of Francis I of France (1494-1547) to Queen Claude of Brittany and the incorporation of her territory into France in the early 16th century. In the Blois design Francis I is represented by a fire-breathing salamander and his bride by an ermine. Bellenger explained that any depictions of the French monarchy were destroyed in the French Revolution. The Gilded Fireplace at Blois was created in the 1840s by French architect Jacques Felix Duban (1797-1870) and is his fantasy rather than an original Renaissance piece.

So, what the Townsends installed is not an exact copy of the Duban design in Blois. There is no record of why the Townsends replaced the original fireplace or who created the new cast plaster fireplace. This piece of the Townsend Legacy to the Club, installed between 1915 and 1930, is a late 19th or early 20th century interpretation of Duban's mid-19th century fantasy in Blois of what a Renaissance design might have been. Why the Townsends made the switch is a mystery we may never untangle.

Although his visit gave us this mystery, Sylvain Bellenger did provide a clear photograph of the Blois Gilded Fireplace. The photograph hangs beside what had been thought to be a copy of the Blois fireplace in the Townsend mansion's library.

THE PEASLEE PROJECT

Considerable study preceded the Club's decision to acquire the Townsend House and grounds. Architect Horace W. Peaslee (CC 1926-1959), best known for designing the Meridian Hill Park in northwest D.C., had been a key player in these studies. According to Wilcomb E. Washburn's (CC 1965-1997) account in his *The Cosmos Club of Washington* (1978), once the purchase was made much work was needed before the Townsend House was suitable for the Club's purposes. Peaslee was hired to lead this conversion. Figure 6 is the architectural plan as he envisioned the renovation in 1952. The stables, now the Powell Room, were extended to the east by the addition of the Annex. This plus the new Garden Dining Room connected the former stables to the mansion. With the two new constructions, an east and a west car park were defined. The west lot, now the Garden Parking Lot, remains as Peaslee designed it, but the area of the east parking lot was taken over when the addition that is now the ground floor Garden Bar, the second floor Creutz Room, and the third floor meeting rooms was built in the early 1960s.

Peaslee's plan included the West Garden patio, a Garden Walk (the allee) paralleling Massachusetts Avenue, a pond in the West Garden, and a walkway from the terrace on the west side of the Townsend House to the Garden Walk. Plantings are shown in several places around the Clubhouse.

For athletic facilities a shuffleboard and horseshoe pit were to be built in the East Garden. Neither survives.

Peaslee in the redesigned interior of the Clubhouse used some of the exterior architectural features from the Townsends.

Several of Frances Benjamin Johnston's photographs of the Townsend House and grounds hang near the rear entrance to the Club. In one of the circa 1908 photographs eight ornate columns appear in a line outside the stables (Figure 7). Paul Miller notes, "The

Romanesque style columns probably once intended as supports of a garden pergola, are in cast stone-cement and would date to the late 19th or early 20th century. They are based on columns once set in an ecclesiastical setting with a motif, in low relief, of the tree of life and birds feeding from grapes symbolizing the Eucharist. The period prototypes of these columns would have been used as part of a chancel screen or the surround of a small ciborium. Identical cast columns, paired with a wellhead, were installed in the late 1880s by Catharine Lorillard Wolfe on the grounds of her Newport estate ‘Vinland’ (Peabody & Stearns, architects), now part of Salve Regina University; the columns were removed and are now in the collection of Mrs. Harle Tinney at Belcourt Castle, Newport, Rhode Island, and for sale in 2012.”

By 1950 the Townsend columns were in a circle in the area (Figure 8) designated for the Club’s primary dining room. Peaslee incorporated four of these columns in his dining room design. They are still visible to diners as the skeleton of the exterior of the Garden Dining Room (Figures 9 and 10). The four other columns have been relocated to the East Garden (Figure 11).

Peaslee also moved a wall fountain (Figure 12) from the exterior wall of the stables to the new dining room – now the Heroy Room. According to Paul Miller, this fountain “is typical of a variety of 19th-century assemblages made up by Stefano Bardini in Florence; generally using Renaissance architectural fragments; here it comprises an anthemion-crowned round arch overdoor pediment with brecciated marble for the interior of the arch and the surround carved with fluting; it is supported by a pair of Corinthian pilasters with verde antique marble inset panels and carved rosettes surrounding a Medusa mask water spout set amidst four specimen marble roundels over an eagle support marble basin. A related wall fountain was supplied by Bardini to Stanford White in 1898 for \$850.00 and, after polishing and reassembly, installed at the Frederick W. Vanderbilt house at Hyde Park, New York. Other similar wall fountains were located in the residence of Stanford White (1898), second floor lobby, 121 East 21st Street, New York; in the summer cottage of Theresa Fair Oelrichs, ‘Rosecliff,’ Newport, Rhode Island (1902), for the rose garden; in the conservatory of the J.L. Breese house, ‘The Orchard’ (1900) Southampton, New York; and in the palm room of the Wm. Salomon house (1903), 1020 Fifth Avenue, New York.”

As the Club moved into its new quarters, it brought along a living tie to the Old Clubhouse on Lafayette Square. Club members had arranged to transplant a portion of the massive wisteria vine to the area and patio outside the Warne Ballroom. It is the oldest inhabitant of the Cosmos Club and its land.

After planning the Townsend House renovation, Peaslee founded the Garden Committee and served as its first chairman. Under his direction, the Committee acquired some of the iron grillwork from the Old Clubhouse and installed it on the veranda off the Warne Ballroom. This grillwork became the trellis for the transplanted wisteria. Another major accomplishment of Peaslee’s tenure on the Garden Committee, which lasted through the 1950s, was the plantings of the azaleas in the front gardens. A statue of Daphne graced the center of the pond in the West Garden. Unhappily, Daphne was stolen. An historic anachronism was that the 1950s Garden Committee was planning for adjustments in the Club property to accommodate the “inner loop” of the proposed D.C. freeway system along Q Street, which happily never happened.

