

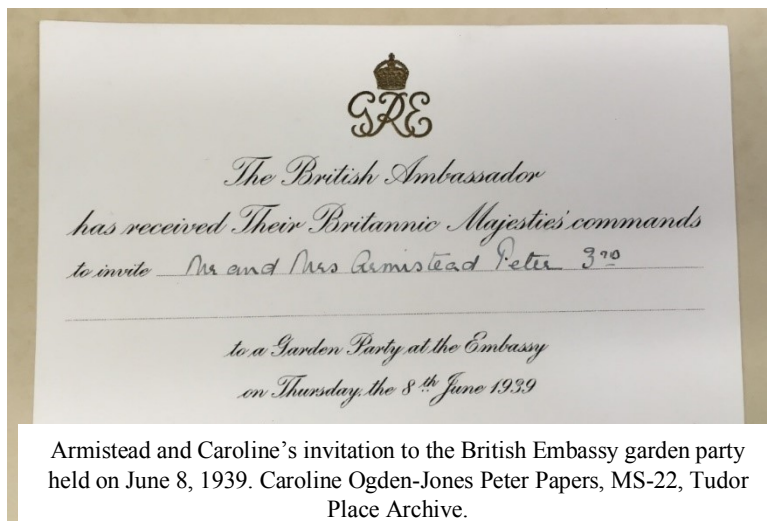
## The Royal Visit:

### “Two burning, boiling, sweltering, humid furnace-like days in Washington”

For two days in June of 1939, the city of Washington, D.C. played host to King George VI and Queen Elizabeth of Great Britain. The royal visit was a significant occasion as it was the first time<sup>1</sup> that a reigning British monarch set foot in the United States, a country comprised of former colonies that had successfully rebelled against both British rule and monarchy two centuries earlier. The arrival of the King and Queen in Canada in late May 1939 had earlier marked the first time that a British monarch had even been in North America. The visit had been the idea of John Buchanan, Governor General of Canada, and MacKenzie King, Canadian Prime Minister. The Prime Minister was in London for the Coronation in May of 1937 and took the opportunity to make an invitation to His Majesty for a Canadian tour. Prime Minister King also alerted President Franklin Roosevelt of his proposal for a royal visit. The President then instructed American diplomat James Gerard, his special envoy at the coronation, to extend an invitation to the King to visit the United States during the same trip.<sup>2</sup> The King eagerly accepted both invitations.

The American portion of the trip would include visits to Washington, D.C.; the campus of the 1939 World's Fair in Queens, New York; and the Roosevelt estate in Hyde Park, New York. Dinners with President and Mrs. Roosevelt, a visit to Arlington National Cemetery, and a driving tour of Washington were all announced in local papers as parts of the couple's itinerary.<sup>3</sup> However, there was an underlying reason for the visit. George VI was attempting to gain American support for the nation of Great Britain with the threat of war looming across Europe. Roosevelt also wanted to strengthen this alliance since he saw Great Britain as the first line of defense against Nazi Germany.<sup>4</sup>

One of the key events of the visit was a garden party held at the British Ambassador's residence on the afternoon of June 8, 1939. Hosted by the British Ambassador, the Honorable Sir Ronald Lindsay, and his American-born wife, Lady Lindsay (née Elizabeth Sherman Hoyt), it has been described as one of the most desirable social events in the history of our city. Among those invited to the affair were Armistead Peter 3rd and his wife





Caroline. Their invitation, which survives in the Tudor Place Archives, led to the research summarized in this article.

The King and Queen would be the guests of honor at the garden party, and members of the President's cabinet, Congressional leadership, diplomats, and financiers, as well as prominent members of Washington society, were all invited to attend. As word of the soiree spread across the city, it became one of the most coveted invitations imaginable. Members of the press traveling in Canada with the King and Queen the week before their arrival in Washington began referring to the outcry for invitations as the "Second American Revolution."<sup>5</sup> One reporter claimed that "one of the brightest spots of the long, tiring dominion tour for both Their Majesties...has been newspaper accounts of the stress and strife occasioned by the grand manner in which American-born Lady Lindsay has handed out invitations to the [garden] party."<sup>6</sup> The British press, familiar with the royal garden parties held at Buckingham Palace since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, couldn't comprehend why invitations to this particular garden party were in such high demand. However, those in Washington knew the sense of prestige that was attached to attending a social event at the British Embassy, and this particular party also provided an opportunity to potentially meet or at least see the British monarch.

