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Living in a Landmark

Dupont Circle's Belmont Mansion Has Been Restored to Its Gilded-Age Glory

What's it like to live in one of the city's finest Beaux Arts mansions? Ask Betty and Bill Briggs. For the past 14 years, their home has been the magnificent Belmont Mansion at 1618 New Hampshire Avenue, N.W., near Dupont Circle. But even though they go about their daily lives in a Gilded Age world of marble staircases, crystal chandeliers, Tiffany vases, French antiques, and fine paintings, rugs, china and silver, the unassuming couple from Iowa focus mostly on leading a fraternal organization devoted to humanitarian projects.

They moved to Washington and into the mansion in 1989, after Betty was elected right worthy grand secretary and Bill became temple host of the General Grand Chapter, Order



Perry Belmont's wedge-shaped chateau is one of the city's most distinctive historic homes.

of the Eastern Star. When the Eastern Star bought the home from its original owner, Perry Belmont, the organization agreed that the right worthy grand secretary must live in the mansion (or International Temple)—ensuring that it would remain a private residence as well as Eastern Star's international headquarters.

Perry Belmont (1851-1947), U.S. Representative from New York and U.S. Minister to Spain, was the son of August Belmont, founder of one of the country's early great fortunes (New York's

Belmont Park racetrack carries the family name). Perry and his wife, Jessie, split their time between homes in New York, Florida, Kentucky and Paris.

When they decided to build a home in Washington in order to entertain Washington notables and world dignitaries during the capital's winter party season, they selected French architect Eugene Sanson. Sanson, who had designed elaborate homes and chateaus in Europe and was renowned for his use of light and space—and his beautiful staircases—partnered with American

architect Horace Trumbauer, acclaimed for his own Beaux Arts mansions and public buildings. The aging Sanson never saw the finished house, but his son came to America to supervise the 3½-year construction. Completed in 1909, the \$1.5 million structure set a new standard in the Dupont Circle neighborhood, which was becoming an enclave of extravagant edifices along tree-lined avenues.

The wedge-shaped house is constructed with a concrete-encased steel frame, fireproofed with terra-cotta and encased in

finely carved and detailed limestone. “The exterior limestone walls came from the Bedford, Ind., quarries that supplied the limestone used to construct Washington National Cathedral,” according to Bill Briggs. Like a French chateau, the home’s most prominent feature is the grand upper floor capped with a copper-trimmed slate roof accented with stone urns and finials.

The palatial interior is a mosaic of Italian marble and fine woods, accented with wrought iron and brass. The Belmonts used the house until 1925, then put it up for sale. It stood unoc-

cupied until 1935, when the Eastern Star bought the home and many of the original furnishings for \$100,000.

Today, the mansion, which is on the National Register of Historical Places, is in pristine condition, thanks to the vision and dedication of Betty and Bill Briggs. When they arrived, remembers Betty, they were confronted with a far different situation: “The house was dirty, the fabrics on the walls were soiled and worn, many minor repairs were necessary and the entire interior needed painting—and we just did it. We

established a Restoration Program, and Eastern Star members contributed funding.” Over the past five years, Wagner Roofing has performed skylight, dormer and portico roof repairs as part of the ongoing preservation efforts.

Bill Briggs proves a knowledgeable and enthusiastic tour guide as he escorts a visitor through the mansion, pointing out architectural details and artifacts, approximately 90 percent of them original to the house. As arriving guests step into the vaulted foyer, they immediately see Sanson’s trademark white marble

staircase, which rises up a wide single run, splits into a double stair, then returns to an encircling balcony. “All the marble was brought here in blocks from Italy, the wood came from Germany and the metal fixtures were shipped from Paris,” says Briggs.

Two stone vaulted halls flanking the Grand Staircase lead guests to the Grand Ballroom, the centerpiece of the second floor and the largest room in the mansion. The ballroom’s priceless treasures include the Belmonts’ Tiffany vases and a 7-by-14-foot mirror thought to be the largest single-piece mirror in existence. At one end of the room stands a 1911 gold-leafed Model B Steinway. “There are only three of these in the world,” says Briggs. “One in the White House, another at the Smithsonian, and this one.”

Briggs particularly enjoys showing visitors the Italian Renaissance-style State Dining Room, where the Belmonts hosted Franklin Roosevelt, the Prince of Wales and other prominent guests. The mansion is still geared to entertaining on a grand scale. The Briggses have hosted as many as 1,000 guests at a time, and numerous Belmont Balls, featuring 17-piece bands and guests dancing ’til midnight, have raised thousands of dollars for charity.