STATUARY IN THE GARDENS

Little useful documentation exists about how the lands and gardens were used during the

three decades of the Townsends. It seems clear, however, that when the Club took over the grounds were not being used as they had been. A number of architectural elements and garden ornaments dating from the Townsends came with the Club's acquisition of the property.

The Townsend Legacy can be seen in a number of garden ornaments still in use. Paul Miller has described some of these as follows: "The circular wellhead in the allee which parallels Massachusetts Avenue (Figure 13) is of Venetian Istrian stone (14th-16th century Italian); it shows surface wear from use and exposure and numerous 19th-century repairs; the rim has remnants of the iron rods formerly supporting a wrought-iron overthrow; given the tendency of these iron rods to expand, continued exposure to freezes and water provokes corrosion and expansion of the iron leading to its exploding through the stone internally; the existing horizontal crack should be in-filled with a colored mortar to match, the surface should be lightly cleaned, and a fiberglass liner might be made for seasonal plantings to avoid further internal water-damage; placed indoors, the wellhead could, in the main hall or dining room, be planted with a tall vertical arrangement, as in the vintage photos of the Townsend era entrance hall showing a wellhead planted with a palm in that space."

"The square white marble wellhead in the garden (Figure 14), is, I think, a 19th century piece inspired by North Italian wellheads of the Renaissance period and was probably designed for use as a planter. Medieval and Renaissance wellheads, particularly of Venetian origin, were greatly admired in the 19th century, illustrated in a number of well-circulated monographs and acquired, reproduced, and exported by dealers in considerable numbers."

"In the West Garden, the white marble recumbent lions on the Warne Ballroom terrace (Figure 15) are copies of the sleeping lions by V. Bonanni, a 19th century Italian sculptor, that adorn the Lion Terrace of the Vorontsov Palace at Alupka in the Crimea; it is rumored that Bonanni did some sculptural work for the Capitol in D.C., but I do not find him recorded there."

The griffons seen in Figure 13 located in the allee near the circular wellhead are also from the Townsend garden. The lovely stone bench (Figure 16) from the era is in a prominent place at the south end of the East Garden.

THE TACCA FOUNTAIN

The most prominent feature in the East Garden is the Tacca Fountain. Figure 17 shows the original fountain in Florence; the photo with an article from the *Bulletin* is in the Garden Bar next to the door to the East Garden. According to Paul Miller, "The wonderful bronze fountain was copied from a pair in the Piazza della Santissima Annuziata in Florence by Pietro Tacca, dated 1629 and executed with the collaboration of his students Bernardino Radi and Francesco Maria Bandini; the Townsend version was probably the work of the Chiurazzi Foundry, Naples, (est. 1870) which particularly at the turn of the century produced copies of museum works and civic monuments throughout Italy. Beaux-Arts residences of the Gilded Age, although heavily French-inspired, were frequently surrounded by 'classical' gardens which were in essence Italianate; thus the Italian references of the Townsend garden sculpture program, spanning the early medieval or Romanesque to the Baroque, constitute in spirit, an amazingly intact urban example of its age."

In 1902 Fredrick L. Olmsted, Jr. (CC 1917-1957) proposed a landscaping plan for the Townsends. His projects in D.C. included the National Mall, the Jefferson Memorial, and the White House grounds. A 1902 Olmsted photograph (Figure 18) shows the fountain used as a

flower container near the house. At the time the Club acquired the property in 1950, the Tacca Fountain was located fairly close to the Florida Avenue side of what is now the West Garden (Figure 1). In 1952 the Club moved the fountain, stripped down and without its wings, to the East Garden (Figure 19). In 1992 the fountain was restored with funds provided by the Cosmos Club Historic Preservation Foundation. Then the Club's copy of the Tacca Fountain operated on the property as a fountain (Figure 20), however, with different supports for the wings than the original and without a garland around the middle.

An Italian ambassador remarked that the fountain is far better sited in the Club's East Garden than the pair in Florence. The originals are nearly lost in the large Renaissance piazza north of the center of Florence and the Academia, location of Michelangelo's "David."

THE COSMOS CLUB HISTORIC PRESERVATION FOUNDATION

The Foundation was established in 1985 as a 501(c)(3) organization qualified to accept tax deductible contributions and provide funds for historic preservation and restoration of the Club. The Foundation was authorized, with the approval of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, to make grants for the visible exterior historic elements and the structure of the Townsend House. Restoration work funded by the Foundation included the ornamental fence surrounding the Townsend land, the Tacca Fountain, the house systems upgrade which included electrical and sprinkling systems, and a number of structural elements of the Townsend House to prolong the life of the structure. In 2009 the Foundation was further authorized to fund work on historic interiors of the Townsend House. The restoration of the Warne Ballroom was funded mainly by the Foundation. As of mid-2012 the Foundation had provided grants of more than \$5 million for the Townsend House and historic exterior elements on the land.

LIST OF FIGURES

High-resolution versions of all images are available to Club members via the Club's website. The format of the high-resolution images permits readers to enlarge them for better viewing of details.