The royal visit occurred during one especially brutal summer heat wave. The title for this article is taken from a letter written by the Queen to her daughter, Princess Elizabeth, now Queen Elizabeth II, describing the visit. Weather records from Washington National Airport indicate that the daytime temperatures on the day of the garden party, June 8, reached 92 degrees, with 97% humidity. More accustomed to the milder English weather, the royal couple and their entourage must have been miserable at the outdoor events and while riding around in the motorcade of open-air automobiles. Surviving images show the King was always attired in either a full military dress uniform complete with bicorn hat or wearing a three-piece wool morning suit with tailcoat during the visit. One detail shared by First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt at her press conference was a plan for the Queen to wear a dress made of American wool, while Mrs. Roosevelt would wear a dress of English wool as a joint statement of support for the textile industries in their respective countries. Mrs. Roosevelt suffered through the day in her dress of English wool, but the Queen, deciding it was too warm, substituted her dress of American wool for a sheer ankle-length suit of powdered mauve of a more suitable fabric.<sup>7</sup>

The King and Queen arrived in Washington mid-morning on June 8, having come by train from Canada where they had spent several weeks touring the country by rail with Canadian Prime



Minister King. Their whistle-stop tour of Canada had taken them from Montreal all the way west to Victoria, British Columbia. When the royal train arrived at Union Station, they were greeted by Ambassador Lindsay and Cordell Hull, the U.S. Secretary of State. One *Washington Post* reporter observed Lady Lindsay outside Union Station shortly before the arrival, eagerly looking up at the sky and apparently crossing her fingers, fearful of the rain that was predicted for later that evening.<sup>8</sup>

Sir Ronald Lindsay, a career diplomat, had served as the British Ambassador in Washington since 1930, an unusually long tenure for the post. He had initially wanted to retire at the end of 1938 but was persuaded to stay in office until the completion of this royal visit. After initial greetings, Ambassador Lindsay and Secretary Hull escorted the King and Queen to the President's Reception Room in Union Station, strolling upon a strip of royal blue carpet that was laid especially for the occasion and flanked by two columns of U.S. Marines. In the President's Room, they were formally received by the President and Mrs. Roosevelt.

With a military escort, the couples traveled in a motorcade of open-air Packard automobiles from the White House fleet, driving past the Capitol Building and then down Pennsylvania Avenue to the White House. The King and President Roosevelt rode in the lead car with Queen Elizabeth and Mrs. Roosevelt in the second car. Washingtonians lined the avenue to catch a glimpse of Their Majesties, who politely waved to the applauding crowd. After a White House luncheon with the Roosevelts, the King and Queen spent an hour on a sightseeing drive around the city, going past the Lincoln Memorial and Washington National Cathedral and through Rock Creek Park on Rock Creek Parkway. At some point during this tour, they passed Tudor Place, perhaps en route to the Cathedral. Armistead Peter Jr., then owner of Tudor Place, noted in his diary that "All at Tudor [Place] saw their majesties—and had I known I too might have seen them, for they passed through Q Street."<sup>9</sup> His diary entry suggests that the royal motorcade came down Q Street, which forms the southern boundary of the Tudor Place property. The servants, perhaps in their excitement to see the King and Queen, forgot to alert Mr. Peter, who then vented his frustration in his diary.

Much of the planning and execution of the embassy garden party fell to Lady Lindsay who, in addition to being wife of the Ambassador, was a professionally trained landscape architect, though she preferred using the British designation of landscape gardener. Prior to her marriage to the Ambassador, Elizabeth Lindsay had trained at Harvard's Arnold Arboretum with Charles Sprague Sargent and then later worked for several years with her mentor, Beatrix Jones Farrand. Farrand is a name that will be familiar to many in Washington, D.C. as the landscape architect of the Dumbarton Oaks gardens and the first female landscape architect in the United States. Lady Lindsay then



established her own practice in Manhattan where she designed the gardens of many country estates on Long Island's north coast.<sup>10</sup> She later served with the American Red Cross in France during World War I. In 1924, she married Lord Lindsay who was then a widower following the death of his first wife, her cousin Martha Cameron Lindsay.

