

## The Thomas-Siegler House and Garden

### The Owners

Built in 1884 by Isaac and Amanda Thomas, the Thomas-Siegler house was the first house to be completed in Takoma Park. Isaac Thomas was the city's first postmaster and storekeeper. The Isaacs resided on the property until selling it to the Franklin Siegler family in 1919. Franklin's son, Edward, was a prominent entomologist with the Department of Agriculture for over half a century. In 1984, Edward Siegler's widow planned to sell the property to developers, who indicated their intent to demolish the original structures, subdivide the property, and construct new homes.

Spearheaded by neighborhood residents, the *Friends of the Thomas-Siegler Historic Property* organized community opposition to the proposed demolition and new construction. The citizens were able to find new owners for the main house, which was divided into two separate living quarters. The carriage house and surrounding garden were rescued by the Trust for Public Land, which bought the property and re-sold it in 1985 to the City of Takoma Park, which used Maryland Program Open Space funds to complete the purchase.



The original house continues to be occupied by private owners, and the City retains ownership of the rest of the property. Through an agreement with the City, Historic Takoma manages the city-owned portion of the property for public use. In 1995, Historic Takoma opened the Thomas-Siegler Carriage House Museum on the site. The museum will retain the carriage house in its original configuration and will also include exhibits from the entire spectrum of Takoma Park's history.

### The Garden

The trees and shrubs on the Thomas-Siegler grounds have remained relatively undisturbed over the years, and contain many of the plantings of the original owners. Several white oaks tower over the property, accompanied by magnolia and other trees. A horticulturalist's report on the property prepared in the middle 1980s stated that the land is home to many plants - extraordinarily mature azaleas, in particular - of priceless historical value. The report also indicated that the property contains plantings from Benjamin Y. Morrison, the famed horticulturalist who was the founder and first director of the National Arboretum. Morrison is noted for cross-breeding different strains of azaleas to produce the Glenn Dale azalea, which is prevalent today throughout the eastern United States. Morrison, who lived nearby on Piney Branch Road, was a friend and colleague of Edward Siegler.

The Thomas-Siegler garden is a unique scenic amenity, and offers the opportunity to learn about the landscaping challenges created by dense shade. The Garden is open to the public from dawn to dusk. There are two points of access - the pathway across the street

from 214 Tulip Ave., and the pathway which branches off to the left as you approach the main house at 201 Tulip.

## **The Carriage House**

The Thomas-Siegler carriage house is actually two buildings in one. The two-story carriage house was built in 1884, and the one-story garage was added circa 1910. Both structures are representative of the wooden outbuildings that predominated in areas where finished lumber was readily available by rail. Until the 1930s, construction in Takoma Park was almost exclusively wood frame with clapboard siding and double hung sash windows. The plain clapboard visible on the carriage house is typical; the German, or beveled, siding on the garage became increasingly popular during the first quarter of the 20th century.

Prior to the turn of the century, many residential properties in Takoma Park included a carriage house and stable, often under one roof, but few survive today. Carriage houses were generally tall enough to include a second story loft for hay. The use of old-style machine cut nails dates the carriage house to sometime before 1890; in all likelihood, it was erected when the house was built, in 1884. Early photographs of the property show the carriage house with its southern porte-cochere.



After about 1910, homeowners in Takoma Park began to supplement the carriage house with a garage. Early auto garages were only one story tall, and smaller than carriage houses, since hay storage was unnecessary and vehicles were fairly small and one to a family. The Thomas-Siegler carriage house is unusual among local outbuildings in that the garage portion was designed to accommodate two vehicles, and the two structures share a common wall. This wall remains visible inside the garage. Still painted in pale gray that covered the exterior of the carriage house at the time the garage was added, this wall features a raised panel Victorian door with an ornate cast bronze knob, key escutcheon plate, and finial tipped hinge.

## **Restoring the Carriage House**

By the early 1990s, the carriage house was in considerable disrepair, and in need of complete restoration. Historic Takoma spearheaded efforts to raise the \$30,000 needed for the rehabilitation of the structure. These efforts proved successful, with the bulk of the funding provided by Maryland Program Open Space, supplemented by generous contributions from the Takoma Park House and Garden Tour Committee, the Takoma Park Horticultural Club, Historic Takoma, and several private donors.

During the fall of 1993, a site survey, conservation analysis, and paint seriation analysis were conducted to determine the original appearance of the buildings so that they could be restored as accurately as possible. Over the years, numerous alterations had been undertaken for maintenance purposes, primarily to keep water out of the building.

Plywood patches were installed in place of deteriorated clapboard along the base of the building. The original roofs were replaced with modern asphalt shingles. By 1993, these roofs were at the end of their lives and the supporting wood roof structure was seriously decayed.

More visible, and equally vulnerable, were the buildings' double hung windows. Some had been removed and boarded over. Sill moldings on the northwest facade of the carriage house had disappeared, probably the victim of deterioration. During the 1990s the garage windows had to be covered with plywood to secure the building from vandals. Fortunately, the original carriage house and garage doors remained intact with their original hardware, despite occasional break-ins.

The buildings had been repainted several times over the years. The carriage house's original beige walls and dark brown trim had been repainted uniform brown, then light gray. The garage was added, painted matching gray, then cream for a number of years. At the time the restoration project began, both buildings were painted light brown, with no differentiation between the walls and trim.

Interior locks were discretely installed on the vulnerable sliding garage doors, leaving the original tracks, rollers, and cast handles intact. (The handles bear the manufacturer's stamp and a patent date of 1901; the garage was probably constructed a decade later). Hastily installed plywood patches on the exterior walls have been replaced with siding matching the original clapboard. A missing window sash was located on the property and has been reinstalled. Missing window elements have been replicated.

Interior inspection of the carriage house roof revealed a nail spacing pattern indicating that the original roof was probably metal, a common choice for outbuildings of the late 19th century. Inspection of the garage roof revealed that it too may have been metal, but no metal remnants could be located to verify this evidence. Asbestos and asphalt shingles were also widely available at the time the garage was constructed. In the absence of definitive evidence, a decision was made to re-roof the carriage house in standing seam metal and re-roof the garage in high quality asphalt shingles colored red, similar to asphalt shingles available in the early decades of the 20th century. This approach provides an historically plausible way to distinguish the two structures as separate buildings, each roofed in its original style.

Next, a decision had to be made on the correct period of significance for re-painting the structures - the completion date of the carriage house, or that of the garage? Similar to the conclusions reached for the roof, it became clear that the best way to enable visitors to visualize each of the structures as products of their own time would be to re-paint each building as it had been painted at the time of its completion. So, the carriage house has been re-painted as it first had been painted in the 1880s - beige with brown trim, a very popular combination for houses and outbuildings of the day. The garage has been re-painted in its original light gray, including trim.

Only the interiors of the buildings retain their true, original finishes. The carriage house still has its original finish coat of an old time whitewash, the dominant choice for utilitarian surfaces. This rare original finish has been left in place for posterity. The interior of the garage was never finished and remains so today.