

Baltimore City Landmark Designation
Sellers Mansion
801 North Arlington Street
Baltimore, MD

Commission for Historical and Architectural Preservation
June 10th 2008



Photo: Baltimore Heritage

Sellers Mansion was built in 1868 for Kentucky natives Matthew Bacon Sellers Sr. and his second wife Angelina (Anne) Leathers Lewis Sellers. They relocated to Baltimore from Oakland Plantation in Louisiana where he lived with first wife Mary. They made about \$50,000 on the sale of the plantation and used it to purchase the unusually large lot on the newly established Lafayette Square and to construct the grand home designed by architect Edward Davis. In 1874 Matthew Bacon Sellers Sr. was appointed the director of the Northern Central Railroad till his death in 1880 at the age of 85. The Northern Central Railroad had become a strong economic force in Baltimore with the rise of other industries, and improvement of rail connections.

Lafayette Square is one small section of the former Harlem Estate owned by Dr. Thomas Edmondson. After Edmondson's death in 1856 his heirs sold the estate to the city of Baltimore for \$15,000 and city ordinance in 1857 officially created the square; in the same year, the Lafayette Square Association was created to promote development around the square. The streets surrounding Lafayette Square were graded in 1859. This included Lanvale, Arlington, Townsend, and Republican Streets, now known as Carrollton and Lafayette. Development of Lafayette Square was halted during the Civil War when Camp Hoffman, home to the 3rd Maryland Calvary, was constructed in and around the square for the last two years of the war. By the late 1860's the barracks were removed and the square returned to its intended purpose as a recreation area. A cast-iron fence, very typical of urban parks at the time, was constructed around the green space of the square. Sadly, these fences along with several other original features were removed by the city many years later. In 1867, Church of the Ascension, now St. James, was the first church constructed on the square. Sellers Mansion followed a year later as the first residence built on the east side of the square on the southeast corner. In 1875 the Sellers returned from an extended trip in Europe to find a home had been built on an adjoining property. Angered by the change in view, they constructed a 40-foot wall along the northern edge of the property. Lafayette Square is currently shaded with maple and linden trees, and the large tulip poplar might have been planted right after Camp Hoffman disbanded. A cast-iron fountain originally located in the square has been replaced with a replica.

The Sellers Mansion is architecturally significant for its late-High Victorian styling featuring Second Empire elements. The craftsmanship and fine architectural detailing is remarkable and a wonderful example of an opulent and comfortable residence of the socially affluent in post-Civil War Baltimore. The mansion is often compared with residences such as the Mt. Vernon mansion located at 105 Monument Street, which has a similar proportion and styling that Edward Davis was emulating in the Sellers new home. The Sellers Mansion is a completely detached three-story building, five bays by eight bays with symmetrically placed windows. Sitting on the corner lot, the "front" of the mansion faces west onto the square.

On top of a sandstone base the three-story brick structure is topped with a patterned slate tile mansard roof enclosing the third story. The hipped center of the roof structure was once seamed metal and the sloping mansard roof was trimmed with a painted flashing, the original color is unknown and seamed metal has since been replaced with a modern rolled material. The south and north roof lines both feature two chimneys, and evidence of a fifth can be seen on the eastern façade. Three hooded shed dormers are located on each façade at the roof level. A strong painted wood cornice with brackets and dentils sits below the base of the mansard roof, encasing a

copper drain system. Between the cornice and the brick wall is a small row of carved wood details.

Each façade of the structure is different. The Arlington Street or the west façade faces the square and is the most decorative. Each window is framed with a carved sandstone surround supported by an attenuated carved scroll bracket of the same stone. A dentil ribbon supports the carved stone molding that boasts an incised floral carving in a scrolling fan-like form. On the second story of this façade the windows are two over two and sit on sandstone sills. The center window is an elongated triple sash French style window that possibly provided access to the roof of the porch structure below. The windows on the first level are longer than the second floor windows and have similar carved sandstone sills and surrounds. The porch on the Arlington façade is supported by four fluted columns with Corinthian capitals, and a cornice at the roof line. The front door is a solid wood six-panel door, trimmed with triple-paned side lights and a multi-paned rectangular transom light supported by a decorative dentilated mullion beam. The Lanvale Street façade is the second most public and decorated façade of the mansion. The roof line of this façade features two chimneys framing the slightly off center porch and windows. The window surrounds on this façade are much simpler with less ornamental carved stone sills and surrounds. The porch on this façade was most likely identical to the one on the Arlington façade. The east and north façades are the least public but contain many of the design elements of the main façades but in a simpler form. Due to deterioration and alteration some of the mansions elements have been lost, such as a copula located in the center of the roof, decorative metal edging at the crest of the mansard roof and porches that were once on the east and north façades.