1. 2121 Massachusetts Avenue in 1950
2. 1957 map of properties north of the Club
3. Library fireplace 1915 (Frances Benjamin Johnston)
4. Current fireplace (Richard Shanklin '89)
5. Gilded fireplace, Blois Chateau, Loire Valley, France
6. Peaslee plan 1952
7. Columns next to stable 1915 (Johnston)
8. Columns in 1950
9. Columns in Garden Dining Room (Shanklin)
10. Detail of column in Garden Dining Room (Shanklin)
11. Columns in East Garden (Shanklin)
12. Wall fountain on stable 1915 (Johnston)
13. Griffons and circular wellhead in West Garden allée (Shanklin)

14. Square wellhead in West Garden allee (Shanklin)
15. Lions on ballroom terrace (Shanklin)
16. Stone bench East Garden (Shanklin)
17. Tacca Fountain in Florence, Italy (Johnston)
18. Club's Tacca Fountain with flowers, about 1902 (Fredrick Olmsted)
19. Tacca Fountain in East Garden 1952
20. Restored fountain in East Garden 1992

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Club members, an associate, and one of my talented sons have made irreplaceable contributions to this paper.

The Text

Paul Miller '07 provided extensive input on the background of the decorative arts. Thanks to Judy Holoviak '99, cousin Nona Shepard '07, Laurence J. (L.J.) Aurbach, Jr., and Andrea Schoenfeld for careful reading and editing, as well as substantive contributions to the content and scope of the work.

The Supporting Figures

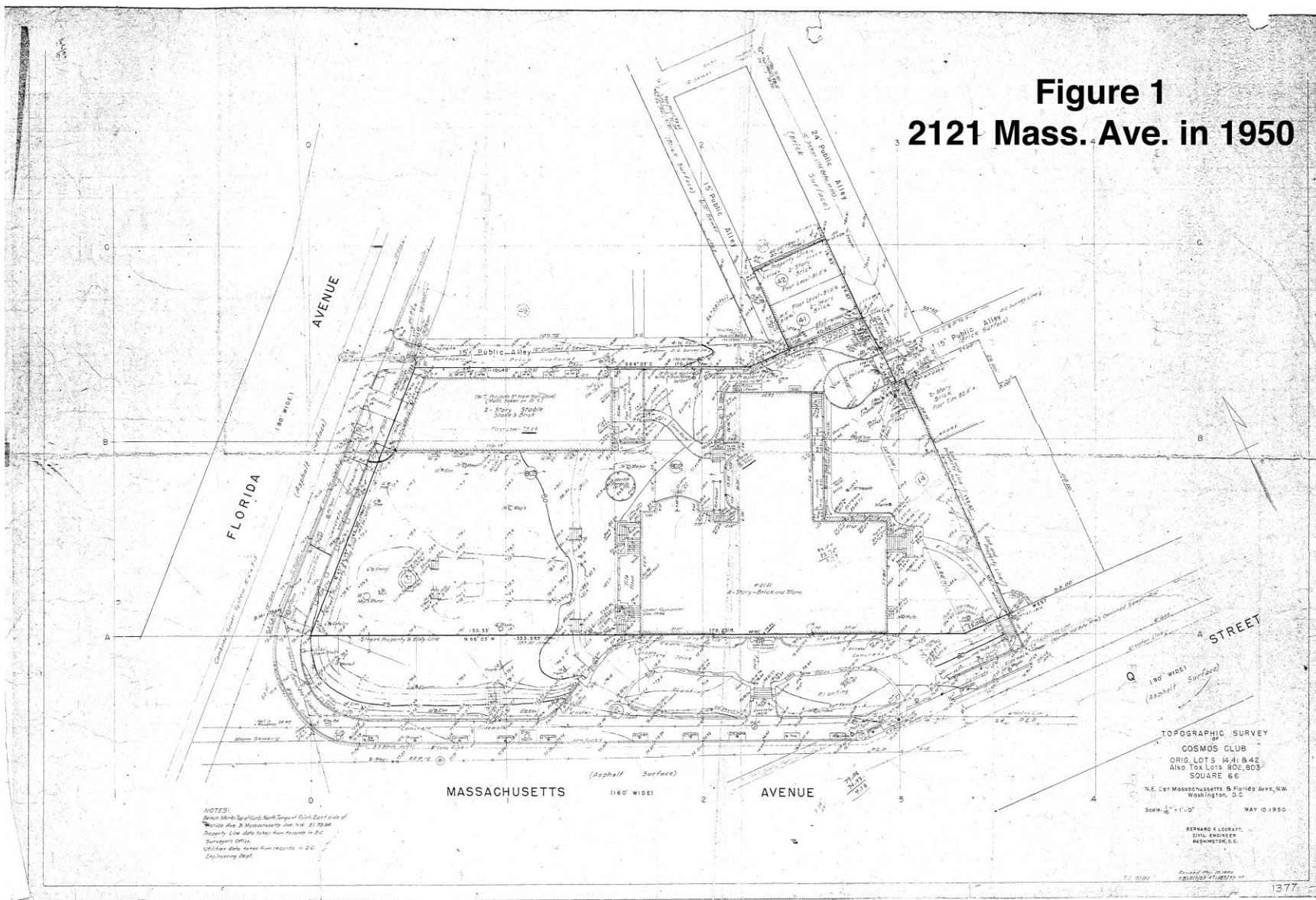
Richard Shanklin '89 photographed the subjects of the paper to document their current state at the Club. Fellow Cosmotographer Don Gerson '99 transformed photographs, architectural plans, and assessor's maps into captioned publishable formats.

Support from the Club

John Graham '01, Chair of the History Committee, supported and sponsored the work and provided encouragement throughout the process. Ian McDonald '81 as Board Liaison and Club Secretary provided guidance through the Club publication process.

My heartfelt "thank you" to those who made publication of the paper possible.

Figure 1
2121 Mass. Ave. in 1950



NOTES:
 1. North Arrow is of True North Tapered Rod, East side of
 Florida Ave. & Massachusetts Ave. N. 21. 20. 50
 Property Line data taken from records - D.C.
 Surveyors Office
 Official date taken from records - D.C.
 Engineering Dept.