For Lady Lindsay, the party would not only allow her to play hostess to the King and Queen but also to showcase a garden where she was responsible for many of the plantings. While not the original designer of the embassy garden, Lady Lindsay replanted the garden entirely during the nine-year posting in Washington. As the *Boston Globe* reported a month before the visit, Lady Lindsay wanted a garden that would be attractive in all four seasons. She also sought to design a garden that wouldn't require extensive upkeep.<sup>11</sup> Many of the trees, flowering shrubs, and roses that she planted still remain more than 80 years later. Nearest to the house, the most formal spaces in the garden contained geometric beds planted with roses, though one newspaper article noted that the roses were not in bloom during the garden party.

What was envisioned as a smaller more intimate affair during the royal visit soon ballooned when a group of Congressional wives learned of the event and sought invitations. As initially planned, only the chairmen of standing Senate and House committees as well as members of the Foreign Relations Committee and the Majority and Minority leadership were to be invited along with their spouses.<sup>12</sup> That meant that only 47 of the 96 sitting U.S. Senators would receive invitations. According to a *Washington Post* story published several days before the event, the Senate wives then made an appeal to Mariette Garner during a luncheon several weeks before the party, requesting that she discuss the matter with her husband, Vice President of the United States, John Nance Garner. In addition to being Vice President, Garner also happened to be a frequent tennis partner for the British Ambassador.<sup>13</sup> In the end, more than 1,500 invitations were mailed out for the garden party.

Since 1791, the British government had maintained a diplomatic presence in the United States. Anthony Merry was the first British diplomat to reside in Washington, D.C., arriving in 1803. Diplomatic relations between the two countries were suspended during the War of 1812, and, when they resumed in 1815, the British government did not have a permanent address in the city. For much of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a multitude of buildings were rented to serve the British Legation until a permanent site was purchased on Connecticut Avenue and a building completed in 1875.<sup>14</sup> By 1929, the legation had outgrown that building and property, and at that time a deal was made with local real estate developer Harry Wardman in which the British government received their present site on

Massachusetts Avenue in exchange for their Connecticut Avenue property and an agreed upon sum of money.<sup>15</sup>



The King and Queen's arrival at the garden party, June 8, 1939. Press photograph now part of the Tudor Place Collection.

The present ambassador's residence within the British Embassy compound was designed by noted British architect Sir Edwin Lutyens. The residence was completed in 1930 and represents the architect's only commission in the United States. Resembling an English country house, the building also exhibited details that Lutyens borrowed from a distinctly American architectural vocabulary. When viewed from the garden, the prominent feature of the house on its east façade is a Palladian portico flanked by two pavilions with dormers and a high-pitched roof. In contrast the western façade of the residence was very baroque and, as one scholar has suggested, evokes the English Baroque style of Nicholas Hawksmoor.<sup>16</sup> A corridor that housed the ambassador's personal study connected the residence to the chancery building and also served as a porte-cochere.



The garden party began at 4:00 p.m., and the royal couple was scheduled to arrive at 5:00 p.m. En route from the White House to the British Embassy, the royal motorcade was allowed to go the "wrong way" through Dupont Circle, turning left around the western arc of the circle to pick up Massachusetts Avenue. As the *Washington Post* pointed out, the King and Queen were used to the British custom of driving on the left side of the road, so they would likely not even notice this important courtesy afforded to them.<sup>17</sup> They arrived slightly behind schedule, closer to 5:30 p.m. Even though the party was scheduled to last for three hours, the King and Queen would only stay for thirty minutes as they had to return to the White House and prepare for their dinner with President and Mrs. Roosevelt later that evening.

Upon arriving at the party, the King and Queen walked out beneath the portico as a band played "God Save the King." Much of their visit was spent enjoying tea beneath the shade of the portico with a select group of guests including their hosts, Ambassador and Lady Lindsay, along with Vice President and Mrs. Garner, and financier J.P. Morgan. Also seated under the portico but at a separate table were Mr. and Mrs. John D. Rockefeller Jr., former First Lady Edith Galt Wilson, Grace Graham Wilson Vanderbilt, and Alice Roosevelt Longworth, socialite daughter of President Theodore Roosevelt and cousin of First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt.

After finishing tea, the King accompanied by Ambassador Lindsay strolled out among the crowd. The Queen and Lady Lindsay did the same in the opposite direction. While most of the guests who met the visiting royals during the party politely bowed or curtsied, Vice President Garner broke the accepted rules of protocol at one point and slapped the King on the back. Garner who had earned the nickname "Cactus Jack" during his early days of Texas politics had a personality the size of his beloved Lone Star state, which must have been quite a surprise to the normally reserved and shy King George.

