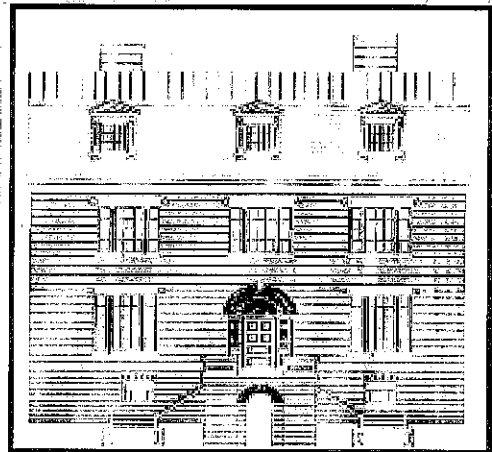


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Project Cost

THE SEWALL-BELMONT HOUSE
HISTORIC STRUCTURE REPORT
WASHINGTON, DC

VOLUME 1



Prepared for:
THE NATIONAL WOMAN'S PARTY

1 June 2001

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Executive Summary

The Sewall-Belmont House, located at 144 Constitution Avenue NE, in Washington, DC, is a very important site in our nation's history. Although it is not (yet) a very well known site, it has been officially and unofficially recognized for both its historical and architectural significance. It was included in Washington D.C.'s Inventory of Historic Sites, compiled in 1964. It was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1972, and designated a National Historic Landmark by the Secretary of the Interior in 1974. It was also designated a National Historic Site by Congress in 1974, and it was placed under the auspices of the National Park Service for its restoration and maintenance. In 1998, it was designated an outstanding national heritage site by the President's Commission, and in 1999, it was selected by Congress as one of only four projects named in the original Save America's Treasures legislation.

The property, located across from the Supreme Court, and next to the Hart Senate Office Building, is one of the oldest residential properties on Capitol Hill. It is architecturally significant for its early construction date and its location, but also for its alterations and the record of changing architectural styles that they convey, as much as for any one style. It is historically significant for its associations with several important figures and events in American history. Most recently, it has served as the national headquarters for the National Woman's Party for more than 70 years, and was home to its founder and leader, Alice Paul, for more than 40 years.

In 1999, with its selection as one of America's Treasures, the National Woman's Party renewed its commitment to the importance of preserving its landmark headquarters, and its exceptional historic collections. The NWP Board of Directors revised its mission statement, elected a new President, and hired a new Executive Director, and began the work of raising funds to match the Save America's Treasures Grant. These monies have been invested well in researching and documenting the site, as preliminaries to the necessary restoration work to follow. As part of this effort, the HABS/HAER documentation of the site was completed. As a continuation of this effort, the firm of Ehrenkrantz Eckstut & Kuhn Architects and their team of professional consultants was commissioned by the National Woman's Party to prepare this Historic Structure Report for the house and grounds, as well as to prepare technical documents for the first phases of critical work requiring immediate attention to protect the building from existing and imminent threats. Concurrent with this, a Historic Interpretation Plan is being produced by the National Park Service.

The Sewall-Belmont House is a residential structure constructed in the Federal Style circa 1821. The main house has 2½ stories brick exterior bearing walls laid in Flemish bond, multi-light double hung windows, a front entry portico, stained glass sidelights and fanlight at the front door. The roof, originally a simple gable, was converted to a mansard shape on the main (south) façade in 1881. Three dormers penetrate the mansard on the south and two penetrate the gable on the north. The face of the mansard is clad with slate, and all sloped roofs are covered in standing seam metal, painted red. The floorplan consists of four rooms over four rooms with a central hall and stair, and back-to-back fireplaces. Two brick chimneys penetrate the pitched roof near the ridge.

A two-story kitchen wing is attached to the house on the north side and has similar construction characteristics. Once believed to date from 1750, no physical or primary archival evidence has been found to substantiate this. Construction materials and methods, tax records, and building permits suggest that the kitchen wing dates to the same period as the house. The wing has a simple gabled roof, as does the library, and fenestration patterns of both buildings have been visibly altered over time.

