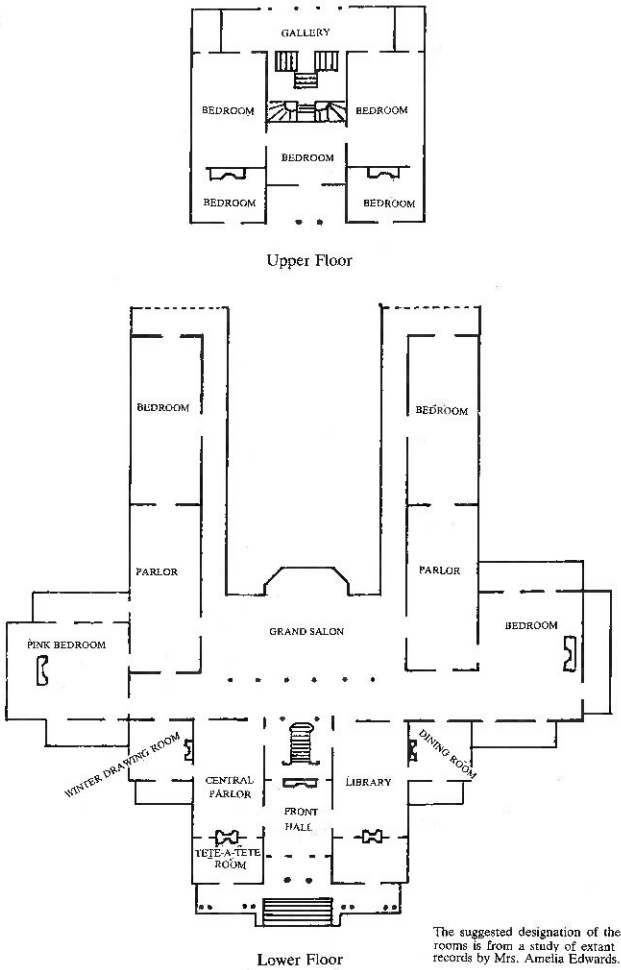


shaped like a Greek temple with two porticos, stood on the west, while on the east was a bowling alley. On the south side of the gardens were three greenhouses and a propagating house with beds nearby. The largest greenhouse grew tropical fruit and flowers, while other greenhouses produced camellia japonica, jasmine, lilies, and cacti. South of the greenhouses was the water tower, 105 feet high in Italianate style, built for \$16,000, which provided water through pipes for the fountains, gardens, and the mansion. The tower, with interior steps which led to the top, provided a splendid view of the grounds.

The Acklens were very hospitable and visitors came in great numbers. An early visitor when the structure was still a summer villa was William Walker, a native of Nashville, whose father lived close to Adelia Acklen's home on Cherry Street. He served as president of Nicaragua from 1856 to 1857. As an ardent expansionist, Acklen favored Walker's filibustering activities. Walker visited Nashville several times and on September 28, 1858, was invited to dinner at Belmont. One of the guests, Randal McGavock, recorded, "It was the finest dinner I ever sat down to and the company enjoyed it finely." On the following day, William Lawrence, husband of Adelia's sister, Corinne, wrote in his diary that he ate with Walker at Belmont and enjoyed "a merry evening." But on his expedition to Central America in 1860, Walker was executed in Honduras.

Another early visitor to Belmont was Mother Frances Walsh, a member of the Dominican Sisters who with other sisters opened in October, 1860, St. Cecilia, an academy for girls. One of the students was Sallie Acklen, niece of Joseph Acklen, who was then living at Belmont. In her *Annals of St. Cecilia Convent*, Mother Walsh recorded that people were calling the new home "The Acklen Folly" because of its lavish expenditure. Mother Walsh was most amazed at the fine furnishings, art, and magnificent grounds, so surprising in a new democracy. In her description of her first visit in early summer, she wrote:

A most gracious welcome was accorded the visitors who were made to feel at home in the spacious reception hall, the surroundings suggestive of Oriental luxury. The floor tessellated, a miniature fountain in the center sent up its misty spray, lending a grateful coolness to the heated atmosphere. Nearby were lounges where guests rested while African slaves, at the bidding of their hospitable mistress, served delicious fruits and refreshing ices. . . . On leave taking a scene of sylvan loveliness greeted the view; such a dazzling array of art and nature, commingling so as to beautify each other, was arranged as by the hand of a master artist. Here and there were statuary, marble and bronze, placed in groups or singly. Fountains, costly vases and flowers of the richest hues intermingled in endless profusion. There were summer houses and grottos of all devices, some so dainty that they might be fitting haunts of wood-nymphs or water spirits.



Belmont Mansion, 1860.

Although the mansion had only recently been completed, Mother Walsh also recorded that Acklen had further ambitions for "even then material was being gathered with which to construct a palace." From another source, there is evidence that Acklen had plans for a palace in Louisiana. According to the Milledgeville, Georgia *Federal Union*, August 2, 1859, in an article entitled, "A Palace," Acklen was planning a mansion of fifty rooms, besides bathrooms and closets, in castellated Gothic style, fronting on the Mississippi River which would cost \$150,000 with furnishings for an additional \$125,000. The proposed palace was to have " . . . two side wings of 105 feet and a center compartment of 220 feet deep surmounted by a lofty and beautifully proportioned tower." These features remind one of Belmont. Did these plans have any relation to Belmont or to building a palace at Belmont? It would be wonderful if one had the records.

