

Thanks for the Memory

By AGNES M. DOWNEY

This generation has been given a unique key to that part of the past that is just beyond living memory. The 19th century's development of the camera provided us with a valuable record of the past. Mathew Brady, the famous pioneer photographer, included pictures of the Civil War soldier among his works. When Arlington House, on the ridge above the Potomac, became the headquarters of the Army of the Potomac, Brady and members of his staff used its portico as a background for general staff photographs.¹ Four of these have been found in the Brady collection at the National Archives.

In June 1864, Arlington became a national cemetery.² The Army Quartermaster General, Montgomery C. Meigs, ordered a photographical as well as topographical survey of the mansion buildings and grounds.³ This survey produced at least 12 photographs of the house and grounds, and these are preserved in the Still Picture Branch of the National Archives. These photographs were made at Arlington on June 28 and 29, 1864, by an unidentified photographer supplied by Col. D. C. McCallum, Superintendent of Military Railroads, United States Army Quartermaster Corps, Washington, D.C.⁴ If Mr. Brady's staff and the Army photographer who made photographs of Arlington could be reached by letter, we might express our gratitude in this manner:

January 19, 1960

DEAR SIRs:

It may be a shock to receive a letter at this late date, but your gifts and their value are increasingly appreciated with each passing year. It was thought that you might be interested in the part being played by your early photographs of Arlington in the restoration of that house. You may remember the Doric-columned portico of Mr. George Washington Parke Custis's home on Arlington Heights. Mr. Custis sat for one of Mr. Brady's early works.⁵ Robert E. Lee, Mr. Custis's son-in-law, posed at Mr. Brady's request in Richmond shortly after his surrender of the Army of Northern Virginia.⁶ In this letter, however, our chief interest is not the excellent portraits you have made, but a house which often was only background. Your photographs of the Custis and Lee home are playing an important part in its restora-

¹ Photograph of Gen. Irvin McDowell and staff, Brady Collection, Still Picture Branch, National Archives.

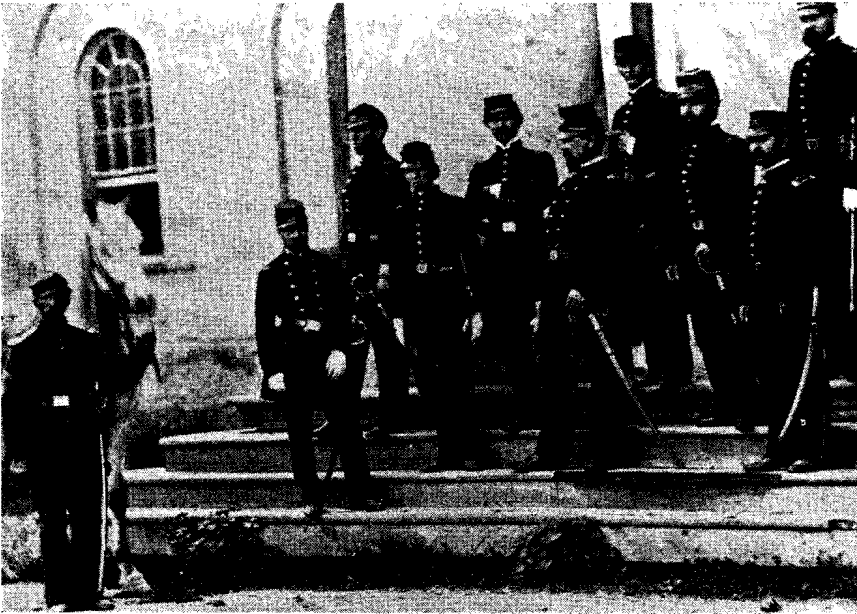
² Edwin McMasters Stanton, Secretary of War, Special Order establishing a Cemetery at Arlington, Records of the War Department, Office of the Quartermaster General, Consolidated Files, National Archives.

³ Gen. Montgomery C. Meigs to Col. D. C. McCallum, Letter, June 18, 1864, Q. M. G., Letter Book #77, p. 390.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 390.

⁵ Murray H. Nelligan, *The Custis-Lee Mansion*, p. 16.

⁶ The Brady Collection, Still Picture Branch, National Archives.



