



Arlington Historical Museum collection

Little Tea House (From a Postcard)

The Little Tea House

BY CIRO TADDEO AND MARK BENBOW

Not far from the Arlington History Museum at the Hume School, north along South Arlington Ridge Road, one comes to an intersection where South Lynn Street branches off to the right. On a parcel of land between these two streets is an Arlington County landmark: a circular stone tower with a conical roof that is all that remains of the “Little Tea House” restaurant, a local landmark built in 1920. The Tea House served lunch and dinner to a variety of Washington notables: diplomats, judges, cabinet members, Congressmen, and famous travelers. Many First Ladies, including Eleanor Roosevelt, dined there. Florence Harding, wife of the 29th President of the United States, hosted the Cabinet wives there at a tea. Diplomats met there, and Supreme Court Justices, including Oliver Wendell Holmes, took a break from court duties to enjoy dinner and the view of the capital city. Amelia Earhart dined there, according to local historian and author Eleanor Lee Templeman. The famous pioneer woman pilot would “come directly up from Hoover Airport...to discuss plans for an improved and enlarged National Airport.” Woodrow Wilson reportedly stopped there for tea while on one of his automobile rides around the area.¹

The view which so attracted visitors to the Tea House had pulled others to the area long before 1920. In 1838 the land was purchased by Irish immigrant Philip Roach for his family, the same family for which “Roach’s Run” near Reagan National Airport is named. Roach died shortly after buying the land, which became the property of his son James Roach. James built a large mansion, “Prospect Hill,” which stood next to the Tea House until both were demolished in the 1960s as the area was turned into apartment buildings. During the Civil War (1861-1865) Union troops occupied Prospect Hill, living off the land and its livestock and cutting down its trees to provide a clear view of fire for Fort Albany, one of the local forts protecting the capital. The land on which the Tea House was later built was part of this Union encampment.² After the war the impoverished Roach family sold the land.

The Little Tea House opened June 1, 1920, a somewhat cool and cloudy spring Tuesday.³ It was founded by Gertrude Lynde Crocker and her sister Ruth. Before founding the Tea House, Gertrude Crocker worked for the Treasury Department and, along with her sister, was an active suffragette. Gertrude was a member of the National Woman’s Party (NWP), serving at least one term as their Treasurer. The sisters were just two of many members of the NWP who protested for the 19th Amendment in front of the White House. Like many oth-

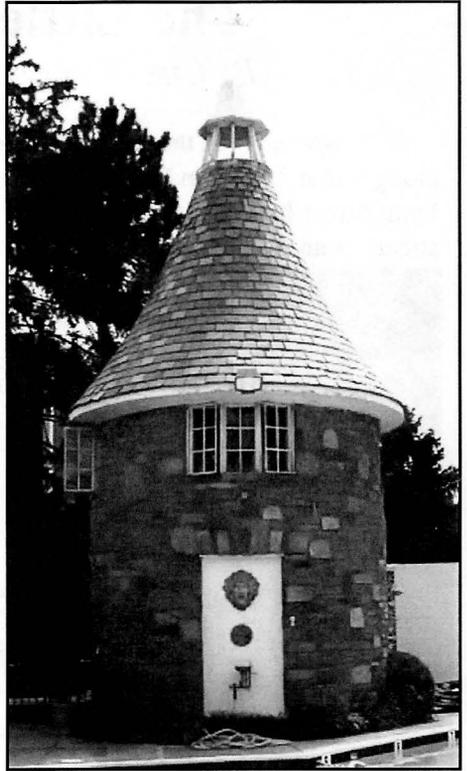
ers, they were arrested and held in the Occoquan Workhouse where Gertrude joined the suffragette's hunger strike.⁴ The sisters were also progressive on racial issues, especially for the time. The Little Tea House was one of the first area restaurants to serve mixed racial parties at a time when both Virginia and Washington D.C. were racially segregated. Gertrude and Ruth also adopted a little girl, Ellen, when adoptions by single women, let alone two, were rare.⁵

The Little Tea House served fine traditional American cuisine including fried chicken, Virginia skirt steak and lobster. The dining rooms offered diners a warm atmosphere filled with copper antiques and a spectacular panoramic view of northern Virginia and Washington D.C. as well as the newly constructed National Airport. From 1941-1943 diners could watch the new Pentagon being built below them. Rationing would have restricted the menu, but dining out was a popular way to escape the daily pressures of wartime Washington, and the greens and herbs from the restaurant's gardens would have been fresh. In short, it was a Washington institution, as well as an Arlington landmark.