As much as they’ve enjoyed their years in Washington, the couple is turning over the Belmont Mansion to other caretakers. “We’re retiring and going home to Iowa,” says Bill Briggs. “Our hope is that our successors will take the same pride in the house and love it as we do.”

Wagner and the Belmont Mansion

The Belmont Mansion features two large and ornate circular skylights—one over the Grand Staircase, the other in the Grand Ballroom—that allow natural lighting to filter into the rooms below. When leaks threatened the integrity of the structure and the mansion’s priceless artifacts, Wagner Roofing’s father-son team, Randy Herald and Randy, Jr., were called on to repair the skylights.

One-of-a-kind jobs can be challenging, but bidding a job without specifications is even harder. The cost estimate to repair the 40’ x 40’ hip-roofed skylight over the staircase included netting the 10-foot shaft below the skylight in the event a piece of glass, a repair tool or copper flashing fell during repairs. Although the valuable torchères and other furnishings would be moved, the marble floor, brass stair railing and irreplaceable glass transom had to be protected.

The actual work was still undefined until the Wagner team removed the copper caps that hold the glass and the glass itself. “I was surprised to find the glass anchored by 3-inch rope,” recalls Randy Herald. “We removed all of the original rope, which had disintegrated over the years.” He fabricated new copper caps and gutter, cleaned the steel frame and glass, then reinstalled the glass and caps. Double-sided tape was the only new item added to help hold the glass and waterproof the entire assembly. Later, the Heralds repeated the process in repairing the skylight over the main ballroom. As Chuck Wagner remarked, “No wonder two glass companies refused to bid this job.”

Next, Bill Briggs and Chuck Wagner worked to identify the source of leaks in the State Dining Room. They found that some of the 28 copper dormers—roofed structures containing the windows that project through the sloping roof—had holes that were causing the leaks. Budgeting the mansion’s restoration funds required repairing or replacing the dormers in stages, six at a time. “Randy selected priority dormers for repair or replacement according to their degree of deterioration,” explains Briggs. So far, Herald has repaired a dozen dormers and is scheduled to work on six more. “I go up on the ladder periodically to check the tops of the dormers,” Herald says. “Over time, water wears holes in copper.”

Briggs seems especially pleased that, thanks to Wagner Roofing, the mansion’s portico roof no longer leaks after perhaps 30 years. The border of the portico roof is limestone, like the exterior walls of the house. But inside that border, a triangular piece of poured concrete, probably dating to the 1940s, was deteriorating and leaking. “Wagner removed the concrete and installed 1.5-inch-thick pavers, with waterproofing underneath, and the leaks stopped,” reports Briggs. As a bonus, the Briggses frequently use the newly repaired portico roof for relaxing and enjoying the streetscape below.

“Chuck Wagner has been great to work with—he has a good rapport with people,” says Briggs. “And we’ve been very satisfied with the work Wagner Roofing has accomplished for us.”

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To recognize the couple's outstanding stewardship of the house, the Dupont Circle Citizens Association recently gave them its Distinguished Service Award. The citation reads in part: "This city is much richer both architecturally and socially, thanks to your efforts."

"It's quite a place," says Bill Briggs of the architectural landmark he and his wife have called home for almost 15 years. "We're going to miss it." ●

The order of the Eastern Star, the largest fraternal organization in the world to which men and women belong, consists of 8,000 chapters in the United States, Canada and other countries and raises millions of dollars annually within its membership for projects to benefit mankind. For an online tour of the Belmont Mansion, go to www.easternstar.org/temple/Tour/home.html.



CAPOL-HIGHSMITH

Wagner Roofing repaired the slate roof, installed a new flat-seam lead-coated copper roof, rebuilt three dormers and replaced wooden corbels at 909 M St., N.W., in Washington, D.C. The property is on the National Register of Historic Places. Wagner served as general contractor on the job, which included carpentry, installing bird barriers and painting the entire façade.

Faster Depreciation for Roofs?

Congress is considering shortening the depreciation period for nonresidential roof systems from 39 to 20 years. The bill was introduced in the Senate as S.1679 by Sen. Jim Bunning (R-Ky.) and in the House as H.R. 3310 by Rep. Mark Foley (R-Fla.). A report by the Roofing Industry Alliance for Progress says the life expectancy of a low-slope roof system is 17 years and that the majority of building owners interviewed said they would replace their roof systems sooner if the depreciation period were shortened.

Spring Maintenance for Slate Roofs

With spring right around the corner, it's time to schedule repairs of winter damage to your slate roof, as well as gutters and downspouts. Sliding snow and ice can break and shift slate. Plus, water freezing in gutters and roof drains and debris left from winter storms can damage the gutters—which in turn can lead to leaks and water damage to your home or commercial building.