GENERAL IRVIN MCDOWELL AT ARLINGTON HOUSE IN 1861. PHOTO FROM NATIONAL ARCHIVES.

tion. You knew this house as "Arlington," located in the vicinity of Alexandria. It is now called the Custis-Lee Mansion,⁷ and is located in Arlington National Cemetery, surrounded by the county which shares its early name.

As you knew, Arlington was considered home by the Lees as well as by the Custises. It was left to Mrs. Lee by her father and then entailed to Custis Lee, General Lee's eldest son.⁸ Early Brady photographs of the house date from 1861 and 1862.⁹ At the time the Army was using the grounds and the house for the defense of the Federal City. In 1864, the estate was seized for unpaid taxes.¹⁰ The Federal Government acquired the house and grounds at auction, and in June of that year placed the cemetery there. In 1883¹¹ the Supreme Court recognized the title of Custis Lee to the property, and he accepted \$150,000 in settlement of his claim to the land and house.¹² The house became cemetery headquarters and was serving in this capacity when you last saw it. In 1925, the son of a Union soldier for Michigan, Lewis Crampton, introduced a bill in Congress to restore the house and a small piece of land around it as the National Memorial to Robert E. Lee.¹³

⁷ Public Law 107, 84th Congress, Chapter 223-1st Session, S. J. Res. 62-Section 3, Approved June 29, 1955.

⁸ Murray H. Nelligan, *Old Arlington*, p. 408.

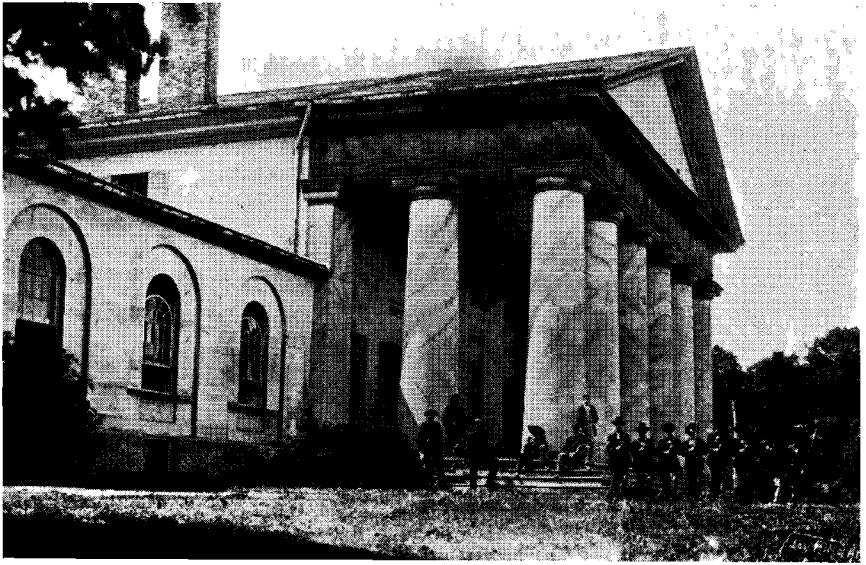
⁹ *Op. cit.*, Photograph of Gen. Irvin McDowell and staff, 1861, and photograph of Samuel P. Heintzelman and staff at Arlington, 1862, Still Picture Branch, National Archives.

¹⁰ *National Intelligencer*, January 11, 1864, Library of Congress.

¹¹ Nelligan, *Op. cit.*, p. 502.

¹² Nelligan, *Op. cit.*, p. 502.

¹³ Public Law 74, H. J. Res. 264-68th Congress, 1st session, approved March 4, 1925.



FRONT OF ARLINGTON HOUSE AS PHOTOGRAPHED FOR THE QUARTERMASTER GENERAL ON JUNE 28, 1864. PHOTO FROM NATIONAL ARCHIVES.

This bill was enacted into law as a tribute to Lee and as an acknowledgment and recognition of the Union which had been reestablished and of the contribution General Lee made after the war to solidify the Union. The Department of the Army initiated the restoration of the house "to the condition in which it existed immediately prior to the Civil War,"¹⁴ and it remained under the aegis of the Army until 1933, when responsibility for continued restoration of house and grounds was transferred to the National Park Service, under the Department of the Interior.¹⁵ The National Park Service continues the work of restoration which the Army initiated.

