

Gaillard Hunt

Arlington's Forgotten Scholar

BY WILLARD J. WEBB

Gaillard Hunt was a scholar and historian. He researched and wrote prodigiously. He edited historical papers and wrote numerous articles, biographies, and other works of history. The Library of Congress catalog contains 35 author entries for Hunt. His career included two eminent Government positions—the Editor of the Department of State and Chief of the Manuscripts Division of the Library of Congress. In 1900, Hunt purchased the remote Basil Hall house in then rural Alexandria (soon to be Arlington) County. He and his family used the house as a summer home and country retreat for the rest of his life, and family members lived on the property until 1997. Yet, Gaillard Hunt is little remembered in Arlington today.

Gaillard Hunt was the son of William Henry Hunt and his second wife, Elizabeth. The Hunts were a distinguished Charleston, South Carolina family, but had moved during the 1830s to New Orleans. Here Gaillard Hunt was born on March 20, 1862, the seventh child and sixth son of the family. He came from a distinguished lineage. His father's mother, Louisa Gaillard, from whom he received his name, was the daughter of John Gaillard, who represented South Carolina in the US Senate. His mother was a granddaughter of Chancellor Robert R. Livingston of New York.¹

After the Civil War, the Hunt family moved to Washington in 1878. Young Gaillard attended the Hopkins Grammar School in New Haven, Connecticut, and the Emerson Institute in Washington. He did not receive a university education and had no advanced academic degree. Hunt's father was active in Republican politics and, following the 1880 election, President-elect James Garfield named William Henry Hunt his Secretary of the Navy. After serving as President for little more than three months, Garfield was shot by an assassin and died two months later. The new president, Chester Arthur, wanted his own people for his cabinet, and the senior Hunt was named US Minister to Russia. Gaillard, nineteen at the time, did not accompany his parents to St. Petersburg and remained in Washington. Correspondence between Gaillard and his parents while they were in Russia survives in the Hunt family papers.²

In 1882, Gaillard Hunt entered government service as a clerk in the Pension Office. After five years there, he moved to the Department of State and would eventually head the passport office, where he became the Department's expert on citizenship issues. Gore Vidal mentions Hunt and his role at the State Department in his novel *Empire*.³ It was at the State Department that he acquired his interest

in and love of old documents and began his writing career. It was a career for which he had no formal training but learned from practical experience.

Hunt published his first work, a slim 32-page volume, *The Seal of the United States: How It Was Developed and Adopted*, in 1892. It would subsequently be republished in 1909 as *The History of the Seal of the United States*.⁴ The following year, in conjunction with the Chicago World's Fair, Hunt wrote a "historical sketch" of the Department of State.⁵ This, too, would later be expanded and republished. These two early works were followed three years later in 1896 by a paper for the American Historical Society, "Locating the Capital." To celebrate the one hundredth anniversary of the capital in Washington, the Congress published a special commemorative volume in 1901. Hunt's piece, "Locating the Capital," was included as an appendix.⁶

The ensuing ten years would prove the most active and productive in Hunt's writing career. In 1900, he began editing the personal and public papers of James Madison. When complete in 1910, this work, *The Writings of James Madison*, comprised nine volumes.⁷ Work with and knowledge of the Madison papers allowed Hunt to write a biography, *The Life of James Madison*, published in 1903.⁸

The Madison biography was followed by one of Hunt's most popular and enduring works, *The First Forty Years of Washington Society in the Family Letters of Margaret Bayard Smith*, which he edited and published in 1906. Samuel Harrison Smith came to Washington in 1800 and established the capital's first newspaper, *The National Intelligencer*. Smith and his wife Margaret Bayard lived in Washington for forty years and their house became a social center of the new capital. The Smiths became intimate friends of all the national leaders, including Jefferson, Madison, and Madison's wife Dolly. While assembling and editing the Madison writings, Hunt undoubtedly encountered the extensive correspondence of Margaret Bayard Smith and deemed it worthy of publication. This work remains today one of the most valuable sources on early social life in Washington, and was republished in 1965 in the "American Classics Series."⁹

