



Susana Raab for The New York Times

Tudor Place was the home of descendants of Martha Washington.

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CULTURED TRAVELER

It's Home Sweet Museum in Washington, D.C.

By ANDREW FERREN

HOPES are high in some circles that the Obama presidency will return some luster to [Washington's](#) image as a glittering cultural and social whirl. In reality, the last two low-key decades were more an exception than the rule. For much of the 19th and 20th centuries, Washington had at least a thousand points of light in a vibrant social landscape.

Most of those palatial buildings along Massachusetts Avenue or clinging to the hillsides of Rock Creek Park were built not as embassies but as homes for the country's wealthy and well-born, who came to town for at least part of the year (usually January for the opening of Congress) to rub shoulders with the political elite. Then there were the folks who lived there full time, serving in the government or diplomatic corps, and others drawn to the city by its heady mix of culture and power.

With them came the trappings of a refined life — important [art](#) collections, libraries and fine furnishings — all neatly installed in their showplace homes.

Many remnants of this more lavish era remain in the form of art-filled mansions and historic house museums that tell a fascinating story of political, social and cultural life in the nation's capital. Most throw in a good bit of personality along with the Picassos and fine porcelain. So while the world obsesses about the new residents of 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, now is a great time to check out some of the district's other noteworthy addresses.

At the top of the heap is [Hillwood](#) — the former home of the heiress and arts patron Marjorie Merriweather Post — a museum that bills itself as the place “Where Fabulous Lives.” Built in the 1930s, the sprawling Georgian-style brick mansion is set amid 25 acres of landscaped [gardens](#) and woodlands.

Post bought the [estate](#) in 1955 and remodeled it to house her extensive art collection. Outside are a greenhouse with hundreds of orchids, a Russian dacha and an Adirondack camp building.

Heiress to a cereal fortune, Post, who died in 1973 at age 86, knew how to live on a grand scale, and poking around her former home, one gets the sense that she admired the same trait in others. She had a special affinity for Marie Antoinette and often dressed as the ill-fated French queen for her gala parties. An exhibition called “An Invitation to the Ball,” opening on March 14, will highlight a selection of her costumes from the 1920s.

One gets a glimpse of the quality of the collection and a sense of Post's legendary hospitality upon entering the main house. “La Nuit” (“The Night”), a sensuous life-size painting of a curvy female nude partly draped in a sheer black veil, by the 19th-century French painter William-Adolphe Bouguereau, hangs in the back of the coatroom. It seems undervalued there, until one discovers that the coatroom was originally the men's room, for which Post thought the picture an apt selection.

The rest of the 36-room house is equally extravagant with room after room of exquisite 18th-century French decorative arts like elaborate marquetry furniture, tapestries and seemingly countless sets of Sèvres and other fine porcelain — one of the audio tours is even titled “Kings, Queens, and Soup Tureens.”

Post's third husband, Joseph E. Davies, was ambassador to the Soviet Union, and it was there in the late 1930s that she began to acquire an array of Russian decorative arts — gold-embroidered liturgical vestments, religious icons and imperial regalia — as Stalin was selling off the nationalized collections to finance industrialization. Post eventually amassed some 80 works by the legendary [Peter Carl Fabergé](#), ranging from bibelots like a stamp moistener to the famous Catherine the Great Easter Egg, presented by Czar [Nicholas II](#) to his mother in 1914.

Though equally packed with artistic riches, the [Kreeger Museum](#), which is celebrating its 15th anniversary this year, seems worlds away from such imperial pomp. Built in 1967 by the architect [Philip Johnson](#) as a private home for David Lloyd Kreeger, then chief executive of Geico Insurance, and his wife, Carmen, the house is a light-filled, almost templelike pavilion that is at once modern and classical and utterly tranquil.

Though it was not built to be a museum (friends just used to knock on the door and ask to see the collection), it is in fact ideally suited to this function. Along the smooth travertine walls hang some 200 standout paintings from the 1850s to the 1980s by the likes of [Degas](#), Cézanne, [van Gogh](#), [Picasso](#), Braque, Klee, Kandinsky, Miró, [Man Ray](#) and [Frank Stella](#). A delicate

Calder mobile hangs over the stairs that lead down to displays of African masks and sculptures.

A terrace overlooking the pool and the rear gardens features sculptures by great masters like Henry Moore, Aristide Maillol and [Isamu Noguchi](#).

Lifelong supporters of the arts in Washington, the Kreegers had to agree on every painting they acquired, and their wide-ranging and diverse collection provides an intimate glimpse of their shared passion for art. In the former dining room, a wall of radiant [Monet](#) landscapes faces off against views of the garden through the windows.

The central hall has excellent acoustics and was often the scene of concerts in which Mr. Kreeger would play his Stradivarius violin alongside [Isaac Stern](#) or Pablo Casals.