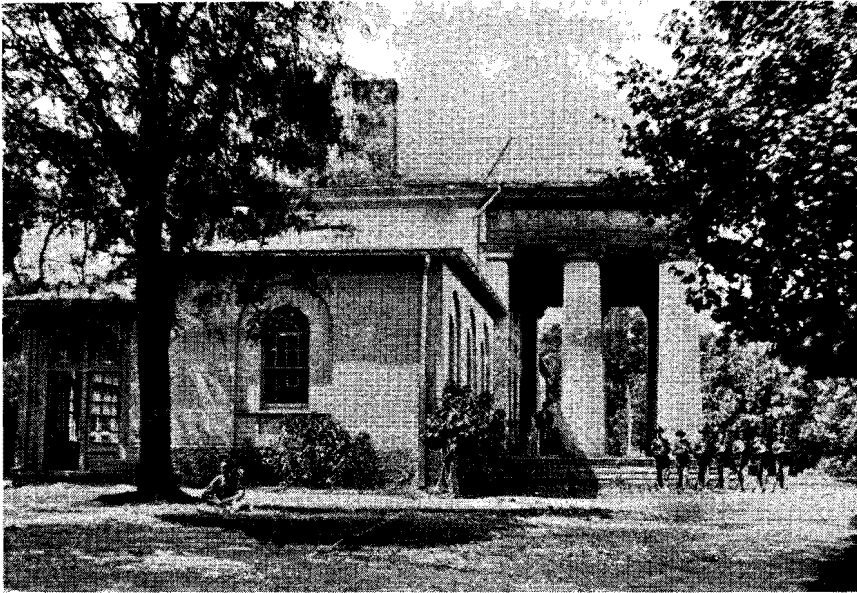
The bitterness which followed the war we now call "Civil" has faded, and the United States stands today as a united world power. Through the perspective of years your countrymen look back upon the tragedy of the war which your cameras depicted so starkly. We have paid tribute to the great men who fought from both sides of the Potomac. Monuments to the men who "have borne the battle"¹⁶ can be found from Maine to Florida. A beautiful National Memorial to Abraham Lincoln has been wrought in Washington City on the shores of the Potomac. It seems fitting that this memorial and the Custis-Lee Mansion lie on a direct line, and that the part of this line which crosses the Potomac—which once divided the Nation—is a memorial bridge.

In order to preserve and interpret our national heritage, many historic

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, Public Law 74.

¹⁵ Nelligan, *Op. cit.*, p. 505.

¹⁶ Abraham Lincoln, *Second Inaugural Address*.



SOUTH END OF ARLINGTON HOUSE AS PHOTOGRAPHED BY THE QUARTERMASTER GENERAL ON JUNE 29, 1864. PHOTO FROM NATIONAL ARCHIVES.

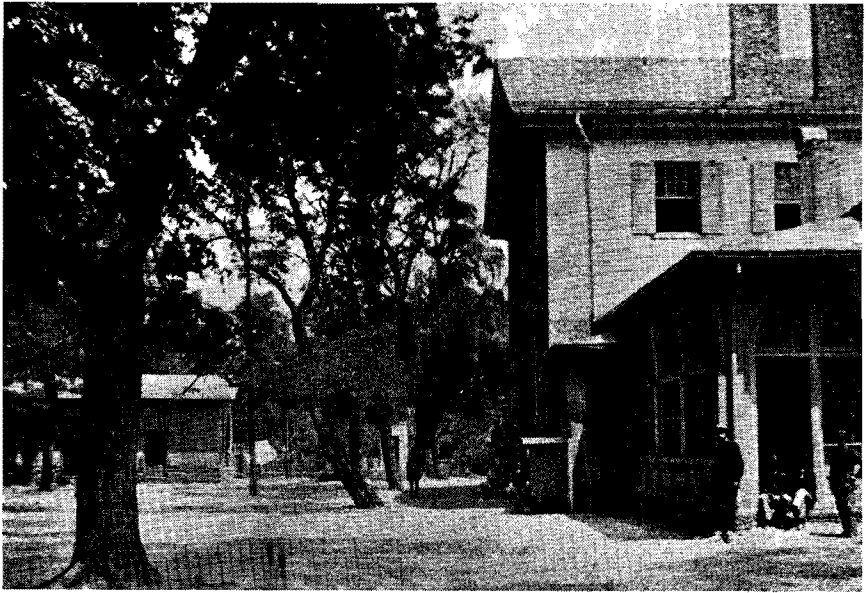
sites have been selected for preservation. Through accurate preservation, restoration, and interpretation of these places, their potential for education and enjoyment may be implemented in the present for the benefit of the future. Your photographs bring reality to scenes enacted almost a century ago. No word description could substitute adequately for your work. Arlington House is one of these sites chosen for preservation.¹⁷ Your photographs of this house made during the war have become more valuable as living memory grows shorter and word description proves inadequate.

