

A HISTORY OF THE AMERICAN EMBASSY

Part I - 1785-1815

The years 1785 to 1948 in the history of the Embassy are so full of interest that a great deal of time and detail could be spent upon them, but the following brief sketch may be of interest.

Our first representative in London, John Adams, was appointed Minister to the Court of St. James's in 1785 by the newly formed Congress of the United States of America, which, at that time had no President.

When Adams arrived in London to present his credentials to King George the Third, he was received pleasantly by that Monarch, who was surprised, it seems, to find that the Minister was, to his mind, the prototype of John Bull. This did not please Mr. Adams, who put it on record later that he was no John Bull, but "John Yankee and as such I shall live and die!"

Adams, after four years of difficult negotiating, and with a grievance against his own government due to insufficient living allowances, declared on departing from these shores that he could not "keep a style of living like other Foreign Ministers."

The succeeding Ministers were presented with the ever-recurring problems of unsatisfactory Treaty terms, unsuccessful efforts to bring about a commercial treaty between the two countries, and the impressment of seamen from American vessels.

An added difficulty was that the British Government was unwilling to send a diplomatic representative to the United States until certain that the ex-Colonies were self-supporting, so Gouverneur Morris, to whom the newly inaugurated President Washington had given all the responsibilities of the title, was never called "Minister", but "Confidential Envoy."

At the time of his mission the first Consulate was opened in London at Hertford Street, where the Embassy was located, and there Consul Joshua Johnson dealt mainly with impressment cases and shipping.

Gouverneur Morris eventually brought about an agreement on diplomatic representation and the first British Minister was sent to Philadelphia, then the seat of the new United States government, and called by the British the "Court of President Washington." Thus Thomas Pickney was appointed Minister Plenipotentiary to London in 1792 and Gouverneur Morris was detailed to France.

From this time the various Ministers, Thomas Pickney; John Jay (who worked together as Minister in Ordinary and Envoy Extraordinary respectively); Rufus King; James Monroe and William Pickney all successively struggled with the outstanding problems - unsatisfactory treaties, unaccomplished commercial agreements and the ever-present nightmare of impressment.

The Consulate quarters had separated from the Legation in 1799 and Consul Johnson set up his office at Tower Hill. This was the beginning of the long separation of the Chancery and Consulate offices which persisted until the amalgamation in 1937, one hundred and thirty-eight years later.

Towards the end of this period Britain was seriously involved in war with France and the struggle to keep Napoleon from her shores gave her little time for the current American problems what were causing so much friction.

In 1812 the United States Government declared war, which lasted, to be sure, only three years, but caused a serious break in diplomatic relations.

William Pickney had already returned home and Russell was now Charge d'Affaires. During these three years Russell exchanged frequent "notes" with Lord Castlereagh, while Consul Reuben Beasley closed the Consulate offices at Queen Square, City, but remained on in London as United States Agent for Prisoners of War, reopening the office in 1815 when peace was declared and Britain and the United States were once more friendly.

Part II - 1815-1912:

In 1815 the Legation and Consulate reopened their separate offices in London and resumed their duties. John Quincy Adams, son of the first Minister, arrived and he was followed through the successive years by Richard Rush (1817), Rufus King for the second time, and Gallatin, whose son was his Secretary.

The Gallatins had a grand time in London, especially Gallatin junior, who kept an amusing diary and recounts, among other things, an encounter with footpads at the top of Park Lane (this was 1826).

James Barbour followed and arrived in London in 1828, to find that the Legation was bereft of files of any sort, Minister Gallatin having taken them with him to the States as his personal property! This began the ruling that complete records must be kept in the Legation of all official business.

Minister McLane followed next with the famous Washington Irving as his Secretary as well as friend of the family. Van Buren arrived in 1831, but owing to political wranglings at home was never made Minister, and in 1832 Aaron Vail, Charge d'Affaires, was left to cope with a somewhat chaotic office. He energetically put all the archives in apple-pie order and in addition to the three London newspapers already being sent to Washington, arranged for the regular despatch of several more.

Andrew Stevenson arrived in 1836, and it was during his domicile in London that the young Queen Victoria came to the Throne. Edward Everett followed (1841), then Louis McLane again, George Bancroft, Abbott Lawrence and James Buchanan.

The latter mentions in his diary that he had great trouble in finding a place to live in London and of the scandalous rents charged! Mr. Buchanan had some difficulty too in the matter of Court dress, deeming embroidery and gold lace undemocratic. He finally evolved his own costume, but added a sword to distinguish him from the Palace servants!

George Dallas (1856 to 1861) was followed by Charles F. Adams. At this time the Civil War was raging in America. Adams' son, the famous Henry, acted as his father's Secretary.

Reverdy Johnson followed Adams, then John Motley, famous for his history of the Dutch Republic, General Schenck, Edwards Pierrepont, John Welsh, James Russell Lowell, poet and essayist, Edmund J. Phelps, Robert Todd Lincoln, son of Abraham Lincoln, and then, as the Legation was at this time raised to an Embassy, the first Ambassador, T.F. Bayard. This was the year 1893.

John Hay, Joseph Choate and Witelaw Reid, who died while at his post in London bring us to 1912, once more a period critical in world history. From 1815 to 1912, nearly a century, the Consulate moved many times and the work was extremely varied, ranging from mutineers, after the War of 1812, to relief for destitute seamen, a few cases of piracy, slavery and the slave trade, and Anglo-American trade, while welfare cases emerged from the increasing travel of Americans to Europe to such an extent that the London edition of the NEW YORK HERALD published on May 21, 1890, a descriptive article entitled, "Consular Crying Room."