While occupied with all these projects, Hunt also found time to write a biography of John C. Calhoun and contribute an article to the *American Historical Review*, "Narrative and Letter of William Henry Trescot Concerning the Negotiation Between South Carolina and President Buchanan in December, 1860." Both appeared in 1908.¹⁰ Not all of Hunt's writings found a publisher. In March 1911, *Harper's Magazine* rejected an article he had written on the battle of Bull Run, advising Hunt that that the article had seemed "mildly interesting, but not compellingly so."¹¹ During these early years of the 20th Century, President Theodore Roosevelt appointed Hunt as one of three commissioners to

study and report on “naturalization.” Hunt’s selection was logical since he headed the State Department’s passport office. Hunt wrote the commission’s report which was submitted to the President in 1905.¹²

In spite of all the work, romance had crept into Gaillard Hunt’s life. He had met Mary Goodfellow, Molly as she was known, the daughter of an old Maryland family and great-grandniece of Archbishop Carroll. Gaillard and Molly were immediately attracted to one another and considered marriage. But religion posed a problem. Molly was a Roman Catholic and Gaillard a Protestant. Neither wanted to change. In the end, Gaillard converted to Catholicism and Molly and Gaillard were married on October 24, 1901 in St. Matthews Church in Washington. Four children were born of the marriage: Gaillard Jr. (1903), Henry Goodfellow (1907), Eleanor (1910), and Mary Cornelia (1912).¹³

Perhaps in anticipation of marriage, Gaillard Hunt had purchased the Bazil Hall house in July 1900 from the estate of Frances Hall, the second wife of Bazil. For the house and 21 acres, Hunt paid \$1,000.¹⁴ At that time, Alexandria County was still rural and the house was somewhat isolated. What is now George Mason Drive did not exist and the adjoining property to the east, now occupied by the Virginia Hospital Center, was farm land. A gravel lane through the woods gave access out to Brown’s Bend Road, or Mt. Olivet Road as it was also known, and which would eventually become 16th Street North. The Hunt family used the house as a summer home and country retreat while always maintaining a residence in Washington at various locations, including Hillyer Place, Desales Street, Woodley Road, and 35th Street. The Hunts called the country property



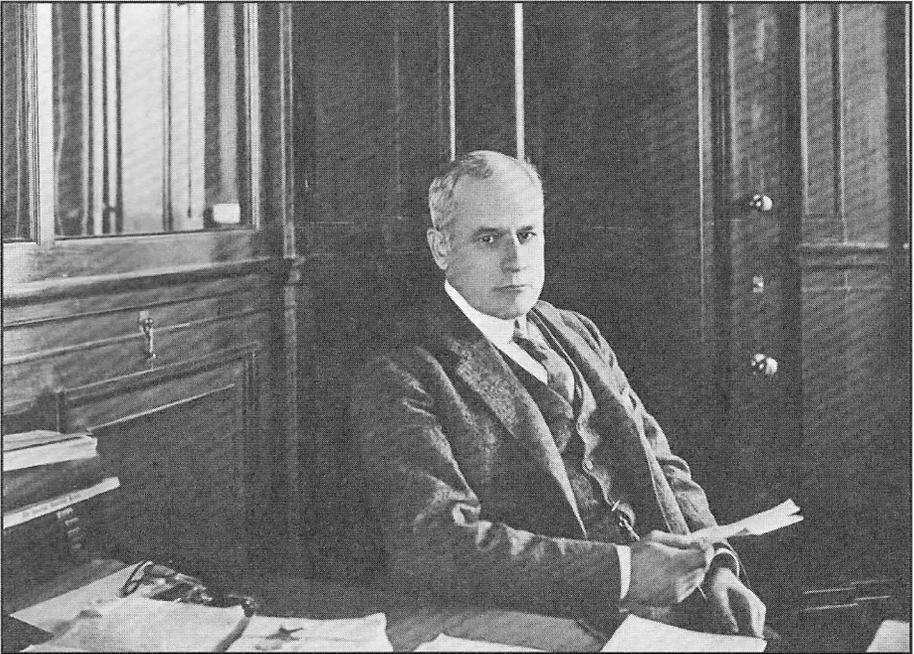
Courtesy of Ross O'Donoghue, Jr.; photo by Anne Webb
Mary "Molly" Goodfellow Hunt (Mrs. Gaillard Hunt).
Portrait by unknown artist.