Matthew Bacon Sellers Jr. was a pioneer in aeronautical experimentation and his leadership and guidance laid the ground work for what we know of as NASA today. A year after the house was completed Anne and Matthew Sr. had the first of four children. Matthew Bacon Sellers Jr. was born on March 29th 1869. Matthew lived in the home and was educated by private tutors most of his young life. As a young man he was also schooled in Gottingen, Germany and Evreux, France. Matthew Jr. then went on to receive his LL.B. degree from Harvard Law School in 1892 and from 1893 till 1894 he attended the Lawrence Scientific School of Harvard University. In 1888 Sellers Jr. mother (and widow of Matthew Sr.) bought land once owned by her family near Grahn, Kentucky and named the property "Blakemore." Matthew Jr. built a large farm house in the middle of the rural mountainous area on the peak of a hill. His farming class neighbors were in awe of the large ominous home, much like the image his father tried to impose in Baltimore 20 years earlier. On this Kentucky estate, Matthew began to experiment with aerodynamics, and in 1897 he built a miniature wind tunnel. Eventually his experiments lead to his invention the "Quadra Plane" In 1912, Matthew Jr. was appointed by President Taft to the Aerodynamical Laboratory Commission. The deliberations of that body lead to the formation of the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics, now the National Aeronautics and Space Administration. In 1915, Matthew was appointed to the Naval Consulting Board as an authority of aeronautics. Sellers also spent time in Georgia, North Carolina, and eventually settled in New York. Matthew Bacon Sellers Jr. died on April 5, 1932 in Irvington, New York. In 1967 aviation historian Edward Peck learned of Sellers achievements and began collecting artifacts, documents, photos, and oral histories. "Blakemore" burned in 1974 during restoration, and his work shop that survived the fire was destroyed in by a Tornado in 1979 while in storage at the New England Aviation Museum.

The Sellers family decedents remained in the home until the late-1950's when the house became the head quarters of the City Commission on Urban Renewal. In the late 1960's the home was threatened with demolition to make way for a parking lot for the St. James Terrace apartments. Other arrangements were made for parking and the structure survived as a community center until the early 1990's. Various entities related to the St. James Church have owned the structure since the 1960's.

The Sellers Mansion meets CHAP Criteria:

1. dates from a particular period having a significant character, interest, or value, as part of the development, heritage, or culture of the City of Baltimore; or
 - As one of the first grand homes on Lafayette Square, the Sellers Mansion set the bar high, and competed with Mt. Vernon's grand architecture
2. is associated with the life of an outstanding historical person or person
 - Both Matthew Bacon Sellers Sr. and Jr. were significant to their time, one for business and industry and the other for the sciences
4. is significant of the architectural period in which it was built and has distinguishing characteristics of an architectural style, method of construction, or engineering, or is the notable work of a master builder, designer, engineer, artist, or architect whose individual genius influenced his age; or
 - The home is a wonderful example of High Victorian and Second Empire architecture in post Civil War Baltimore.

Photographs:



Map



Aerial View, Lanvale Street façade



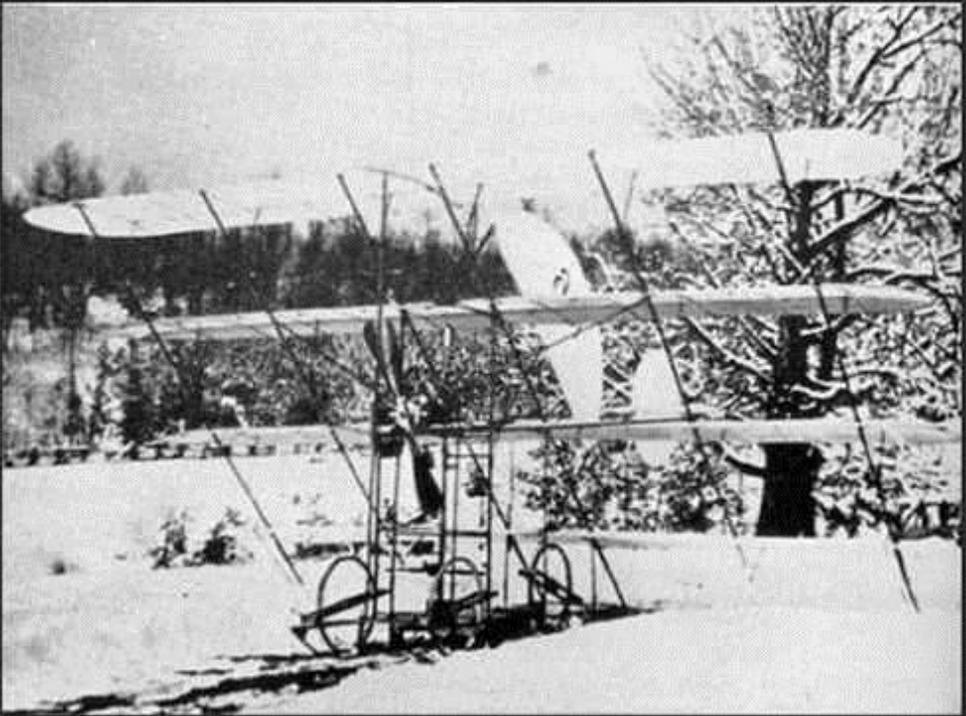
North Arlington Street, detail



The main façade, North Arlington Street



Matthew Bacon Sellers Jr.



The Quadra Plane