



A portrait of William Walker, the American filibuster who ate dinner at Belmont in 1858. Other pictures show a gazebo and details of a gazebo and the ornamental grill work of the balconies.

With their growing wealth and stable times, it is very understandable that the 1850's would prove to be most propitious for the Acklens to begin building a house on the Belmont property. The Acklens first built Belmont as a summer villa, living in their house on Cherry Street in the winter (when not in Louisiana) and spending the summers in the new home. But it was not long before the family made Belmont its principal residence and rented the house on Cherry Street.

A date for the erection of the summer villa has been a problem. Although it was probably erected in the early 1850's, there is no documentary evidence at this time for a definite year. According to the census of 1850, the family was living in the city. The Acklen family Bible recorded that Adelia gave birth to the first three Acklen children before the end of 1852 in Nashville, but then the Bible stated that the next child, William, was born in September, 1855, at "Belle Monte." The first known letter to make reference to Belmont was written by Adelia's father on March 9, 1855, in which he wrote that everything was well at "Bellemonte." He also stated that he had procured for Adelia "100 choice varieties of tulips" and believed that the Acklens would have sufficient ice during the summer.

From an article in May, 1888, at the time of the sale of the furnishings of Belmont, it is stated that the summer villa was enlarged in 1859-1860. Students of the architecture of the structure find clear evidence of alteration, notably the addition of the grand salon which thereby enclosed part of the courtyard, the attaching of wings to the east and west of the center section, and the extension of the wings on the rear even further to the north. There is also evidence that the villa was built with two belvederes, approached by stairs, one on the east and the other on the west, but were later replaced by a central belfry reached by a new staircase. After the enlargement of the mansion and the construction of additional structures on the premises, the Acklens commissioned an artist, now unknown, to paint Belmont and its grounds. This picture was used as the basis of an engraving which appeared on a map of Nashville and Edgefield which was published in 1860, thus confirming this date for the completion of the mansion.

The Acklens engaged the leading architect of Nashville in that day, Adolphus Heiman, for the construction of the mansion, if not also for the summer villa. For years it had been speculated that William Strickland, who for many years had been burdened with the construction of the state capitol before his death in 1854, was the architect. But the engraving on the 1860 map clearly gave credit to Heiman as the architect. Heiman was born in 1809 in Potsdam, Germany, the son of the superintendent of Sans Souci, the summer palace of the

monarchs of Prussia. He migrated to the United States in 1834 and, as Acklen, served in the Mexican War. Heiman was not only known for his architectural activity in Nashville but also in Huntsville, Acklen's hometown, where he designed the First Presbyterian Church.

The mansion with its wings and cupola, encompassing approximately thirty rooms, looked very impressive on its hill. By 1860 the house was stuccoed with an ashlar pattern, painted, as shown by examples, with an ocher of a slightly red hue. One approached the front entrance from the south by first passing marble vases and large lions on each side, then up steps into a recessed portico.

Heiman was proficient in several styles, including castellated Gothic, but built Belmont as an Italianate structure which incorporated classical elements. Its classical order is seen not only in its clearly defined symmetry but in its strikingly handsome Corinthian columns and the two small porches on the front. The Italian ornamentation is clearly evident in the Venetian glass, the consoles at the sills of the windows, the cornices and pediments above the doors, the coping, the pilasters, the balustrades above the small front porches, the outside brackets, and the cupola. A Renaissance feature was the placing of at least six statues on blocks on the parapet of the roof. Some of these statues are now on the grounds. The ornate grill work on the balconies portrayed a style seen in New Orleans. The interior was shown to advantage by the white Carrara marble fireplaces, bronze chandeliers, and French blinds. The grand salon, with its vaulted ceiling, included a double colonnade of Corinthian columns on one side and a very ornate cornice which included the classic egg and dart design and eagles. From the grand salon a handsome staircase rose to the second floor. Immediately above it, but in reverse order, was a smaller free-standing staircase which led to the cupola. The stairs of the latter staircase were divided at its base but met to form an arch.

The splendor of Belmont was enhanced by its magnificent grounds. At one of the entrances, approached from Middle Franklin Pike (Granny White), were gates near which were the rococo carriage house and the stables. Cedars lined the roadway to the house. The gardens were laid out in formal style with three large central circles outlined by pathways. Fountains, including a large marble fountain, encircled by four marble statues portraying the four continents, intersecting walks, flower beds, boxwood, summer houses (or gazebos), covered with roses, eglantine, and star jasmine, statuary, and a small tower provided a peaceful setting. On the west were a deer park, a zoo with ornamental cages, and an artificial lake with alligators brought from Louisiana. An octagonal bear house of two stories stood apart within its own circle on the east. An art gallery,