“Cherry Hill” after several large cherry trees around the house, and never knew it as the Basil Hall house.¹⁵

Gaillard Hunt loved studying and working with old documents, and a new opportunity arose during this same period. The Library of Congress, which had recently moved into its spacious new building across the street from the Capitol, had established the Manuscripts Division in 1899 to administer its growing collections of personal papers and manuscripts.¹⁶ Hunt was immediately interested. He wrote to the Librarian of Congress Herbert Putnam in November 1900 seeking the position of chief of the new division. His sole reason for wishing to move from the Department of State, Hunt told Putnam, “is that the preservation, collection, arrangement and cataloging of historical manuscripts has been my chosen study.”¹⁷ But Putnam did not select Hunt. Instead, he chose Worthington C. Ford, a more widely recognized scholar. When Ford left the Library in 1909, Putnam did name Hunt as Chief of the Manuscripts Division.¹⁸

Under Ford the Manuscripts Division had begun publication of the voluminous records of the Continental Congress. At the time of Ford’s departure, 15 volumes of the *Journals of the Continental Congress, 1774-1789* had appeared. Hunt carried on the project and edited volumes 16-24 of the Journals during his tenure at the Manuscripts Division. When completed in 1937, the series comprised 34 volumes that remain a basic source of American revolutionary history.¹⁹ Hunt’s major accomplishment at the Manuscripts Division was the promotion of an increase in the donation of personal papers, and he introduced improvements in bibliographic control. He also recognized that, with the increasing size and number of collections coming to the Library, the then practice of producing calendars (detailed lists of documents) would no longer be adequate to make the resources of the Manuscripts Division known. He instituted instead a handbook to describe “the character and scope” of the Division’s collections. This *Handbook of the Manuscripts in the Library of Congress*, the first comprehensive guide to the Library’s manuscripts, was published in 1918 just after Hunt had left the Library.²⁰

While Chief of the Manuscripts Division, Hunt participated in efforts to obtain the Lincoln papers for the Library’s collections. Robert Todd Lincoln, Abraham Lincoln’s only surviving son, had a large cache of his father’s papers which he zealously protected from public scrutiny. Beginning in 1905, Librarian Putnam urged Robert Todd Lincoln to donate the papers to the Library of Congress. Although amenable to the idea, Robert Todd Lincoln would make no definite commitment. Hunt’s predecessor, Worthington Ford, met with Lincoln several times to urge him to donate the papers, but without success. After he became the Manuscripts Division chief, Hunt traveled to Chicago and visited



Library of Congress

Gaillard Hune at his desk while Chief of the Manuscripts Division of the Library of Congress.

Lincoln to encourage him once again about the papers. Hunt stressed that the Library then had the papers of nine presidents, including those of George Washington. Again, Lincoln was agreeable, but still reluctant to give any firm commitment. In the end, it was only in March 1919, after Hunt had left the Library, that Robert Todd Lincoln gave the Manuscripts Division eight trunks of his father's papers. Even then the papers did not become available to the public, for Robert Todd Lincoln specified that the papers must remain sealed and closed until twenty-one years after his death. Only in 1947 did the Library open the Lincoln papers to scholars and researchers.²¹

With the entry of the United States into World War I, the Secretary of State asked the Librarian of Congress in 1917 for the temporary assignment of Hunt to the State Department to serve as his advisor on citizenship. Hunt's experience with the passport office was again in demand. Following the end of the war, the Secretary of State asked Hunt to begin collecting documents for a history of the war. Then, in 1921, Secretary of State Charles Evans Hughes reorganized the Department of State. Among other things, he created a Division of Publications, naming Hunt the chief with the title "Editor of the Department of State." Although Hunt had left the Library for the State Department in 1917,