[Architecture](#) buffs will want to see another Philip Johnson gallery, this one at [Dumbarton Oaks](#), the impressive Georgetown estate that Robert Woods Bliss and his wife, Mildred Barnes Bliss, bequeathed to [Harvard University](#). Living in [Paris](#) in the years leading up to World War I, the Blisses began collecting Byzantine and pre-Columbian art and textiles, which at that time were not particularly in favor.

They purchased the property in 1920, considerably expanding the existing house to create gallery space for the collections and library. Mrs. Bliss worked with Beatrix Farrand to design the extensively terraced gardens, which are astonishingly beautiful in any season.

In 1959, Johnson was brought in to design galleries for the dazzling array of pre-Columbian art that includes gleaming gold jewelry, ceramics painted with brilliantly colored geometric patterns and animal figures carved in jade and turquoise. Tucked into a cove of trees behind the main house, Johnson's compact, almost cylindrical glass-walled galleries encourage intimate contemplation of these small-scaled treasures.

The rest of the museum — including the galleries for late Roman and Byzantine mosaics, sculptures and textiles — has recently emerged from a thorough renovation that has perhaps streamlined some awkward spaces, but left them a little cold and uninviting. The shop, which stocks many garden-related items, like delicate copper leaf pins made from casts of the local oak leaves, is definitely worth a visit.

A few blocks away one finds the similarly named but unrelated [Dumbarton House](#), a historic home, a museum of Federal period architecture, furniture and decorative arts, and the headquarters of the National Society of the Colonial Dames of America. The house, which was begun in 1798, two years before the federal government installed itself in Washington, has seen much history. Dolley Madison took refuge there as she fled the burning White House and advancing British troops in 1814.

Also around the corner is [Tudor Place](#), home to successive generations of the Peter family, descendants of one of Martha Washington's granddaughters, Martha Custis Peter. It was designed by William Thornton, the architect of [Octagon House](#) as well as the first United States Capitol, which was reduced to ashes by the British in 1814.

The Peters, who lived at Tudor Place from 1805 until 1984, played an active social role in the city. The Marquis de Lafayette was a dinner guest, as were many dignitaries passing through Washington over the nearly two centuries when the house was family home. [Robert E. Lee](#) married a cousin of the Peters', and before the trees of Georgetown grew too tall, the white-columned Arlington House where he lived could be seen from Tudor Place's hilltop perch.

Highlights of the collection include well over 100 objects from Mount Vernon that were purchased by Martha Custis Peter from the estate sale held upon her grandmother's death. Beyond the home's gracious neo-Classical architecture, Tudor Place's considerable charm lies in the fact that it is not frozen in any one decade, but reveals the rich patina of history.

The 45-minute tour feels like a quick whirl through American history told with an endless stream of interesting anecdotes. Where else can you encounter George Washington's punch bowl or tea table in one room and a tenderly sketched portrait of Martha Washington's great-great-great granddaughter painted by Cecilia Beaux in the next?

In Washington, it's always worth remembering the lesson from the Kreeger Museum: if you see a building that looks like it might be a museum, knock on the door. Much of the time, you will not only be allowed in but offered a tour or an audio guide.

I lived around the corner from [Anderson House](#), a museum and the headquarters of the Society of the [Cincinnati](#), for over a year before I dared venture up the drive to see what was inside. Hiding behind its exclusive-sounding name and imposing facade brooding over Massachusetts Avenue was a stunning Gilded Age palace built for yet another charmed couple of seemingly endless means.

Larz Anderson III was a career diplomat, eventually serving as ambassador to [Japan](#), and his wife, Isabel, was among the wealthiest heiresses of her day and wrote more than 40 children's books and travelogues. The couple owned a yacht, on which they traveled up and down the East Coast, and a houseboat; their British servants wore 18th-century uniforms.

Their 50-room Washington mansion, which was finished in 1905, served as their winter home and was designed for the type of high-style entertaining that might advance Mr. Anderson's career.

It was decked out with ornate murals and acres of carved paneling and inlaid marble floors. Treasures still gracing the house include Flemish tapestries that once belonged to Cardinal Barberini, papal legate to [France](#) in the early 17th century and a nephew of Pope Urban VIII; a malachite tazza brought back from a trip to [Russia](#); and Japanese painted screens and lacquered boxes.

A few blocks west on S Street is the [Woodrow Wilson House](#) — the city's only presidential museum — where President Wilson moved upon vacating the White House in 1921. Its preservation makes the house a living textbook of modern American life in the 1920s, complete with flapper dresses and zinc sinks.

And next door to it is the Textile Museum, established in the former home of its founder, George Hewitt Myers, whose passion for Oriental rugs was born when he bought one for his dorm room at Yale. On view at the museum through March 8 is "Timbuktu to [Tibet](#): Rugs and Textiles of the Hajji Babas," a sweeping survey of stunningly vibrant textiles from the bold weavings of the nomadic tribes of West Africa to the plush carpets and shimmering silk velvets produced in the sophisticated courts of Persia and the Himalayas.

With treasure-laden former residences such as these, Washington could easily regain its reputation as a world capital with cachet just by studying its own history of living large.