Sixty-four years elapsed after the Lee family left Arlington,¹⁸ before the house was designated by Congress for restoration and preservation. By the time the Army began the research program upon which the restoration is based, the house had been used for office space and living quarters. Gas lighting and electricity had been installed. Two kitchens had been equipped with stoves and plumbing. The central heating system installed by Col. Robert E. Lee¹⁹ before the war to augment the fireplace heat had been remodeled. The possibility of the present use of this house had not been in the minds of those who had occupied and renovated the structure. And the thick brick and plaster walls of the original structure were formidable and did not lend themselves to change. The innovations after the war were in the form of partitions and additions rather than alteration of the original materials.

¹⁷ Public Law 74, *Op. cit.*, March 4, 1925.

¹⁸ Nelligan, *Op. cit.*, p. 460-461.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 383.



WEST SIDE OF ARLINGTON HOUSE SHOWING THE NORTH SERVANTS' QUARTERS AS PHOTOGRAPHED FOR THE QUARTERMASTER GENERAL ON JUNE 29, 1864. PHOTO FROM NATIONAL ARCHIVES.

This made possible restoration with a minimum of reconstruction. The important challenge was, and to a lesser extent still is, the identification of material present before 1861. This usually can be resolved from a study of physical evidence, but in certain instances further evidence is necessary. In any situation, all the available evidence is helpful. The accuracy of the restoration is relative to the amount of evidence assembled and intelligently interpreted.

In order to establish the true character of this house in structural detail, in furnishings and equipment, and in the story of the life lived there, research is necessary. This may be classified under four general headings: documentary, archeological, architectural, and pictographic.²⁰ The documentary research begun by the Army was continued by the National Park Service when jurisdiction was transferred to it. Dr. Murray H. Nelligan assembled a wealth of information and evidence in his development of this program. In the course of pictographic research, the gifts you left have been located and used. The attention of Park Historian Stanley W. McClure was drawn to your photographs by Miss Josephine Cobb, Chief of the Still Picture Branch of the National Archives. These photographs were related to the work of restoration by Dr. Nelligan. You may well remember the house and the condition in which it existed just prior to the war, but we are dependent entirely upon evidence gained from research. The importance of pictographic

²⁰ *Repair and Restoration Log*, located at the Custis-Lee Mansion.

evidence is obvious. There are early sketches of Arlington House extant, but none drawn between 1854²¹ and your first photograph in 1861²² has been located. Freedom of artistic license sometimes exercised in drawings make them less valuable for restoration work than photographs.

The circumstances which brought the entire Army of the Potomac to Arlington were not pleasant. Secession had come to Virginia. The men of the Lee family of Arlington had made their decision to follow their native state. Mrs. Robert E. Lee had moved with her girls to a less strategic spot with a few of the family possessions.²³ Arlington's commanding position on the ridge made it an important military position. Gen. Winfield Scott waited as long as he dared, and then on May 24, 1861,²⁴ hours after Virginia ratified the Act of Secession, he ordered the Army of the Potomac to move into Virginia. By dawn, Arlington House had been taken and placed under guard.²⁵ Some of the raw recruits who marched across the Long Bridge to occupy this ridge in 1861 were to become the bearded veterans you photographed in the camps and on the battlefields of later campaigns.

You may remember the 8th New York Volunteers who were selected to guard the house²⁶ when Gen. Irvin McDowell had his headquarters tents pitched in the garden south of the house. Their commander, Col. George Lyons,²⁷ did his best to protect the house, which was still private property. It was during this early period that someone from Mr. Brady's gallery made a picture of General McDowell and his staff on the steps of Arlington.²⁸ Later the Brady Gallery made photographs of General Heintzelman and his staff in the same setting.²⁹ While the uniformed figures were the focal point of these pictures and the reason for their being, our present interest is in the facade against which they stand. Three years of war passed before you photographed the house for its own sake. When General Meigs's order came in 1864, the camera survey of the new cemetery was accomplished.³⁰

Aside from military considerations it seems fortunate the Union Army occupied the house. This occupation protected it from physical destruction and made it a favorite posing spot for soldiers who could afford to have pictures made. From the photographs found, a more accurate restoration of the house is possible. From your wartime photographs of Arlington we obtain evidence available from no other source.