Library of Congress

Gaillard Hunt, right, presenting the original of the Declaration of Independence to Herbert Putnam, the Librarian of Congress, in the Department of State Library on September 30, 1921.

he had remained an employee of the Library. Only on becoming the Editor of the Department of State did Hunt formally resign from the Library. In his letter of resignation to Herbert Putnam, Hunt wrote: "I need not assure you . . . that I make this request unwillingly, because of my great interest in the Library and especially in the Manuscripts Division."²²

Even while at the Library of Congress and fully occupied with editing the *Journals of the Continental Congress* and pursuing the elusive Lincoln papers, and after he returned to the State Department, Hunt still found time to continue his own writing. In 1910, the final volume of *The Writings of James Madison* appeared. In 1914, Hunt published *The Department of State: Its History and Functions*, an expansion of his 1893 sketch of the Department done for the Chicago World's Fair. That same year he also published what would prove his most successful and popular work, *Life in America One Hundred Years Ago*. Written to celebrate the one hundredth anniversary of the War of 1812, the book examined life and manners as they were at time of the war. Chapters included such topics as "Coach and Sloop," "Turbans and Pantaloons," "Women," "Com-

mon People,” “The Sunshine of Humor,” “Pirates and Debtors,” “Vice,” and “Discontent.” *Life in America One Hundred Years Ago* has been republished twice, once in 1971 and again in 1993.²³

Following the World War and his return to the Department of State, Gailard Hunt’s writing career was largely finished, and he authored no further major works. He did continue to write articles and present papers to various historical organizations. In 1920, he presented a paper before the Antiquarian Society on “William Thornton [the first architect of the Capitol] and Negro Colonization,”²⁴ and he gave a paper, “The Genesis of the Office of the Secretary of State” to the American Historical Association in 1922.²⁵ He also pursued a major interest, the creation of a US archives. While Chief of the Manuscripts Division at the Library he had served as the US delegate to the International Congress of Archivists and Librarians in Brussels in 1910. Thereafter he was active in promoting the idea of an archive for the United States, and spoke frequently on the need for one to various organizations.²⁶ (This was an idea that would come to fruition only in 1934 with the creation of the US National Archives.) During these latter years, Hunt gave courses at the University of South Carolina and lectured on “Nationality” at the George Washington University Graduate School of Political Science and on “Materials for History” at Johns Hopkins University. His contributions to scholarship were recognized by honorary degrees from Washington and Lee, William and Mary, and the University of South Carolina.

He was also active in many historical organizations, including the American Historical Association and the American Catholic Historical Association, as well as the Columbia Historical Society of the District of Columbia, the Virginia Historical Association, and the Sons of the American Revolution. In December 1923, Hunt was elected President of the American Catholic Historical Association. At the time, he was already serving as Chairman of the Knights of Columbus Historical Commission and was engaged in a reorganization of that Commission.²⁷

On his return to the Department of State, Hunt had arranged for the transfer of the original copies of the Declaration of Independence and the US Constitution, which were in the State Department, to the Library of Congress. The actual transfer took place in Hunt’s office on September 30, 1921 when Hunt presented them to Herbert Putnam. The Library constructed a special display case and area for the documents and they were unveiled at a ceremony on February 28, 1924. Hunt did not attend the ceremony because of illness. The following day, Librarian Putnam wrote:

My dear Hunt

Your absence yesterday was our particular chagrin. We could not, and shall not, forget that the presence here – and

future in our custody – of these documents, is due to your large and magnanimous conception of fitness and utility and your completely successful method of realizing it.²⁸

Gaillard Hunt died unexpectedly on March 20, 1924. He was recovering from an illness that had not been considered serious. On the evening of March 20, he was visited by Congressman Walton Moore of Virginia. Hunt was sitting propped up in bed conversing with Moore. The latter stated that Hunt was in “a most hopeful and joyous mood” when suddenly he closed his eyes and died.²⁹