Originally the Tea House was just that, a Tea House, rather than a restaurant. In a 1934 interview, Crocker described how she started the business with her sister, Ruth:

A friend of mine said that the only way to make a business was to find a need and fill it. I realized there were few tea houses in Alexandria, so I found a site and got an architect to build a little house. At first there were only a few rooms and not more than half a dozen tables.⁶

The business expanded and Crocker added more buildings and dining rooms. The menu also expanded. Crocker later remembered that one day she



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All that remains of the Little Tea House.

got a call asking for a “chicken luncheon for two.” She agreed and accepted the reservation, but, she recalled, “I had never fried a chicken in my life, and didn’t know what to do.” The Tea House had neighbors with chickens, so Crocker quickly hurried over and purchased a couple, paying extra to have the neighbor pluck and clean them. At first Crocker was stymied by directions that she must remove the tendons from the chickens’ legs, but when asked for help another neighbor assured the new cook that the chickens were so young that tendons were not a problem. Using a handy and hastily deployed cookbook, the luncheon was prepared, served, and was apparently successful as fried chicken remained on the menu as a house specialty. Hams, steaks and other entrées were added as well. By the early 1930s the Tea House had four buildings, seven dining rooms, and six outside porches (some of which would eventually be enclosed) and was doing an annual business of about \$120,000 a year, approximately four and a half million dollars in 2012 values.⁷ It was so well-known that local real estate advertisements could use it as a reference point--“About ½ mile South [of the] Little Tea House.”⁸

One of the restaurant’s most popular dining rooms was the “Washington View Room,” an enclosed sunroom that replaced the original open brick patio. It overlooked gardens designed to attract butterflies and hummingbirds during the summer. A postcard writer from 1959 noted that “it’s so cool and tranquil in the garden, we’re now sitting by one of the petunia beds...” In the days before air-conditioning became common, Washington visitors and residents alike would escape to the higher elevations around the city, whether it was the Kalorama neighborhood in D.C., the heights in Maryland, or Arlington Ridge. The Little Tea House tapped into this desire to escape not only the pressure of official Washington, but also the summer heat and humidity. Visitors such as the postcard writer could sit in the Tea House gardens where it was “so cool and tranquil.”⁹

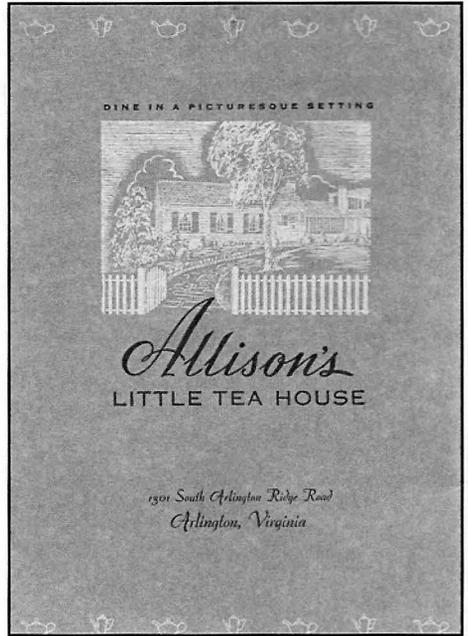
Besides the gardens, the feature that stood out to many people, and the only part you can still see today, was the well house, a stone tower that stood in the garden, looking as if part of a small castle had wandered into the property and decided to stay. The Tea House featured it on the back of their menu and in newspaper ads because it was so distinctive. According to Ellen Puterbaugh, adopted daughter of both Gertrude and Ruth, they worked with an architect, “his last name I believe was Deming,” on the stone tower.¹⁰ Undoubtedly this was William I. Deming, a prominent architect working in the metropolitan D.C. area. A Washington native and an 1894 graduate of Columbian University (now George Washington University) Deming designed homes along North View Terrace and West Maple Street in the New Federal Style. He was an expert in restoration of “Revival” architecture periods and designed homes in Rosewood and DuPont Circle.¹¹

The tower became more than a mere well house and evolved into the “Honeymoon Tower.” The Tea House had become a popular destination for courting couples, especially to enjoy the moonlight on the upper deck. Crocker found that couples sometime refused even a single candle, not wanting any light other than the moon. She wryly noted “I don’t see how they manage to eat—but I guess it doesn’t matter much....”¹² As one thing led to another, many of the romancing couples got married and some wished to celebrate their new status where they had fallen in love. The first newlyweds to rent the tower on their honeymoon had to go into another building to bathe, but they didn’t seem to mind, extending a planned one day stay into four. Sens-

ing an opportunity, Crocker updated the tower facilities to include a bath and small kitchen. Even some novelists featured the Tea House and its tower as a romantic stage. *Roundabout* (1926) by Nancy Hoyt used the restaurant as one of her settings. In Edwin Bateman Morris’ *The Silk Coquette* (1926) lovers meet there to bid each other farewell.¹³

