Courtesy AHS.

Fig. 1: Etching of the Little Tea House Tower, created by Bueler, Carl Jones (AIA), ca. 1930.

The Tea House Tower of Arlington

By Ciro Taddeo

Recently, an etching by American architect/artist Carl Jones Buehler[1] was rediscovered in the archives of the Arlington Historical Society (AHS) (Fig. 1). The subject is a rendering of the stone tower that can still be seen at the intersection of South Arlington Ridge Road and South Lynn Street that became the logo for Gertrude Lynde Crocker's beloved Little Tea House restaurant.

Probably drawn between the late 1930s and early 1940s while working for the War Department, Buehler made it while visiting the famous restaurant. A trained artist, he made the etching before beginning his notable career as an architect. Buehler interpreted the tower as a romantic ruined structure overgrown with foliage in a bucolic country setting. The reality was a bit different. In photographs, the tower was in good condition, part of a formal flower garden.[2] This article will explore how accurate Buehler's depiction was and the history of the tower.

The tower stands on property with a long history. In 1837, James Roach, the wealthy owner of a building supply company, bought the property on Arlington Heights. Around 1841, he built a house nearby he named Prospect Hill, later the site of Fort Albany.[3] During the Civil War, United States forces occupied the Roach estate and stripped parts of the home as a source of building material to construct Fort Albany.

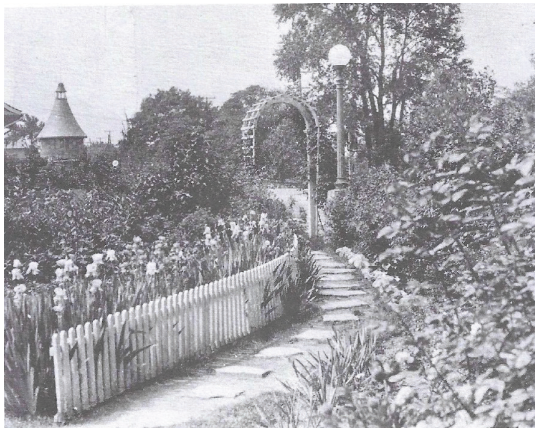
After the war, the property remained in a state of disrepair until sold in 1869. Subsequent owners made a few improvements to the property while the house itself remained in a dilapidated state until it was purchased by Philip Campbell in 1913. A wealthy businessman and a ten-term Republican member of the US House of Representatives from Kansas, Campbell made numerous improvements to the property.[4]

In 1920, suffragist Gertrude Lynde Crocker purchased an undeveloped part of the property for her new restaurant, The Little Tea House.[5] During its heyday, many famous people ate at the Tea House, including Eleanor Roosevelt, Amelia Earhart, and Oliver Wendell Holmes. Known for its lovely gardens and views, it was also one of the first places in Arlington where racially mixed groups could meet (Fig. 2).

The Little Tea House tower remains distinctive despite its current poolside home on the grounds of the Ridge House apartment complex (Fig. 3). It stands approximately thirty feet high with a circumference of sixteen feet with eight windows with views to the front and back. A small, enclosed area is at the rear, with flagstones covering the ground surrounded by a stone wall topped with poured concrete. The stone wall of the tower emerges from a circle of poured concrete around its foundation. A ground-level door leads down a stone staircase into a shallow cellar. The interior walls have been plastered and whitewashed over. Further down there is a lower enclosure containing pool equipment for the apartment building which has occupied the site since the early 1960s.

Originally, a front entrance door opened to the first floor and a spiral staircase to an upper compartment honeymoon suite, which a newly married couple could rent. The suite was popular with newlyweds who had enjoyed their first date at the Little Tea House. The spiral staircase is now gone, and access is by ladder. The front doorway was cemented over, presumably when the Tea House closed in the 1960s, and a water fountain was added. A new doorway was cut into the left side of the tower for access to showers and toilets for those

Fig. 2: The Little Tea House Tower and Garden, ca. 1920



Courtesy AHS.

using the pool. The original windows were replaced a few years ago with standard metal windows sealed into the frame with caulking.

The upper compartment floor is covered with full length tongue and groove wood panels supported by wood beams and appears to be original. The walls have also been whitewashed, and the ceiling is covered with a metallic terrapin to catch water leaks. The metal obscures the rafter construction style of the conical roof.

The overall architectural style of the tower suggests the French Renaissance period. The top of the tower is crowned with a weathervane of a stagecoach drawn by a team of horses. The weathervane is joined to a detached cupula from the main roof supported by eight staves, whereupon the tiled roof slopes to an overhang over the windows. The wall continues down the bottom to a concrete foundation and ground.

The date of construction for the tower is unclear. "Outbuilding" structures like the tower are often poorly documented. They might appear on insurance maps or in real estate advertisements or announcements. Details might be found in routine household files, such as invoices, utility bills, or receipts; however, such documents rarely survive time, changes in ownership, renovations, or damage.

Fig. 3: Tea House Tower, Ridge House Condos, 2010.

Courtesy of AHS.

The tower has two features that suggest when it was constructed. First, the foundation has a circular poured concrete base. Second, the upper compartment has long tongue and groove wood paneling supported by cross beams. Both are significant due to the introduction of new construction innovations in the last quarters of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. In 1904, Richard Bodlaeder[6] introduced the portable rotary cement mixer. This led to the use of poured concrete foundations for smaller homes and buildings.

Rapid improvements made portability in concrete easier to laying down "raft and strip foundations" along a wall regardless of shape in a seamless flow moving from valve or hose from a mobile rotary mixer.[7]

In 1828, William Woodworth[8] was granted a machine patent for "Planing and Tonguing boards" for walls, ceilings, and floors. Flooring stock still required a subfloor for support and attachment. In 1885, The Egan Company of Cincinnati introduced a machine that could plane, tongue, and groove continuously on larger, longer, and heavier size flooring planks.[9] In 1893, The Lehman Machine Co. of Williamsport, Pennsylvania, created the "end matcher" machine.[10] "Until that point, all flooring ends of each piece had to be on joists (horizontal support beams of a structure), as subfloors were not commonly used." This mechanized manufacturing of wood flooring launched the wood floor industry in the first quarter of the twentieth century, just when the tower was built.[11]

In an article published in the 2000 *Arlington Historical Magazine*, local historian Sara Collins noted that "Ms. Crocker built the restaurant, home, cottage tower, and other buildings" on the property.[12] The exact date of construction remains uncertain, but the evidence suggests that Crocker built the tower shortly after acquiring the property circa 1920–1923, perhaps as part of a landscaping theme.[13] This unique tower is all that remains of Arlington's Little Tea House.

About the Author

Ciro R. Taddeo is a long-time member of the Society and has contributed past articles on American suffragist Gertrude Lynde Crocker, The Little Tea House, and Henry Bennet, First Earl of Arlington. A native of Brooklyn, New York, he is a graduate of The City University of New York and Long Island University. He served as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Ethiopia and is retired from Georgetown University.

Endnotes

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