Tributes to Hunt were quick in coming. The *Washington Evening Star* announced the death of the “noted” author and historian.³⁰ Secretary of State Hughes issued a public statement praising Hunt and his contributions to the Department of State and to scholarship. He forwarded a copy to Molly Hunt in a personal letter, stating that he sent the copy that “you may know that this spontaneous expression on the part of men of many years association with Mr. Hunt is dictated by the affectionate honor in which he was held by us all.”³¹ Librarian of Congress Putnam also issued a tribute. Hunt’s death, he said:

deprives the Library of a counsellor and friend, whose interest, appreciation and good offices in behalf of our Manuscript Collections antedated his service with us . . . and persisted on his later return to the Department of State . . . and our debt to him is a very special one—in addition to that general obligation, shared by his associates and beneficiaries, for the human qualities with which he vivified every subject matter with which he dealt and the winning geniality of his disposition in relation to it.³²

The scholarly organizations gave accolades as well. The American Historical Association stated that Hunt’s death “deprived this Association of one of its most distinguished and talented members,” and the *Catholic Historical Review* said, “In his death Catholic historical scholarship has lost one of its foremost leaders, and the [American Catholic Historical] Association, of which he was the honoured President, mourns his loss, for he has left vacant in its ranks a place few can fill.”³³

What of Hunt’s personality and what he was like as a person? Actually, we know little. We do know by the number of works he produced that he was diligent and extremely hard working. It was his habit to rise early every morning and put in two hours of work writing before breakfast.³⁴ As to personality, the *Dictionary of National Biography* states: “Handsome, jovial, humorous, friendly in spirit, lively and original in talk, he was a favorite in Washington society, and had many devoted friends.” Statements by both Secretary Hughes and Librarian Putnam confirm Hunt’s friendliness and good rapport with his colleagues and friends.³⁵

Hunt left no diaries or memoirs to reveal his thoughts and personality, and since all of Hunt's grandchildren were born after his death, no surviving family members have any personal recollection of him. Grandson Gaillard T. Hunt recalls that his father remembered Hunt as "a stern parent" though most others thought him very amiable. Hunt speculates that his father's memory may have been colored by "political disagreements and other family dynamics."³⁶ Stern parent Gaillard Hunt may have been, but he was also interested and involved in his son's education as several surviving letters to the son's school principals attest.³⁷ Grandson Gaillard T. Hunt also recalls that his father claimed Hunt was a "rock-ribbed" conservative who sent him when a small boy to throw stones at the suffragettes marching in front of the White House.³⁸

Although Hunt was a busy professional and the family lived at Cherry Hill only during the summer months, he did take an interest in local Arlington affairs. Such interest is evidenced in a letter he wrote to Mrs. Lacey Johnston in Ballston in June 1915 sharing her concerns about disorderly happenings in the neighborhood and supporting her intention to appear before the next meeting of the county board of supervisors. He thought "a regular officer, giving his whole time to watching and patrolling the vicinity" was needed.³⁹

The Cherry Hill house no longer survives and it is remembered in Arlington today as the home of Bazil Hall. It deserves to be remembered as the home of Gaillard Hunt as well, since Hunt and his family occupied the house for almost one hundred years.

Willard J. Webb is a longtime Arlington resident and Arlington Historical Society member. He served as a government historian for 34 years, culminating in his assignment as Chief of the Historical Office of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. He has been a frequent contributor to the Magazine over the years, submitting his first article, "John Mason of Analostan Island," in 1976.

The author is particularly indebted to Gaillard Hunt's grandsons, Gaillard T. Hunt of Wheaton and Ross O'Donoghue of Arlington. Both were extremely helpful in providing information about their grandfather and the Hunt family and took great trouble to locate and make available documents from the Hunt Papers and to review the completed draft manuscript. The author is indebted as well to Monsignor Robert Trisco of the American Catholic Historical Association for assistance with research in the records and journals of the Association.