The Tea House was a popular location for meetings of all kinds besides romantically-inclined couples. *The Washington Post* society pages list gatherings there for sororities, fraternities, alumni organizations, civic groups, charitable groups, and political meetings. One local columnist quipped that more official business was done over the tables of the Tea House than in the official halls of Washington; certainly an exaggeration, but it does demonstrate the popularity of the restaurant in its heyday.¹⁴

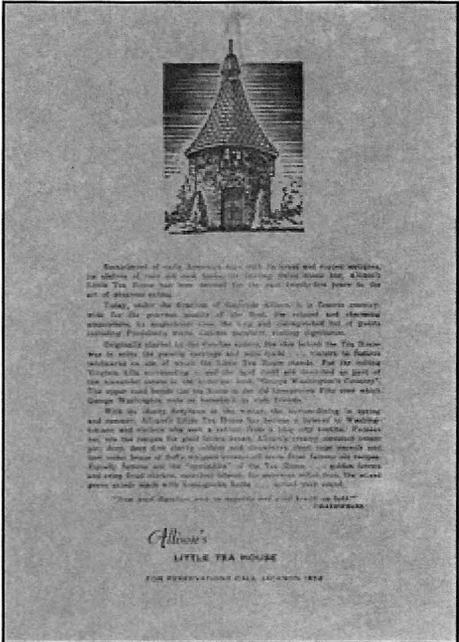
Crocker retired in 1946 and became President of the Arlington So-roptimist Club, a service organization for professional women. She leased the restaurant to Gertrude Allison, a professional cook who studied dietetics at Johns Hopkins, earned a Masters in Institutional Management at Columbia, and wrote a cookbook for the Merchant Marine during World War II.¹⁵ Allison renamed the restaurant “Allison’s Little Tea House.” The new owner took cooking classes with English Chef Dione Lucas and in 1952 travelled to Paris



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Little Tea House Menu: Front Cover

to study French cooking with Julia Child.¹⁶ That same year Crocker sold the restaurant outright to Allison. The advertisements from the Allison period emphasize not just the view of Washington, but also the menu, including prime rib and their “famous coconut cream pie” (see below). Allison married and purchased the Olney Inn in Maryland and became the first woman to head the Washington Restaurant Association. In 1956 Allison, now Mrs. Gertrude Allison Brewster, sold “Allison’s Little Tea House” to Mr. and Mrs. Etienne Weber and its name reverted back to simply “The Little Tea House.” By 1959 ownership passed to Mr. and Mrs. John Denis.¹⁷



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Little Tea House Menu: Back Cover

The Little Tea House continued serving meals to diners wishing to enjoy the Washington skyline, but the restaurant was soon overtaken by development driven by Arlington’s burgeoning population. Developers looking for land for new apartments were drawn to Arlington Ridge as the Crocker sisters had been in 1920. In late 1958 a pair of seven-story apartment buildings, the Robert Towers, opened across South Arlington Ridge Road from the Tea House. The suburbs had finally caught up to what had originally been a rural retreat. In 1963 a proposal build a new Tea House on the top floor of a twelve-story apartment building called “The Ridge House” was rejected by the Arlington County Board, citing traffic concerns. That same year The Little Tea House and everything else on the property was demolished. Only the stone tower has survived. The Ridge House apartment buildings were constructed on the site, and are now condominiums. The tower houses equipment and supplies for the condominium pool. A parking lot sits where the beautiful flower and rose gardens once stood.¹⁸

The Little Tea House is remembered by fewer people as time passes and most people who drive past the stone tower must wonder where it came from. It seems so out of place next to the 1960s-style apartments which loom over it. The Tea House, however, was not only a popular meeting spot and romantic destination. It was emblematic of Arlington County’s place in the greater D.C.

area and of its transition from rural to suburban development. When the Little Tea House was founded, it was rural enough, and high enough, to provide an escape from Washington's weather and its political pressures. It was isolated enough to provide a romantic getaway for young couples. As Arlington grew, the Little Tea House also grew, and became a feature of the landscape, as well as a meeting center for the increasing number of social organizations in the county. Eventually, however, the growth of the suburbs, and the need for more housing close to Washington encroached on what had once been a rural retreat, and the Little Tea House lost first its panoramic view, and then its ability to fit into the newly crowded neighborhood.