Reporters covering the event were especially interested in the Queen's dress, describing it the next day as "flounced and full, it was fashioned of white net with embroidered panels, edged with ruffles, and horizontal tucks giving it a quaint, Victorian effect."<sup>18</sup> The King wore a morning suit with a cutaway coat and matching trousers, traditional dress for a garden party. Among those who conversed with the royal couple, the *Washington Post* noted that Alice Roosevelt Longworth did not curtsy to the Queen when greeting her and later spoke with her for over two minutes. A brief burst of misty summer rain sent the King and Queen back to the shelter of the covered portico.<sup>19</sup> In addition to tea, the menu included sauterne punch, 25,000 specially grown strawberries of uniform size, frappes, ice creams, and fancy cakes.<sup>20</sup>



While it is unlikely that Armistead or Caroline Peter met the King and Queen during their promenade around the embassy garden, they would have had no shortage of common interests to discuss if they had met. In the summer of 1939, both Armistead and George VI were 44 years old. Each had served his country during World War I in Naval Service focused on aviation. At the time of the Armistice in November 1918, Armistead Peter 3<sup>rd</sup> was awaiting transfer to a Naval Reserve Flying Station where he was going to work as a Radio Officer; King George VI, then Prince Albert or “Bertie” as he was called by his family, served as an officer of the Royal Naval Air Service and later the Royal Air Force. Both men also had great-grandmothers with regal sounding names: George VI had a great-grandmother named Victoria, and Armistead Peter 3<sup>rd</sup> had a great-grandmother named Britannia.

Later that evening, after leaving the British Embassy, the King and Queen returned to the White House for a State Dinner hosted by President Roosevelt and stayed the night as guests of the Roosevelts. The following day, Friday, June 9, the King and Queen returned to the British Embassy where they received members of the British community in Washington. Next, they travelled to the Capitol Building where they were received by members of both the Senate and the House of Representatives. At noon, they boarded the President’s yacht, the U.S.S. *Potomac*, at the Washington Naval Yard where they joined the President and members of his cabinet for luncheon and a trip downriver to Mount Vernon. It was during their time at Mount Vernon that they would be introduced to a member of the Peter family. Agnes Peter (later Mrs. John R. Mott) was well known at Mount Vernon as a direct descendant of Martha Washington. In 1939, Agnes Peter owned a significant collection of Martha Washington’s jewelry, clothing, furniture, and other objects that she had inherited in 1911 from her grandmother Britannia W. Kennon. Just a few months before the royal visit, Agnes had made national news when she portrayed Martha Washington at Mount Vernon as part of a reenactment on the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of George Washington’s departure for New York City to assume the Presidency. An image of Agnes standing on the steps of Mount Vernon wearing several pieces of her ancestor’s jewelry and accessories was taken by a local photographer and reprinted in newspapers across the country.

When the presidential yacht docked at Mount Vernon’s wharf, the King and Queen were last to disembark followed only by President Roosevelt. While the King and Queen walked up the hill to Washington’s tomb, the President was put in a waiting car and driven the short distance. After a wreath-laying at the tomb, they visited the mansion where they were presented to the Regent and Vice Regents of the Mount Vernon Ladies Association. It was after they toured the mansion that they met Agnes Peter in the garden. According to one newspaper story, it was Lady Lindsay who recognized Agnes and beckoned her over to meet the King and Queen. And as the newspaper story



noted, “Martha Washington’s great-great-great-granddaughter met the great-great-great-grandson of King George III.”<sup>21</sup>

Leaving Mount Vernon by car, the King and Queen next visited the Civilian Conservation Corps camp at Fort Hunt—the CCC being one of President Roosevelt’s New Deal programs that he was likely eager to show off to the King. The corpsmen at Fort Hunt had been busy constructing picnic shelters with stone fireplaces and public comfort stations, even excavating an artificial lake and creating a network of roads and trails. Driving further along the George Washington Memorial Parkway, they next visited Arlington Cemetery, where the King laid wreaths on the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier and on the Canadian Cross of Sacrifice, the memorial honoring American citizens who had enlisted in the Canadian Armed Forces during World War I and were killed in action.

After a late afternoon tea with the Roosevelts at the White House, the King and Queen returned to the British Embassy where they hosted a dinner for the President and First Lady. The dinner lasted until almost 11:00 p.m. after which the King and Queen left for Union Station where they boarded their train bound for New York. Following a visit to the campus of the 1939 World’s Fair at Flushing Meadows, they spent the rest of the weekend further up the Hudson as the guests of President and Mrs. Roosevelt in Hyde Park, New York. It was during a barbeque at President Roosevelt’s retreat, *Top Cottage*, that King George VI famously ate hot dogs, spilling a glob of mustard on his shirt in the process.