TOPOGRAPHIC SURVEY
 COSMOS CLUB
 ORIG. LOTS H.41 & 42
 Also Tax Lots 802, 803
 SQUARE 66
 N.E. Cor. Massachusetts & Florida Aves., N.W.
 Washington, D.C.
 Scale 1/8" = 1'-0"
 MAY 10, 1950
 BERNARD E. LOCKART,
 CIVIL ENGINEER
 WASHINGTON, D.C.

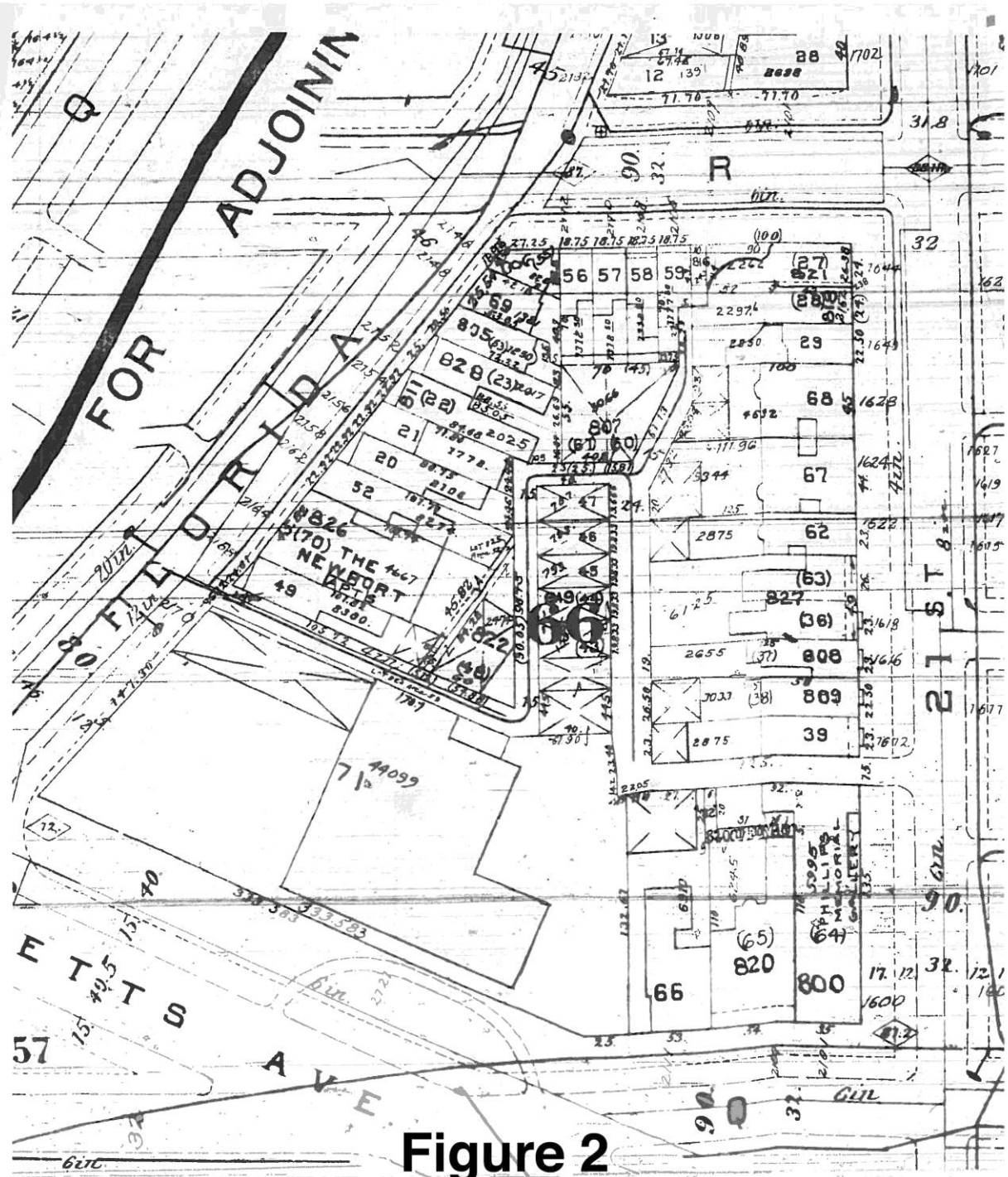


Figure 2
1957 Map of Properties
North of the Club



View of the library of the Townsend Mansion prior to the alteration of the mantel over the fireplace. Photo by Frances Benjamin Johnston, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.