The library (originally the carriage house) is situated north of the residence and is connected to the kitchen wing by a masonry breezeway. The current fenestration and interiors of the library have been significantly altered since its construction, the date of which is uncertain, but which likely also dates to the same period as the house. The current interior architectural features of the building are credited to Wilmington, DE architect Elise Dupont, who designed the building renovations in 1941.¹

¹ Surviving drawings by Elise Dupont found to date at the Sewall-Belmont House are unclear as to the exact scope of work undertaken at this time. No building permits were found relating to this period in the building's history.

Four (4) periods of construction have been identified:

- Original Construction (circa 1820)
- Stylistic Modifications (circa 1880)
- Porter Dale, 1922-29
- National Woman's Party, 1929-present

The property was purchased by Robert Sewall in 1799, and an "improvement" made to it, presumably a building, in 1800. This structure was the only residential property to be burned by the British during the War of 1812, due to having received hostile fire from within its confines. It was disputed as to whether the house was burned to the ground or only damaged, but by 1820, it was either repaired or rebuilt. During the tenure of the Sewall family, the house was leased to a number of prominent government figures, due to its size, elegance, and location. In 1879, an improvement was made to the house. It is possible that this is when the pitched roof was altered to the current mansard with dormers. In 1881, an entry portico was built, which may have been made necessary by the lowering of the street grade in the 1870s.

Some of the most dramatic alterations date to the 1920s occupancy of Porter Dale, Congressman (1915-1923) and senator (1923-1933) from Vermont. During his occupancy, all areas of the buildings were modified, particularly with the addition of several window openings and replacement and/or alteration of interior finishes.

The National Woman's Party also altered the building significantly, with the removal of the entry portico, and the addition of several window openings and bathrooms, to suit their purposes as living quarters and offices. Probably the most significant alteration made by the NWP was the conversion of the carriage house to the library.

As the headquarters of the National Woman's Party, this site became the hub of the long campaign for women's citizenship. The NWP suffragists were the first to picket the White House; their marches, arrests, and prison sentences galvanized the suffrage movement, and their pioneering strategies of sustained nonviolent activism became a model for future civil rights organizing. In 1920, women won the right to vote. In 1923, Alice Paul wrote the original Equal Rights Amendment. In 1929, she moved into the Sewall-Belmont House. She lived and worked in the house for more than 40 years, organizing thousands of women to work for equality in every area of American life. The Sewall-Belmont House represents more than a century of women's activist politics, in a direct, unbroken line from the suffragists to the modern women's movement.

In the recent past, the Sewall-Belmont house has been opened to the public as a non-profit museum with docent-guided tours, films, exhibits, and special programs celebrating women's long, determined quest for full citizenship and equal participation in society. In the past four years, visitorship to the house has increased more than 500%. In the past year, new educational programs have been developed to attract school groups and scout troops to bring the message of equality to children. No other site in Washington, D.C. tells the story of what women have done for suffrage and equal rights. In fact, fewer than 5% of the nation's historic sites recognize women's achievements. Sewall-Belmont House is one of two of the most important women's history sites in the U.S., but unlike the other site, the Women's Rights Historic Site, in Seneca Falls, NY, the Sewall-Belmont House is still both architecturally and functionally intact.

The Sewall-Belmont House retains not only its authentic historic character as the headquarters of the NWP in the 20th century, but also its exceptional historic collections. The house contains an extraordinary 150-year collection of original suffrage and women's rights materials – the national legacy of the American women's movement, the largest and longest human rights campaign in U.S. history. Much of this collection has been in storage at the NPS, due to the inadequate conditions for storing or displaying them on the site. Limited access to the library's research materials has been available by appointment only.

The goal of the NWP is to use this document and the forthcoming Historic Interpretation Plan as blueprints to transform this extraordinary national legacy into a first rate museum, and to create a national landmark that honors the powerful, inspiring story of American women. Future use of the property is intended to serve the educational mission of the National Woman's Party, to serve as a house museum, educational facility, functioning research library, special events venue, and offices for the non-profit organization.

The overall approach to attain this goal is to preserve and restore selected architectural features and interiors of the house and library, while sensitively upgrading systems and other spaces to serve the needs of the organization and other users. Restoration to its original appearance is neither feasible nor desirable given the short and long term use of the house and grounds. Rehabilitation in accordance with the Secretary of the Interior's Standards is the recommended overall course of treatment.