From Hyde Park, Queen Elizabeth wrote to her thirteen-year-old daughter, Princess Elizabeth in London, describing the visit to Washington saying that she and the King had “two burning, boiling, sweltering, humid furnace-like days in Washington, and as we were busy from early morning till late, you can imagine what we felt like at the end of it! But everybody was so kind & welcoming, & one feels really at home here.”<sup>22</sup> The visit was lauded as a huge success by both the British and American press. While only two days long, the visit endeared the King and Queen to the American people, and the royals were equally impressed with the warm reception and hospitality extended to them during the time in Washington. It also strengthened the diplomatic relationship between the two countries on the eve of the second world war, which began less than three months after this visit when Great Britain and France jointly declared war on Germany. Some cultural historians have even speculated that this brief visit to Washington, D.C. and the press coverage it received is what renewed the American people’s fascination with the British royal family. It also started a succession of royal visits to the United States. While it was the only visit made by King George VI, his daughter Queen





Elizabeth II has come to Washington on five separate occasions beginning with her first visit as Princess Elizabeth in 1951, followed by her first visit as Queen in 1957.

While Armistead Peter Jr. may have missed the royal motorcade driving past Tudor Place, his son Armistead Peter 3rd and daughter-in-law Caroline did attend the Ambassador's garden party -- but it was his sister, Agnes Peter, who happened to be in the right place at the right time the following day at Mount Vernon, who received an introduction to the King and Queen.

- Grant Quertermous, Curator

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<sup>1</sup> During Queen Victoria's reign, her son, Prince Albert, then The Prince of Wales and not yet King Edward VII, visited the United States and Washington, D.C., in 1860.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Conradi, *Hot Dogs and Cocktails*, Alma Books, 2013

<sup>3</sup> "Sovereigns' Schedule: Last-Minute Schedule of the Royal Couple" *Washington Post*, June 8, 1939.

<sup>4</sup> Conradi, *Hot Dogs and Cocktails*

<sup>5</sup> Inez Robb, "Sovereigns Amused by Social Tempest Garden Party Stirred" *Washington Post*, June 6, 1939. ProQuest Historical Newspapers

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> "Sidelights of Capital's Epochal Day" *Washington Post*, June 9, 1939. via ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> A. Peter Jr., Diary Entry for June 9, 1939. 1939 Diary, Papers of Armistead Peter Jr. MS 14, Tudor Place Archive.

<sup>10</sup> An excellent source for more information about Lady Lindsay and her career as well as her work on the British embassy garden can be found on the blog, Landscape of a Washington Place by Julia Blakely found here: <https://washingtonembassygardens.wordpress.com/2014/02/09/the-royal-garden-party/>

<sup>11</sup> Boston Globe, May 21, 1939 as cited on the Landscape of a Washington Place blog by Julia Blakely noted above.

<sup>12</sup> Robb, "Sovereigns Amused by Social Tempest Garden Party Stirred".

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. Also, "The Royal Garden Party" on the Landscapes of Washington blog.

<sup>14</sup> See Mark Bertram, *Room for Diplomacy: A Catalog of British Embassy and Consulate Buildings, 1800-2010*. Spire Books, 2017.

The author has also created an expanded website with information on each of the British embassy buildings around the world. The section on the British Embassy in Washington, D.C. can be found at:

<https://roomfordiplomacy.com/washington-before-1951/>

<sup>15</sup> See Bertram, *Room for Diplomacy*.

<sup>16</sup> James Stourton, *British Embassies: Their Diplomatic and Architectural History*. Francis Lincoln, 2017.

<sup>17</sup> "Sidelights of Capital's Epochal Day" *Washington Post*, June 9, 1939/ ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>18</sup> "Garner Slaps King's Back at Garden Fete" *Washington Post*, June 9, 1939/ ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Text from newspaper article found in Walter G. Peter's compilation, "A collection of Facts Pertaining to the Peter Family" Copy in the research files, Tudor Place Archive.

<sup>22</sup> William Shawcross, Editor. *Counting One's Blessings: The Selected Letters of Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012), p. 272. As cited in "The Royal Garden Party", blog entry at <https://washingtonembassygardens.wordpress.com/2014/02/09/the-royal-garden-party/>