We are enclosing four photographs so you may more fully appreciate the

²¹ Benson Lossing, Arlington House, *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, September 1853, p. 433.

²² Photograph Irvin McDowell, *Op. cit.*, 1861.

²³ Nelligan, *Op. cit.*, p. 461.

²⁴ *War of the Rebellion Records*, Series I, Vol. 2, p. 40.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 39, and Muster Rolls of New York 8th Infantry Regiment, State Militia, Old Army Section, National Archives.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Photograph of General McDowell, *Op. cit.*, 1861.

²⁹ Photograph of General Heintzelman, *Op. cit.*, 1862.

³⁰ Meigs, *Op. cit.*, June 18, 1864.

specific value of your work. First, chronologically, is the photograph of General McDowell and his staff.³¹ Some opined Arlington's front steps should be reconstructed in stone; your photograph provided sufficient guidance to insure retention of wood. The date of the application of the rough-textured, pebble-filled plaster exterior finish of the wing foundations has been questioned. This picture shows it present in 1861. The pictures show exterior of the house scored to resemble stone, and traces of marbleization are visible on the columns. Archeological investigation has been conducted in an effort to establish the color of that marbleization as well as the base color beneath it.³² To date, we know that a series of coats of ochre and off-white were used over plaster scored to look like stone, and applied over brick.³³ It has been established that the first detectable coat of paint applied over most of the old lime plaster on the exterior of the house was ochre.³⁴ Dates of application of the succeeding coats are difficult to establish. There is no original plaster remaining on any of the columns, which in the photographs show the clearest marbleization. Dampness penetrated the hollow brick columns and caused the exterior plaster to crack and fall off. While the building was still under the administration of the Army, authorities found the answer vainly sought by Lee. They removed all the plaster from the columns and coated them with tar before replacing the plaster with a hard cement.³⁵ This solved, to a great degree, the problem at hand but destroyed any possibility of establishing the color of the marbleization from physical evidence on the columns. This photograph shows the front view of the south wing and its well-proportioned, Roman-arched windows.

The second photograph enclosed was made by the Army on June 28, 1864.³⁶ The camera was placed south and east of the portico, approximately where Gen. Philip Sheridan is now buried. In this view of the east front, the presence of marbleization on the columns is evident. There are indications that it may have been present across the entire front. In this photograph, however, the traces on the house itself are not as clear as on the columns. The chimneys are bare brick. They are at present covered with plaster to protect the brick and to prevent leaking. This was done prior to restoration as part of routine maintenance. The same paneled shutters with a few new coats of paint still hang beside the windows on the portico and on the south side of the second-story windows.³⁷ No vegetation is shown in front of the wings except a small bush at the northeast corner of the north wing. There were several reasons for keeping vegetation away from the house: one was the need for the light and heat of the sun, another the danger to the founda-

³¹ Photograph of General McDowell, *Op. cit.*, 1861.

³² Repair and Restoration Log, *Op. cit.*, Exterior.

³³ *Ibid.*, Exterior.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, Exterior.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, Exterior.

³⁶ Notation on front of photograph #CN. 5654, Brady Collection, Still Picture Branch, National Archives.

³⁷ Repair and Restoration Log, *Op. cit.*, Exterior.

tions of the house from water retained by roots, and the possibility of root penetration of foundation walls. The road that swings past the steps in this photograph is the same one that leads south and west around the old flower garden. If you study the columns in this photograph carefully, you can detect the two etched lines which are placed on a column to give it the appearance of being composed of three huge pieces of stone. The marbleization lines are painted to emphasize this treatment. The plain roofs of the wings are also visible. It is evident that they had no parapet or balustrade at this time. We believe that the early parapets shown in sketches³⁸ were removed by Colonel Lee to prevent leaks.