End Notes

- ¹ All biographical information, unless otherwise noted, is from J. Franklin Jameson, "Gaillard Hunt," in *Dictionary of American Biography*, Vol. V, Dumas Malone, ed. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1964), p. 385, and from interviews, author with G.T. Hunt, March 24, 2007 and with Ross O'Donoghue, July 16, 2007.
- ² The Hunt Family Papers, hereafter cited as Hunt Papers, are a collection of 1,626 documents that have been cataloged. The collection is divided among several family members, principally G.T. Hunt and Ross O'Donoghue, Jr.
- ³ Gore Vidal, *Empire* (New York: Random House, 1987), p. 412.
- ⁴ Gaillard Hunt, *The Seal of the United States: How It Was Developed and Adopted* (Washington: Department of State, 1892); Hunt, *The History of the Seal of the United States* (Washington: Department of State, 1909).
- ⁵ Gaillard Hunt, "*The Department of State of the United States*," subsequently expanded and published as *The Department of State: Its History and Functions* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1914).
- ⁶ Gaillard Hunt, "Locating the Capital," 1896; published as Appendix 5 in *Celebration of the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Establishment of the Seat of Government in the District of Columbia*, William V. Cox, ed. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1901).
- ⁷ Gaillard Hunt, ed., *The Writings of James Madison, Comprising His Public Papers and Private Correspondence, Including Numerous Letters and Documents Now for the First Time Printed* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1900-1910).
- ⁸ Gaillard Hunt, *The Life of James Madison* (New York: Doubleday, Page & Co., 1903).
- ⁹ Gaillard Hunt, ed., *The First Forty Years of Washington Society in the Family Letters of Margaret Bayard Smith* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1906); (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1965).
- ¹⁰ Gaillard Hunt, *John C. Calhoun* (Philadelphia: G.W. Jacobs & Co., 1908); Hunt, "Narrative and Letter of William Henry Trescot . . .," *American Historical Review*, Vol. XII. April 1908.
- ¹¹ Ltr, Thomas P. Welly to Hunt, March 21, 1911, Hunt Papers.
- ¹² Report, "Commission on Naturalization," (Washington: GPO. 1905).
- ¹³ Wedding invitation, Mary Goodfellow and Gaillard Hunt, October 24, 1901, Hunt Papers; interviews, G.T. Hunt and Ross O'Donoghue. St. Matthews Church became St. Matthews Cathedral in 1948.
- ¹⁴ Alexandria County Deed Book 103, pp. 203-206.
- ¹⁵ Interviews, G.T. Hunt and Ross O'Donoghue, Jr.
- ¹⁶ Library of Congress, Manuscripts Division and Collections, *A History of the Manuscripts Division*, 2003, p. 2.
- ¹⁷ Ltr, Hunt to Herbert Putnam, Nov. 6, 1900, LC Manuscripts Div. Collection.
- ¹⁸ *History of the Manuscripts Division*, p. 3.
- ¹⁹ Library of Congress, *Journals of the Continental Congress* (Washington: GPO, 1904-1937).
- ²⁰ *History of the Manuscripts Division*, pp. 3-4.
- ²¹ David C. Mearns, *The Lincoln Papers* (Garden City: Doubleday & Co., 1948), pp. 89-136.
- ²² Ltr, Hunt to Herbert Putnam, May 19, 1921, LC Manuscripts Div. Collection.
- ²³ Gaillard Hunt, *Life in America One Hundred Years Ago* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1914); (Williamstown, MA: Corner House Publishers, 1971); (Stockbridge, MA: Berkshire House Publishers, 1993).
- ²⁴ Gaillard Hunt, "William Thornton and Negro Colonization," *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society*, April 1920.
- ²⁵ Gaillard Hunt, "The Genesis of the Office of Secretary of State," published in the *American Historical Association Annual Report*, Vol. I, 1929, pp. 335-343.
- ²⁶ "Gaillard Hunt" in *Catholic Historical Review*, Vol. X (New Series, Vol. IV), April 1924, p. 113; ltr., W.G. Leland, Secy., Am. Hist. Assoc., to Hunt, November 1915, Hunt Papers.
- ²⁷ Jameson, "Hunt," *Dictionary of American Biography*, Vol. V, p. 385; "Hunt," *Catholic Historical Review*, Vol. X (New Series, Vol. IV), Apr 1924, pp. 112-115; Marcus Benjamin, "Gaillard Hunt: A Sketch," (Washington: Sons of the Revolution, 1924), pp. 11-12.
- ²⁸ Ltr, Herbert Putnam to Hunt, February 29, 1924, Hunt Papers. The originals of the Declaration and Constitution were transferred from the Library of Congress to the National Archives in 1952.
- ²⁹ *NY Times*, Mar 21, 1924, p. 19; Walton R. Moore, Memorandum with ref. to death of Mr. Gaillard Hunt, undated [Mar 1924], Hunt Papers. Hunt died at the Everett Hotel in Washington where he was apparently