Figure 3



**Figure 4,
Current Fireplace**

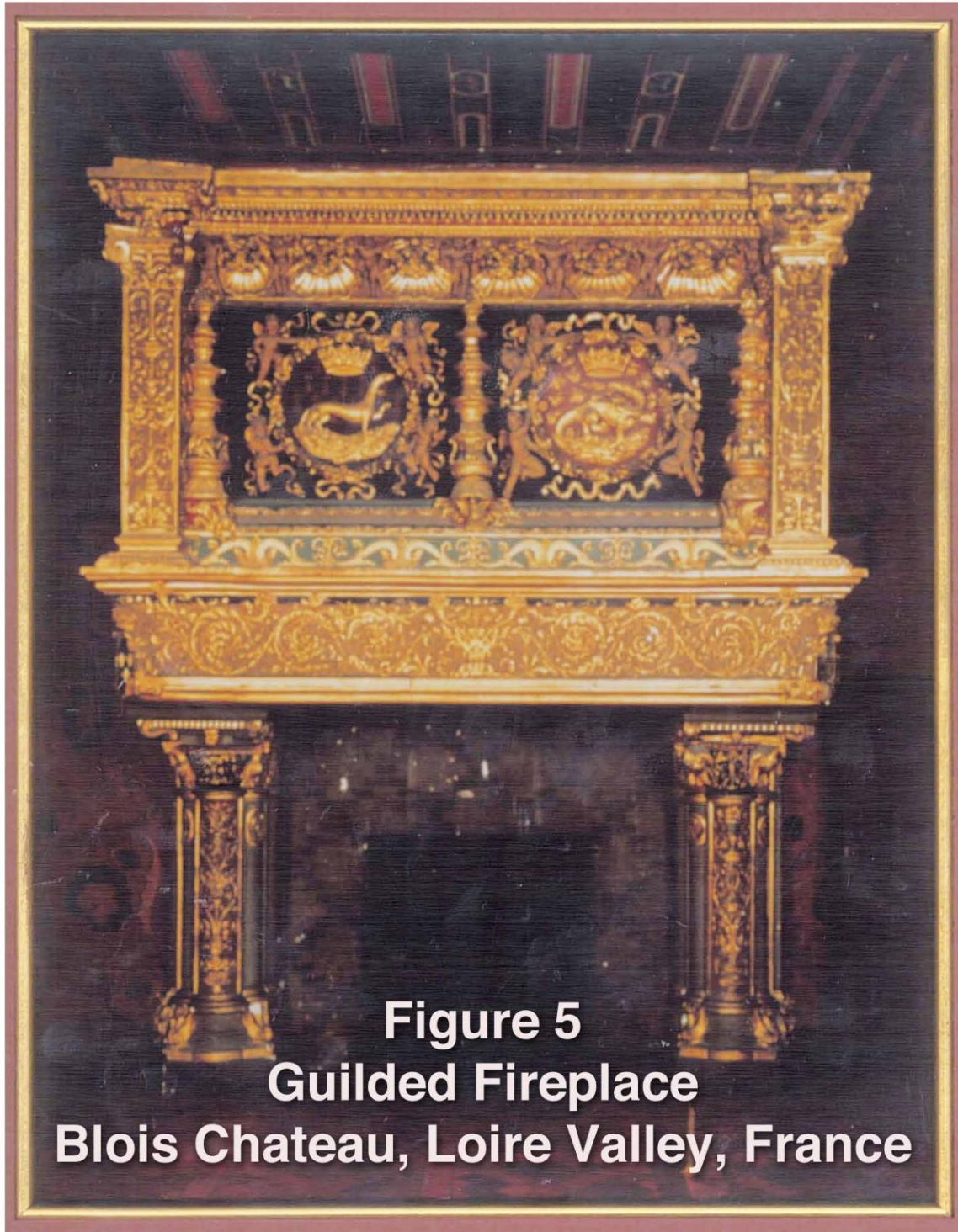
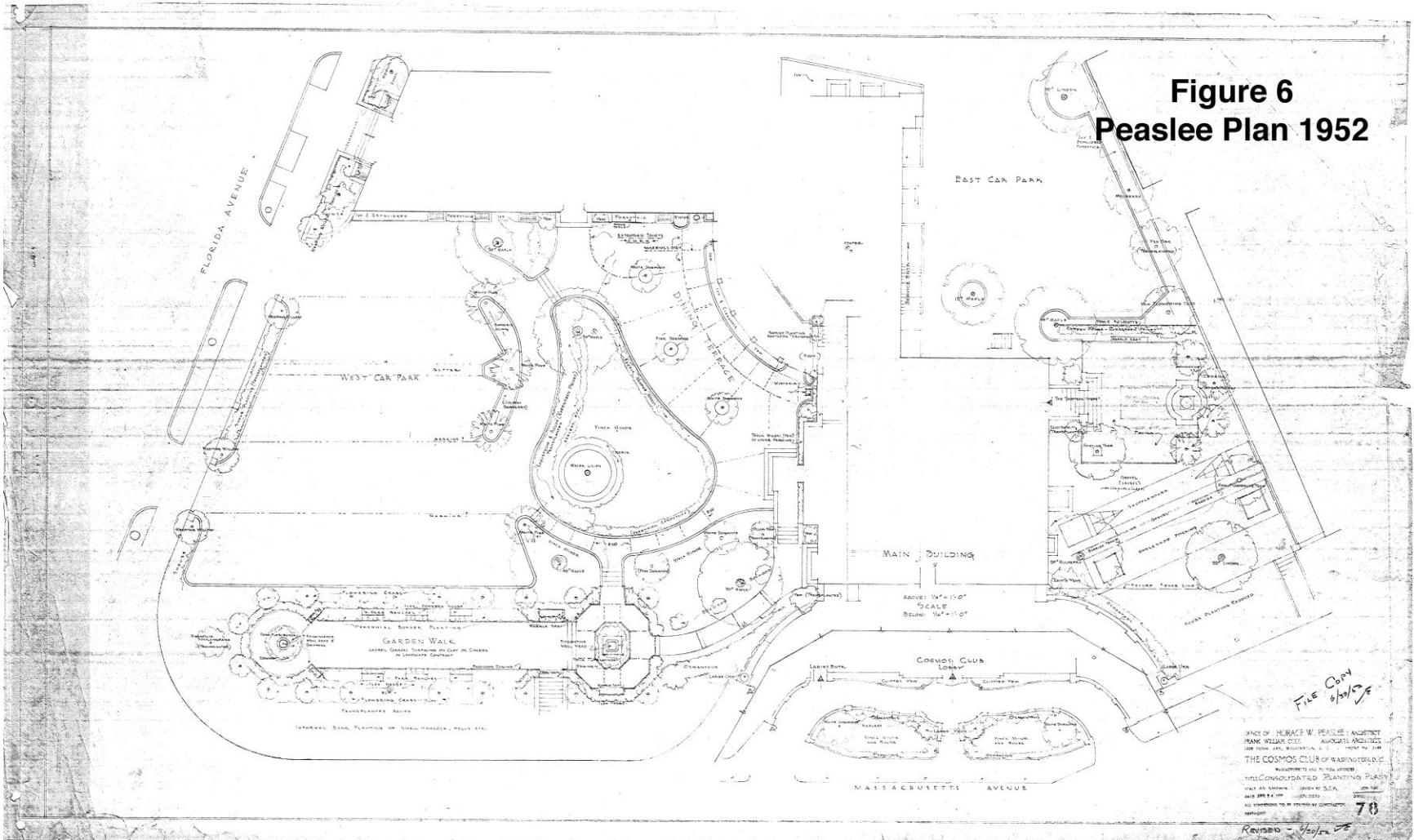