With the above in mind, recommendations have been made by each of the members of the project team. These recommendations have been translated into Critical Work Items, which have been cost estimated, and prioritized into eight categories. These priorities were developed for the purposes of phasing construction and obtaining funding. It is important to note that the cost estimates are direct construction costs only. These figures do not reflect a total project budget, which would include approximately 20% more money for related legal, administrative, and other soft costs associated with the work. It is estimated that the entire scope of work could be completed in approximately four to five years.

While interpretation of the property is beyond the scope of this report, several themes have been recently discussed. The following appear to stand out as the primary themes and have been considered during the preparation of this report:

- "Full Citizenship" for Women
- Achievements of the National Woman's Party (and Alice Paul)
- Socio-Political Significance of the Sewall-Belmont House and grounds

The Sewall-Belmont House is a living, working monument. Unlike many house museums, the most recent tenants, who lent their personal and institutional significance to the site which housed them, are still in residence, and are still growing and changing. It would be unrealistic to require that this site remain frozen in some particular era or style. It must continue to serve its tenants, and also to serve the public. It has been the intention of the project team to develop recommendations which can be used to improve not only the physical condition of the existing historic fabric, but also the usefulness and functionality of the site for both its tenants and the broader public.

Introduction/Administrative Data

This Historic Structure Report presents the findings of the project team, with regard to the property's significance, existing conditions, and future treatment and use.

The *Developmental History* section presents the findings with regard to the property's historical background and context, its evolution, and the current physical condition of the buildings and grounds.

The *Treatment and Use* section presents the treatment philosophy, recommendations and alternatives for treatment, and future use alternatives for the property.

The *Critical Work* section provides a summary of identified work needed for immediate undertaking and also includes copies of technical documents and drawings prepared prior to completion of the other sections of the report.

Appendices included in a second volume of this report include drawings, photographs, condition survey forms, and material analyses located and prepared for the investigations and conclusions of the study.

The project team assembled for the creation of this document consisted of Architects: Ehrenkrantz, Eckstut & Kuhn; Architectural Historians: Robinson & Associates; Landscape Architects: Rhodside & Harwell; MEP Consulting Engineers: GHT; Structural Engineers: Robert Silman Associates; Civil Engineers: A. Morton Thomas and Associates; and Cost Consultants: Project Cost. Thanks to all of our great consultants!

The National Parks Service held an advisory role in this process. NPS staff have been involved in the progress of this document throughout. They have received copies of all drafts, and their comments have been solicited and incorporated into revisions. They have been approached with questions regarding appropriateness of materials and treatments, when a number of different possible options existed. They have provided helpful advice to assist with the development of a set of useful and realistic recommendations, which it is likely will be approved by the local Historic Preservation Review Board, when Critical Work phases go into construction.

Funding for this document has been provided by a federal grant given in connection with the Save America's Treasures Program, along with two line item appropriations approved by Congress. Also received was a Johanna Favrot Fund For Historic Preservation Grant, which enabled the conception of a Capital Campaign to develop a donor base and generate private sector contributions. Matching funds for the Save America's Treasures grant have been received from the Cook Foundation, the Kiplinger Foundation, the Clark-Winchcole Foundation, the Ms. Foundation, and the Interior Furnishings and Design Association, as well as hundreds of smaller contributions from private donors across the country.

The Historic Structure Report shall be completed by June of 2001, and the first phase of Critical Work shall begin in the summer of 2001. To permit time for fundraising and to allow for the continuing occupation of the NWP in the house, the Critical Work items have been broken down into eight phases, based on priority. Each phase includes a number of alternates, which can be completed separately, or in a later phase. Depending on the results of fundraising efforts, these phases can be compacted into 4-5 years, or can be spread out over 10 years.

This Historic Structure Report focuses on the house and the surrounding landscape. It does not include any investigation of or recommendations with regard to the furnishings, the collections, or the interpretation of the site.

An Historic Interpretation Plan is concurrently being developed by the National Park Service. It is due to be completed in December, 2001. Future studies may include the furnishings and the collections.

The project team would like to thank the following people for their help with the development and completion of this document: Nancy Morrison, Marty Langelan, Matt Sokolowski, and the entire National Woman's Party staff, Karen Whitehair and the Sewall-Belmont House curatorial staff, Rebecca Stevens and Frank Faragasso of the National Park Service, and Sonia Fuentes.