While the Little Tea House is gone, a few of its artifacts survive. The menu (pictured) was a gift to the Arlington Historical Society from Ciro Taddeo. Dated September 3, 1947, it is in excellent condition, as it was likely taken as a souvenir of a luncheon or dinner. It is inscribed inside with the names of five women, possibly the luncheon attendees. Guests could choose from regular items, specials of the day, and even enjoy a little wine or champagne, although beer and harder liquors were not offered at the time. Among the specialties were fried chicken, fresh lobster, and a mixed green salad made with home grown herbs. The desert offerings include some house specialties, including Allison's creamy coconut cream pie, a deep, deep dish cherry cobbler, and strawberry short cake. The menu closes with a dinner toast from Macbeth, Act 3, Scene 4, Page 3, "*Now good digestion wait on appetite and good health on both!*" SHAKESPEAR" (sic).

And now that we've made you hungry, Allison's Little Tea House Coconut Cream Pie Recipe can be found online at MyRecipes.com. Hard copies are available for free at the Arlington History Museum at the Hume School.

<http://www.myrecipes.com/recipe/allisons-little-tea-house-coconut-cream-pie-10000001960165/>

A sincere thank you to Ciro Taddeo for the gift of the Little Tea House menu, as well as an original advertisement, several postcards, and a matchbook he found in the tower. Mr. Taddeo also wrote the original draft of this article. I decided to expand it and any errors are mine alone. The menu and other artifacts from the Little Tea House may be seen at the Arlington Historical Society's museum at the Hume School. It is open from 1:00-4:00 Saturday and Sunday.

– Mark Benbow

References

- ¹ Eleanor Lee Templeman, "The Little Tea House," *The Arlington Historical Magazine* Vol.11, No. 2, October 1974, pp. 45-46; Tea House owner Gertrude Crocker claimed that Wilson stopped there for tea in her deposition in a 1936 lawsuit. See "Alexandrian, Seeking to Oust Trustees, Say's She's 'Prudent,'" *The Washington Post*, March 28, 1936, p. X4.
- ² Eleanor Lee Templeman, "James Roach's 'Prospect Hill,'" in *Arlington Heritage: Vignettes of a Virginia County* (Arlington: The Author, 1959), p. 58.
- ³ Templeman, "The Little Tea House," p. 45; "Weather Conditions" *The Washington Post*, June 1, 1920, p. 18.
- ⁴ Ruth likely did as well. See Inez Hayes Irwin, *The Story of the Woman's Party* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1921), pp. 201, 248-249.
- ⁵ "The Little Tea House," Arlington Public Library (January 2, 2007) <http://library.arlingtonva.us/2007/01/02/the-little-tea-house/> (last accessed December 29, 2012); Genevieve Reynolds, "Introducing—Gertrude Crocker, Spirited Battler for Equal Rights," *The Washington Post*, June 19, 1947, p. S2.
- ⁶ Susan Mills, "Romance Blooms at Tea House that Offers Moon With Meals," *The Washington Post*, March 10, 1934, p. 11.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*; the annual income of the Little Tea House comes from "Alexandrian . . ." *The Washington Post*, p. X4. Currency values were calculated via <http://www.measuringworth.com/uscompare/relativevalue.php>. (accessed December 31, 2012). Computing the historic value of currency is not a simple calculation and depends on numerous variables. The figure here is based upon income and standard of living and should be taken as a rough approximation.
- ⁸ "In Lovely Oakcrest Manor Estates," *The Washington Post*, October 21, 1934, p. R8.
- ⁹ "Little Tea House," postcard, July 8, 1959, in the collection of the Arlington Historical Society. Arlington, VA.
- ¹⁰ Sarah Collins, "Oral History Interview with Mrs. Ellen C. Puterbaugh," October 11, 2000, text in Arlington Central Library, Virginia Room, Ser.3, No.14, pp. 3, 19, 26; *The George Washington University Bulletin*, Vol. 4, No. 2, June 1905, p. 39.
- ¹¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Waddy_Wood (accessed 12/30/12); <http://www.architecturaltrust.org/virginia/alexandria/rosemont> (accessed 12/20/12).
- ¹² Mills, "Romance Blooms," p. 11.
- ¹³ "Honeymooning Couples Gravitate to Tea House," *The Washington Post*, June 28, 1934. p. 12.
- ¹⁴ Undated clipping, probably from the *Northern Virginia Sun*, copy in author's possession.
- ¹⁵ Marie Smith, "Food 'n' Flowers Are to Her Taste," *The Washington Post*, December 4, 1958, p. C11.
- ¹⁶ Julia Child, *My Life In France* (New York: Anchor Book Edition, 2007), pp. 133-134.
- ¹⁷ Smith, "Food 'n' Flowers," p. C11.
- ¹⁸ "Tea House Rejected," undated newspaper clipping, probably from June 7, 1963.