Figure 5
Gilded Fireplace
Blois Chateau, Loire Valley, France

**Figure 6
Peaslee Plan 1952**



FILE COPY

PLAN BY HORACE W. PEASLEE ARCHITECT
 FRANK WELLMAN CIVIL ARCHITECT
 THE COSMOS CLUB OF BOSTON
 THE CONSOLIDATED PLANTING PLAN
 SCALE 1/4" = 1'-0"
 REVISIONS TO BE PROVIDED BY CONSULTANT
 78
 REVISIONS - 4/30/52

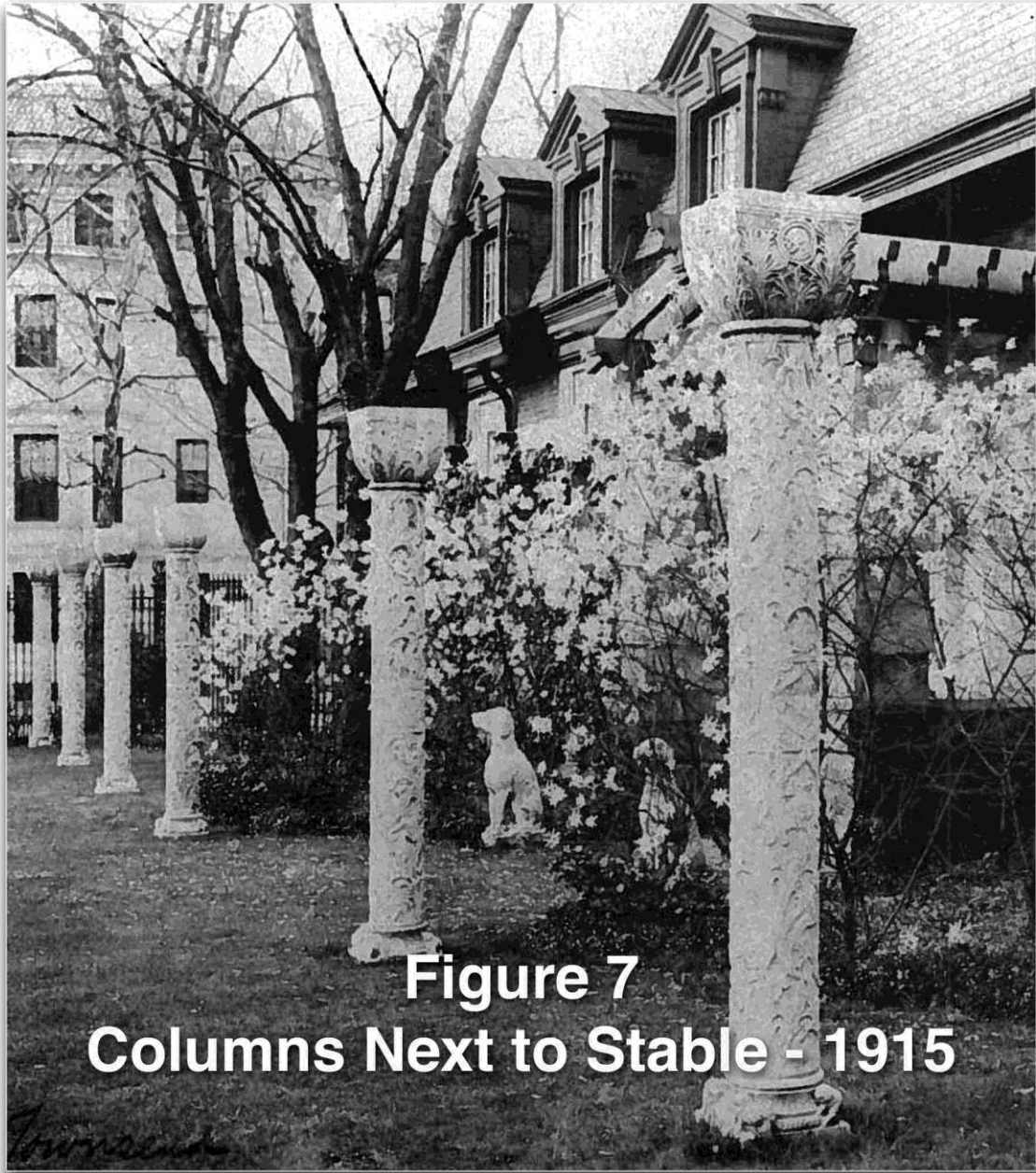