recuperating from his illness. Why there and not at his home is not explained in existing documentation or by family members.

³⁰ *Washington Evening Star*, March 21, 1924, p. 6.

³¹ Ltr, SecState Hughes to Mary G. Hunt, March 22, 1924, Hunt Papers.

³² Statement, Herbert Putnam, undated [March 1924], Hunt Papers.

³³ Am. Hist. Assoc., "Gaillard Hunt: 1862-1924," September 9, 1924, Hunt Papers; "Gaillard Hunt (1862-1924)," *Catholic Historical Review*, Vol. X (New Series Vol. IV), April 1924, pp. 112-113.

³⁴ Benjamin, "Gaillard Hunt," p. 9.

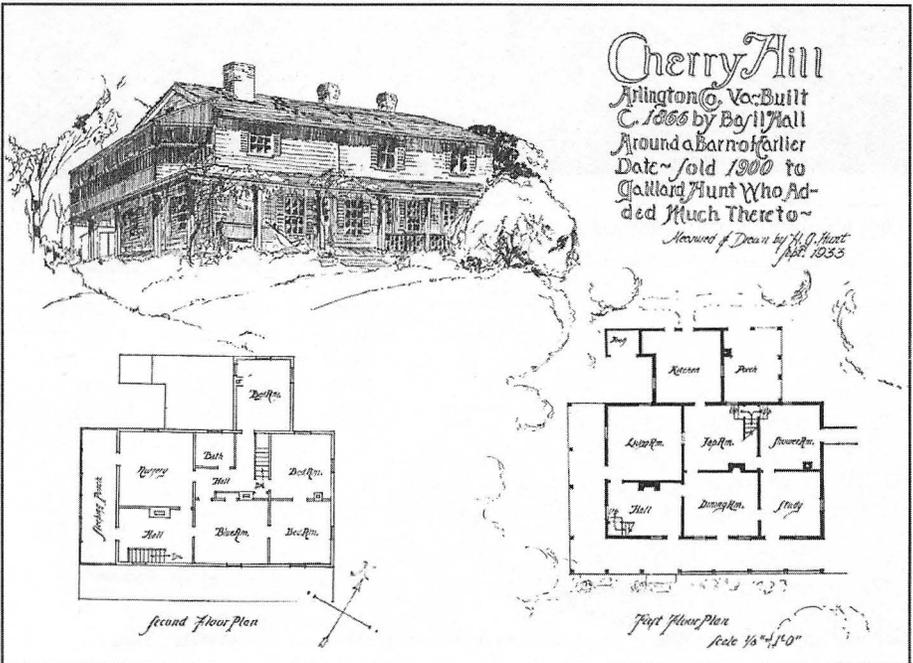
³⁵ Jameson, "Hunt," *Dictionary of American Biography*, Vol. V, p. 385.

³⁶ Interview, G.T. Hunt.

³⁷ Ltrs, Hunt to Mrs. C.L. Garrison, June 1, 1915 and Hunt to S.B. Buck, Berkshire School, September 11, 1918, Hunt Papers.

³⁸ Interview, G.T. Hunt.

³⁹ Ltr, Hunt to Mrs. Lacey Johnston. June 1, 1915, Hunt papers.



Gaillard T. Hunt