Call Wagner today at 301/927/9030 to schedule an inspection or repairs by one of our slate-roof specialists. And if your gutters and walkways aren't protected by snowguards, be sure to ask about the economical and attractive options Wagner offers for preventing avalanching snow problems on slate roofs. ●

In the Works

These Wagner jobs are in progress or recently completed. To discuss or visit any of our projects, call Chuck or Sheila Wagner at 301/927/9030. Unless otherwise noted, jobs are in Washington, D.C.

El-Hibri Charitable Foundation, 1420 16th St., N.W., lead-coated copper cornice, built-in gutter, standing-seam metal mansard and membrane roof

Herb Cottage, gift shop next to Bishop's Garden on the National Cathedral grounds, slate roof

Lincoln Summer White House (J.S. Cornell & Son), **Soldiers' Home**, Rock Creek Church Road, N.W., new copper and slate roofs



CAPOL-HIGHSMITH

Old Post Office/The Pavilion, 12th St. and Pennsylvania Ave., N.W., restore slate roof and metal flashings

U.S. Department of Justice, 950 Pennsylvania Ave., N.W., remove and refasten 72,000-sq.-ft. sloped tile roof and 51,000 sq. ft. of pavers

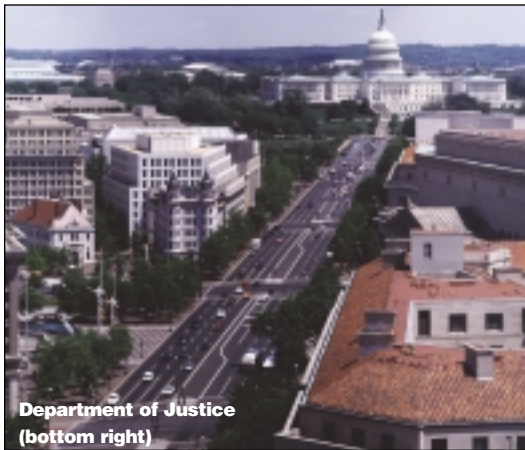
Our Customers Say ...

"In a world of amateurs, you are the pros! You are honest, expert and take the time to clearly explain what needs to be done."

—Derek and Julie Linden, Silver Spring, Md.

News & Notes

Due to the superior performance of job foreman Freddie Oltman, Wagner Roofing received the **Contractor of the Month Award** for August at the modernization project by Gilbane Building Company at the U.S. Department of Justice, 950 Pennsylvania Ave., N.W. The DOJ project is a first: The roof doesn't leak, the sloped tile will last the remaining life of the building, the copper gutter is in good condition and the flat roof was recently replaced. So why is Wagner Roofing spending a year repairing the roof on the 75-year-old four-square-block building? The fastening system has failed on the 72,000-square-foot sloped roof and the pavers on the flat roof are delaminating. Wagner will remove and refasten



CAROL HIGHSMITH

Department of Justice
(bottom right)

the sloped roof and restore antefixae tile at the eaves. The 51,000 square feet of pavers will be removed and replaced using a 110-ton crane that can be operated only on Saturdays due to its size.

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A record 6,000 people, some from as far away as Philadelphia and New York, watched as master craftspeople from Wagner Roofing and other firms demonstrated their skills at the fall 2003 **Festival of the Building Arts**. Wagner has participated in the festival since the 1980s, and the Wagner booth is always a popular feature, with the company's roofing team demonstrating slate, copper and shingle roofing techniques. Chase W. Rynd, new president of the National Building Museum, said "the enthusiasm and energy of demonstrators and the event's general atmosphere of learning and fun were remarkable."

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Wagner Roofing is performing extensive roof repairs and installing new roofing as part of the renovation of the historic **Bowie-Sevier House**, 3124 Q St., N.W. The 1805 house was built by Washington Bowie, a merchant and shipper whose estate once encompassed the entire Georgetown block on which the house stands. In the late 19th century, John Sevier expanded the house.

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The **Argyle Apartments** building in Washington, D.C.'s Mount Pleasant neighborhood has won an award for its historic restoration; Wagner Roofing removed the rusted galvanized cornice work and fabricated and installed a lead-coated copper replacement.

Who We Are

Chuck Wagner, Sheila Wagner
Owners

Louis Barba
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**Larry Myers, Troy Sampson,
Lee Simon, Rodney Willey,
Jeff Wooldridge**
Estimators

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Project Manager/General Contracting

Barbara Demarest
Project Manager

Colleen Kennedy
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Sergio Luise
Project Manager/Purchasing

Rhonda Potter
Assistant Controller

Jennifer Rozier
Service Department

Dan Williams
Sheet Metal Superintendent

Adrienne Whyte
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