Figure 7
Columns Next to Stable - 1915



Figure 8.
Columns in 1950



Figure 9
Columns in Garden Dining Room



Figure 10
Detail of Column in GDR



Figure 11
Columns in East Garden

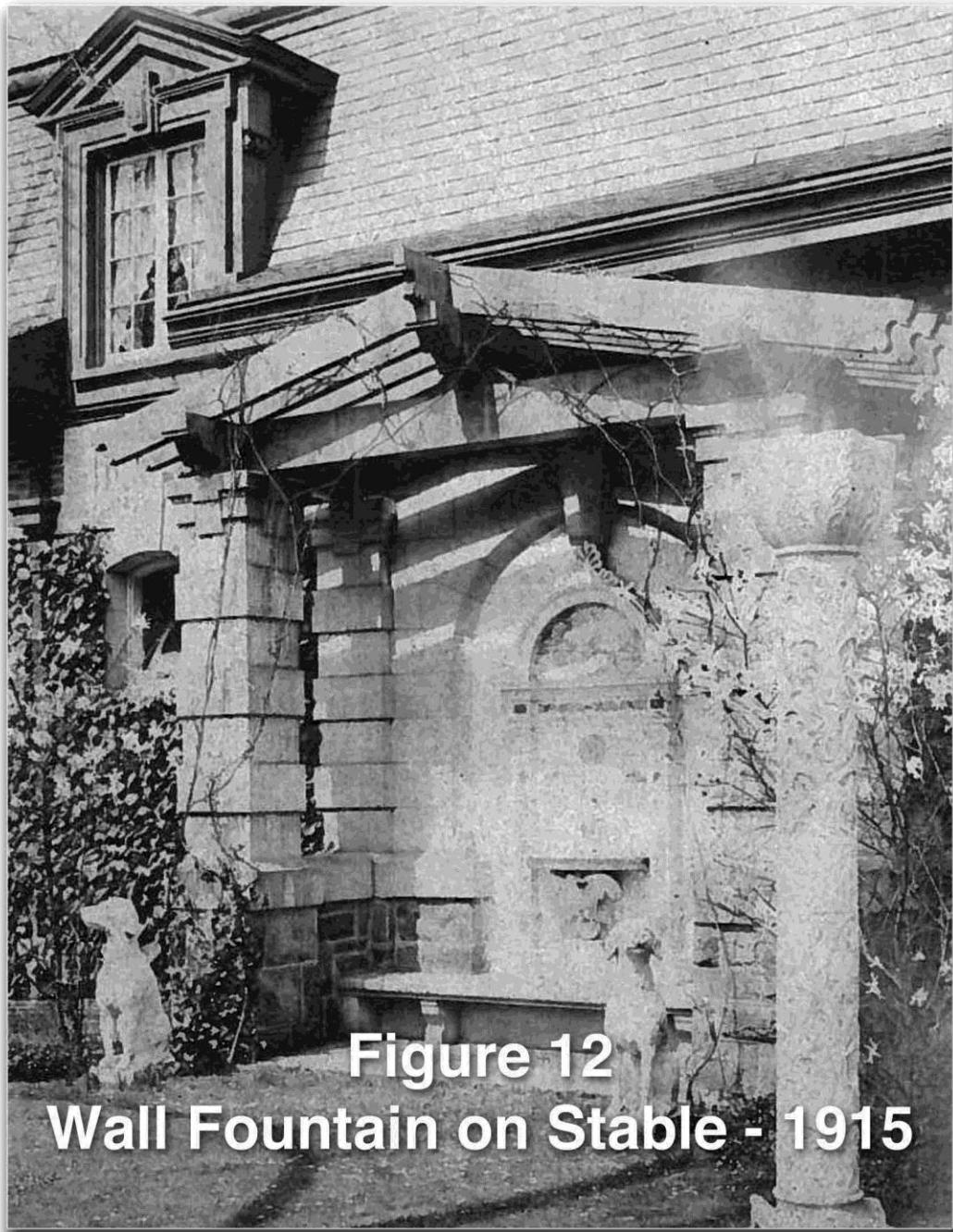


Figure 12
Wall Fountain on Stable - 1915



Figure 13
Griffons and Circular Wellhead
in West Garden Allee



Figure 14