The third view of Arlington was made by the army on June 29, 1864,³⁹ with a camera placed due south of the south wing at the north end of the garden. The cloisters or observatory, the structure composed of Roman arches to the west side of the south wing, is shown enclosed in glass. The date of this work also has been questioned. The design of the benches used on the front portico is clearly visible. The question of indoor shutters had been raised but left unanswered. Painting and scraping had removed any sign of the hinges or screw holes which once may have been visible on the window frames. With a careful study of the south window in the south wing in this photograph, however, indoor shutters and the design of their louvres can be distinguished. The texture of the wing roof and of the cloister beyond is rough and pebble-like, substantiating the description Robert E. Lee wrote of them in an insurance policy for Arlington in 1859.⁴⁰

The fourth photograph is one made by an Army camera placed south and west of the house, between the house and the south servants quarters. This also was taken on June 29, 1864.⁴¹ The south front of the north servant quarter is visible. These quarters today are being renovated.⁴² The north quarter at present has tongue-and-groove doors with a window in each. The original doors are shown in the photographs as six-paneled, all opening on the same exterior level. The paintings above these doors, attributed to Mr. Custis,⁴³ had disintegrated by the time of the initial restoration. One of the Arlington sheep can be identified as the subject of this painting. The design of the vegetable garden fence at the north of the main house also can be seen in this photograph. The pulley wheel above the well indicates that it was still functioning. Enough of the well is visible to justify a careful restoration. Note that no ivy was grown on the buildings at this time. The ivy we have seen on these structures was planted when they were serving

³⁸ Lossing, *Op. cit.*, p. 433.

³⁹ Notation on front of photograph, #c. 517, Brady Collection, Still Picture Branch, National Archives.

⁴⁰ Hartford Fire Insurance Co., policy for Arlington House, signed Col. R. E. Lee, 1859, copy in Custis-Lee Mansion collections.

⁴¹ Notation on front of photograph, #CN. 969, Brady Collection, Still Picture Branch, National Archives.

⁴² Repair and Restoration Log, *Op. cit.*, North Servant Quarter.

⁴³ Nelligan, *The Custis-Lee Mansion*, p. 44.

as cemetery buildings. Careful study will establish the fact that the rear of Arlington, or the west front, was not plastered. The entrances to the basement were at this time covered with the lattice-sided additions still present. They have also been questioned. The treatment of the west entrance to the main house was quite different in this photograph from what we see today. The present entrance is not part of the restoration. There will be much study, thought, and discussion before any attempt at restoration of this feature is begun. The shutters on the first floor at the west front are louvred, not paneled like the shutters on the portico. These shutters are still in place.

Gentlemen, this represents only a little of the evidence gleaned from a study of your Civil War photographs of this house. It is the aim of the research and restoration efforts to show how Arlington House looked and was lived in when it was the home of the Robert E. Lee family, in the era of its greatest glory and importance, just prior to the Civil War. Because of your pictures, taken between 1861 and 1864, this mansion is one of the very few historic restorations able to claim the immense benefits of actual photographs showing their appearance in the day envisioned by the restorers. The detailed knowledge of the exterior appearance of Arlington House which can be gained through concentrated study of these photographs makes possible a more accurate restoration. When those responsible for restoration work are forced to rely only on deduction from documentary, archeological, and architectural sources alone, the margin for error is greatly increased. The accident of war which brought you to Arlington led to these photographs which help the National Park Service to continue the work initiated by Congress for this house, and to carry it forward in keeping with the spirit expressed by Robert E. Lee in a letter to Mrs. Lee on July 9, 1855:⁴⁴

. . . but you must not think I desire the house to be repaired from any expectation of enjoying it. It is not with that view I do anything, farther than incidentally. But I think it right to improve everything for which we are responsible, as far as necessary for its object and within our means, and leave the enjoyment to the great disposer of events. In this particular instance it is for the sake of her who is gone, and of those who remain, that I wish the place dear to their affections to be properly preserved and not either to suffer from, or exhibit neglect. And I wish it out of respect for their memory and feelings. It matters not who is benefited by our labours, so our part is done. May God grant that it be well done, and that we earn the title of faithful servants.⁴⁵

Your contributions, Gentlemen, are gratefully acknowledged. It is hoped that should either you or the Lees return to Arlington, you would find it looking much as it did that spring of 1861.

Sincerely yours,
AGNES M. DOWNEY

⁴⁴ Nelligan, *Op. cit.*, p. 379.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 379.