

From the beginning of construction in the spring of 1850, it was apparent to any casual observer that the house of Joseph and Adelia Acklen, was unqualifyingly unique. No other house constructed in Nashville offered such fascination, or had yet created this degree of interest among the populace. The design held nothing back, there is no reticence of detail or proportion in any aspect of Belmont Mansion. All is monumental in scope, from towering columns set within a two story recessed porch, to a multi-faceted modillioned cornice wrapping the central block, seemingly three stories high. Atop the house stands a parapet wall interspaced with plinths designed to support a series of classical statues. As if two statues on the central block were not enough, the same feature is repeated on wings to each side.

Few American homes of the era offered such visual opulence. Similar to ancient temples, Belmont could only be entered by climbing a flight of stone steps to the *piano nobile*, as the Italians referred to the principle entertaining floor. Rising before contemporary visitors, the mass of Belmont's structure would surely have been overwhelming. A two story central block projects forward from single-story symmetrical wings wrapped with cast iron balconies. Not one, but two classical porticos project from the principle façade to the right and left of the recessed entry porch. These matching elements shelter French doors topped by transoms containing

etched red Venetian glass sparkling in the sun. Few homes in Nashville could boast porticos as detailed as these. Pairs of fluted columns topped with cast iron Corinthian capitals support each portico, while fluted pilasters complete the composition adjoining the front wall. Barely visible atop the house was an octagonal cupola, as fully ornamented as if it were constantly in view.

Debow's Review published a description of the estate in August of 1860:

Mr Ackland's which we visited, is a perfect paradise, and is marked by natural beauties not to be surpassed anywhere.... Nothing is spared which one of the greatest fortunes in the country can command. The grounds are tastefully laid out, the buildings are commodious and costly.... Within the mansion are many choice and valuable paintings.³⁹

The site of Belmont alone guaranteed adulation. Placed directly between two of the busiest pikes in Nashville, travelers were well aware of Belmont's existence, even if the verdant landscape allowed for only a fleeting glimpse of the mansion. Urn-topped cast iron gateposts, rising eight feet into the air, announced one would soon be crossing into another world, totally sculpted and manicured, unlike any other estate in the city. As completed in 1860 with the assistance of Adolphus Heiman we are left today with



Some have compared Belmont to the Villa Borghese in Rome, a "villa suburban" for social events. For over a hundred years, historians have attempted unsuccessfully to find a link between Belmont Mansion and the villa. (Alessio Domato, photographer, 2007, Wikimedia)

this symbol of an era representing unfettered wealth, soon to be brought to an end by war.

In 1850, few Americans could have imagined or anticipated our nation being ripped asunder in little more than a decade. What concerned most Nashvillians at the time was the increase of commerce spurred by growing trade and the national economy. Both Joseph and Adelia Acklen were participants in these concerns. Primary evidence of this is the home they spent ten years planning and building.

Categorized in the twenty-first century as an Italian Villa, Belmont bears little resemblance to a true Renaissance villa. From the time Belmont was completed, long before the first coat of decorative finishes dried, there have been multiple attempts to describe this house, while assigning a specific structure as inspiration. Many have looked straight to Italy and the buildings of the Italian Renaissance, in particular the Villa Borghese in Rome, built by Cardinal Scipione Borghese in the early seventeenth century. Cardinal Borghese had much in common with the