Square Wellhead in West Garden Allee



Figure 15
Lions on Ballroom Terrace



Figure 16
Stone Bench in East Garden



Figure 17
Tacca Fountain in Florence



Figure 18
Fountain With Flowers About 1902

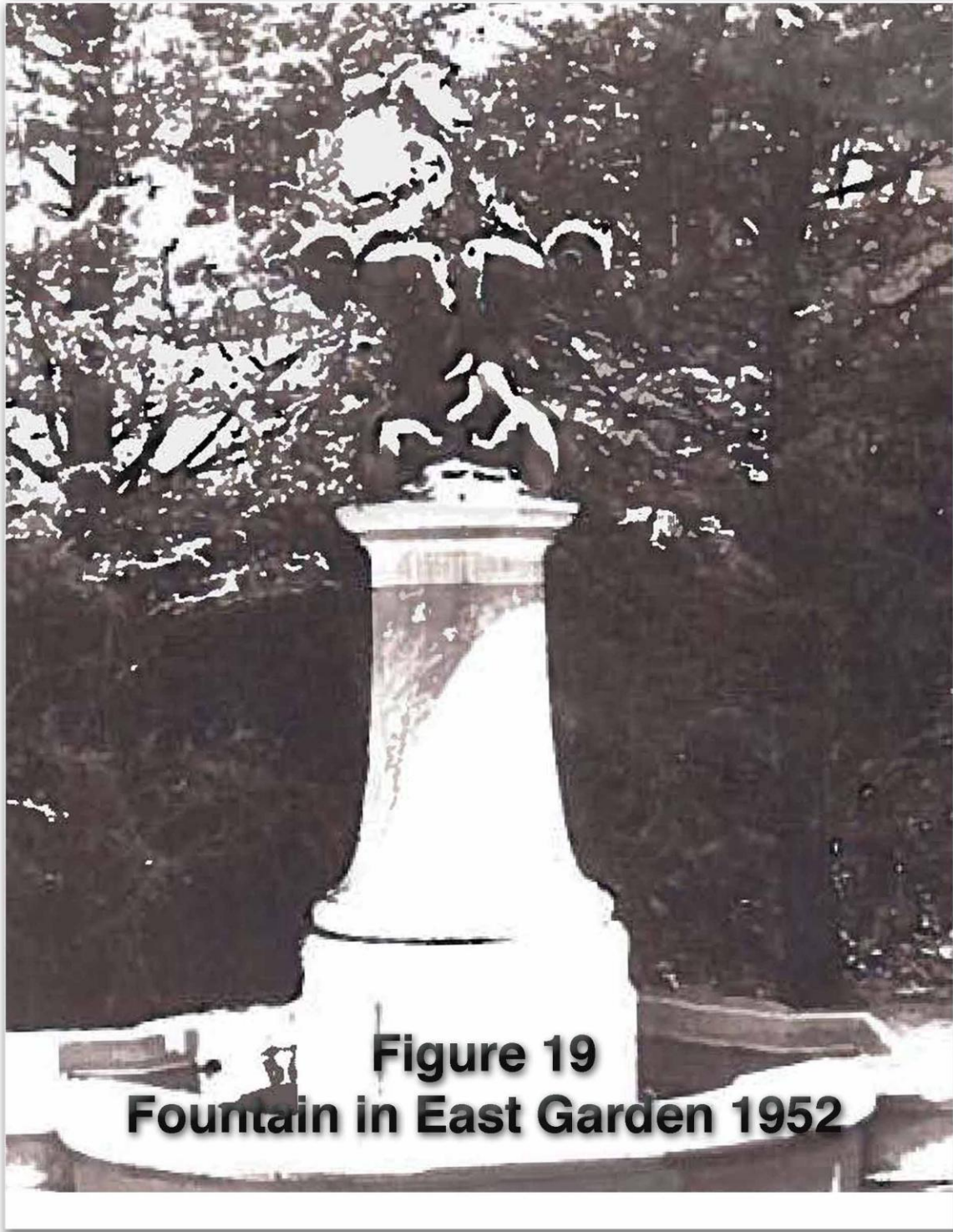


Figure 19
Fountain in East Garden 1952

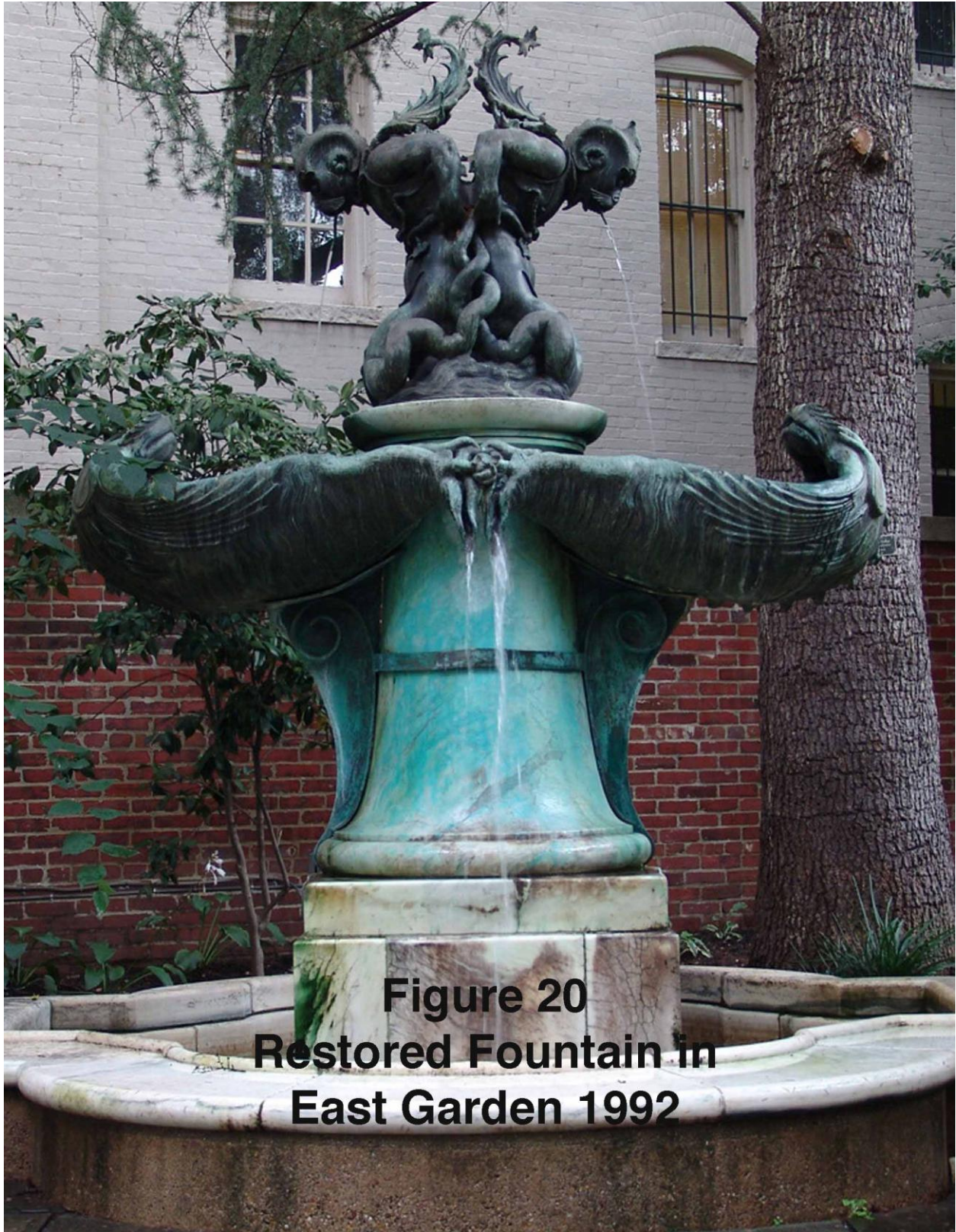


Figure 20
Restored Fountain in
East Garden 1992