The office was raised to the dignity of a Consulate-General in 1853 and George N. Saunders was the first Consul General.

The first recorded inventory of Government Property was made in 1815 by Mr. Aspinwall.

Passports were evidently made out by the Legation in 1831, for it is recorded that Minister Lawrence sent a report to Washington on the increase in their number thus:

"1831 - 170 passports issued; 1845 - 638 issued; 1850 - 1167 issued; 1851 - 1145 issued in the first six months only."

Part III - 1912 -1939:

The Embassy has had many literary men as its Ambassadors in its time and Walter Hines Page, the newly appointed representative was an outstanding editor. His remarkable personality made him many friends here. He arrived in 1913 when the clouds of the first World War were gathering, but before that event he had the Chancery premises moved from 123 Victoria Street where they had been housed for thirty years in dreary and depressing quarters, to Grosvenor Gardens, while he chose No. 6 Grosvenor Square (indicated by a blue plaque) as his residence.

The Consulate was at this time at New Broad Street, City, but in 1917, during the war, Consul-General Skinner took the premises at 18 Cavendish Square - the "haunted house."

Ambassador Page proved himself Britain's great friend in time of trouble and he was obviously relieved when the United States came into the war. His own account of the first days of war are reminiscent of those of World War II -- that hoard of worried and frantic Americans pouring into the Embassy for advice and help, the staff working long hours handling the many problems.

Consulate records show that the first women employees were introduced to the staff in 1915, and from that date the number of personnel, both Chancery and Consulate, has increased steadily, as the post has grown in size and importance.

Ambassador Page returned home in 1918 and John W. Davies arrived. The Embassy staff in his time consisted of three First Secretaries, three Second Secretaries, three Third Secretaries, a Naval Attache and five

assistants, a Military Attache and four assistants, quite a contrast to the time of the first Minister, who worked with a single Secretary and a single clerk!

Less formal relations with the British Governmental offices were established at this time.

Ambassador George Harvey, another journalist, Ambassador Kellogg of the famous pact, and Ambassador Houghton in 1925 followed. Princes' Gate, the former home of Mr. Pierpont Morgan, was acquired at this time as a permanent Embassy residence. Until then the successive Ambassadors had been responsible for their own residences and for a number of years Chancery business was transacted from them also. The addresses ranged from Ealing, Covent Garden and the Strand in the earlier days, to Lowndes Square and Portland Place later, and then narrowed down to the district in and about Mayfair.

Ambassador Houghton was followed by Ambassadors Dawes, Mellon and Bingham, bringing us to 1938 when Ambassador Joseph Kennedy was appointed and it was in his time that World War II hurled us all into another period of confusion, horror and anxiety once more.

The Embassy and Consulate became a combined office in 1937-1938 under the same roof at 1 Grosvenor Square. The Agricultural and Commercial representatives were merged into the Foreign Service in July 1939 thus making a consolidated group of permanent United States Government offices in London.

Part IV - 1939-1948:

1939 saw many changes in the work of the Combined Offices at 1 Grosvenor Square. The Munich Crisis of 1938 had warned everyone of impending trouble, and work seemed to be shaping itself for the coming war.

Ambassador Kennedy, the Consul-General and staff worked hard on evacuation plans, air raid precautions and security measures, so that the day war was declared everything was so well organized that there was no panic, no confusion, and above all an excellent morale. Activity increased immediately with the evacuation of American citizens, and immigration visa work. The staff at the outbreak of the war totalled 166 but by 1947 it had increased to 487.

The Lend-Lease staff was housed under the roof of No. 1 Grosvenor Square as the "Harriman Mission." The history of the office activities of this period being too complicated to trifle with in this brief account, one can only mention a few of the more outstanding functions that came into being with the war years. A close liaison was kept with the Military and Naval Attaches, while the Commercial and Agricultural Attaches respectively formed close alliance with the British Government offices to work out mutual problems, while representation of the Exiled Governments, Economic Warfare, and Protection of British Interests all became new working subjects. The first Press Officer was assigned to the Chancery in 1941.

When the bombing began most of the staff had personal experiences to recount, and although they had their entertainment value in the telling, in actuality they were not all so amusing! The commodious air-raid shelter provided a hideout from Hitler's Luftwaffe, but the staff unanimously decided that they preferred to risk a bomb

upstairs rather than sit for hours inactive below. The shelter, however, provided night accommodations for those on duty during the heavy night raids.

Headley Park and Coworth Park provided relief from the night bombings to many members of the staff, and though office work was done at Headley, the same could not be said for Coworth Park, that comfortable country house owned by the late Lord Derby. Both places, surrounded by lovely countryside, provided tonic for the morale, and, for those who were privileged to stay in them, many happy memories.

Ambassador Winant, who arrived in 1941, devoted himself to the close alliance of the United States and British Governments and during the whole war spent arduous hours at work along with his staff. V-E and V-J days came at last, and then began the terrific task of sending back to the States the numerous British brides and children of American servicemen, and of clearing up work that had been held in abeyance during the war years.

Ambassador Winant was followed by Ambassador Harriman, Ambassador Lewis Douglas, Ambassador Walter Gifford which brings us to the present date with Ambassador Winthrop W. Aldrich who arrived in London in February 1953.

THE END

(This is taken from a Report prepared by Mrs. Margaret Bryant, Embassy Librarian.)