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by Clare Lise Kelly

HOMES INSPIRED BY AMERICA'S PAST: COLONIAL REVIVAL ARCHITECT V. T. H. BIEN

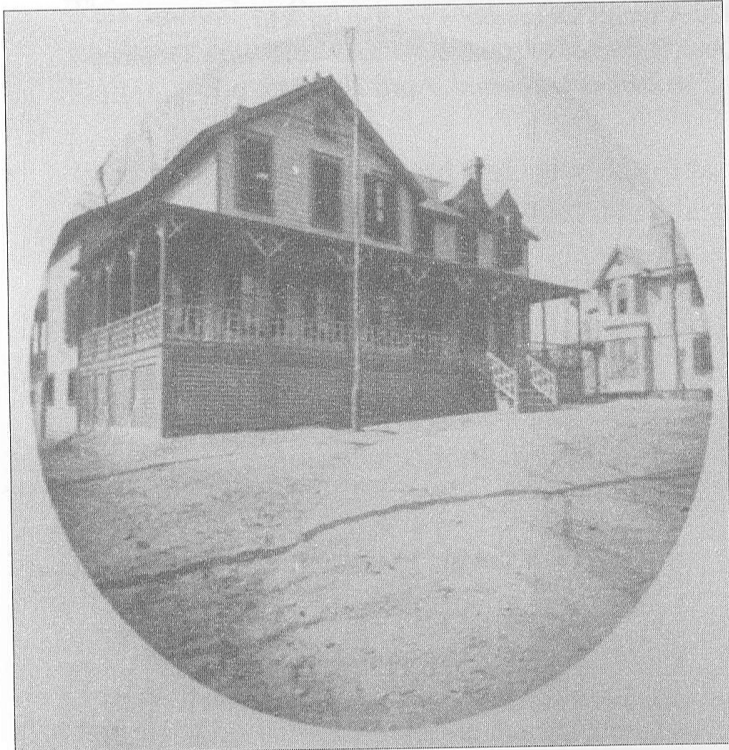
by Clare Lise Kelly

“As ancient is this hostelry/As any in the land may be,
Built in the old colonial day,/A kind of old Hobgoblin hall,
With weather-stains upon the wall,/And chimneys huge, and tiled and tall.”¹

Tales of a Wayside Inn, by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, as adapted by Currier & Ives, 1864

In the 1930s, the Wayside Inn, a Henry Ford-operated tourist attraction in Sudbury, Massachusetts, fortified an interest in Colonial Revival architecture which had been popular for over a half-century. Among the American public captivated by its antiquity was Montgomery County architect V. T. H. Bien, who was inspired to use the inn as a design model for his own residence. Bien's body of work in Montgomery County is highly representative of the popularity of the Colonial Revival architectural style of the 1930s, yet also represents Bien's skill and innovation.

Van Tuyl Hart Bien (1887-1960) was the son of Morris and Lilla Hart Bien, who were living in a rowhouse on 14th Street, in N.W. Washington when he was born. Morris Bien had graduated from the University of California, Berkeley, in 1879 with a degree in civil engineering. He worked for the U.S. Geological Survey and the General Land Office. In March 1889, Morris Bien paid \$4,200 for two lots in the new railroad community of Takoma Park. The property became their summer retreat, with a large rambling frame dwelling composed of two houses joined together to form one structure.

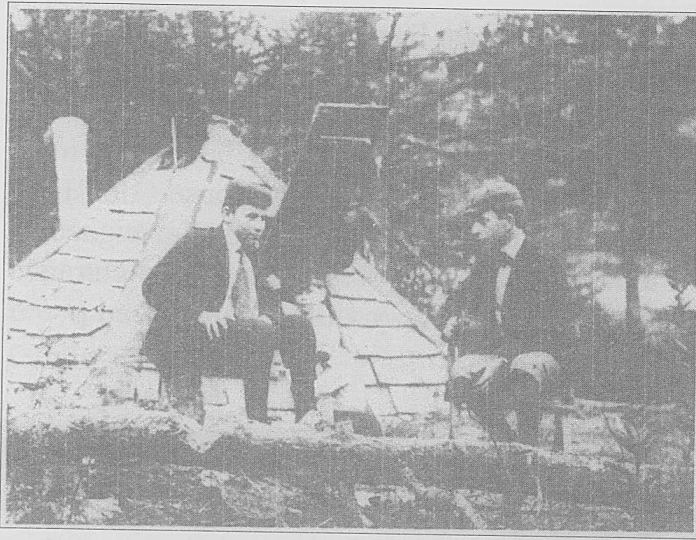


Starting in 1889, V.T.H. Bien and his parents Morris and Lilla Bien summered in this rambling house at 54 Elm Avenue, Takoma Park. It became their year-round residence in 1900. (Source: Bettina Bien Graeves, Bien family collection)

The house, located on a generous horseshoe-shaped parcel of land bounded by today's Westmoreland, Elm, and Pine Avenues, still stands at 54 Elm Avenue, in the Takoma Park Historic District.²

About 1900 the Bien family took up full-time residency in Takoma Park. By this time, Morris Bien had received a Master of Law degree from Columbian University Law School (now George Washington University). From 1903 to 1924, Bien served as chief legal officer for the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation Service. Rooms in the Bien house were filled with books indicative of the varied interests of the Bien family.³

Van Tuyl Bien became interested in construction as a child. He was about 11 years old when he erected his first construction project--a kind of neighborhood clubhouse. Dubbed "The Old Dugout," the retreat was a conical hip-roofed structure that was entered through a roof hatch.⁴



V.T.H. Bien (left), shown here with friend Hallie Mooers (right), at his childhood retreat dubbed "The Old Dugout," in Takoma Park. (Source: Bettina Bien Graeves, Bien Family collection)

Bien attended Mercersburg Academy, a boarding school in Pennsylvania. With origins as a prep school for Franklin & Marshall College, Mercersburg is the alma mater of such notables as actor James Stewart and Maryland governor Harry Hughes. Bien graduated from Mercersburg in 1906, then attended McKinley Manual Training School, in Washington, D.C., which offered practical courses in carpentry and construction. Bien received his B.S. in 1910 from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where he concentrated in naval architecture. Remaining in Massachusetts, Bien worked for the next three years at the Fore River Shipbuilding Company in Quincy.⁵

Returning to Montgomery County in 1914, Van Tuyl Bien started a construction business. His work grew from building simple garages to constructing private homes. In 1920, he established V.T.H. Bien, Inc., a general contracting business, and soon employed several workers to assist in construction.⁶

By 1917, Bien had a young family and needed a home of his own. He selected a site on the back lot of his childhood Takoma Park home and built a house where he moved with his wife, Bertha Conn Bien, and their infant daughter Bettina. The modest bungalow, at today's 6901 Westmoreland Avenue (formerly 46 Elm Avenue), was nicknamed "The Doll House." It originally had a broad south-facing front porch with classical columns, white clapboard on the first level, and dark shingles on the second.

In 1919, Bien added a second-floor sleeping porch at the back. He enlarged the house again in 1924 to accommodate a growing family. By this time, he and Bertha had three young daughters: Bettina,



In 1917, Van Tuyl Bien built this dwelling, nicknamed "The Doll's House", at 6901 Westmoreland Avenue, Takoma Park, for his own young family. View from southeast, taken in 1919. (Source: V. T. H. Bien photograph, Bien Family collection)

Phyllida "Penny," and Jan. The residence was reoriented so the west side became the front entrance. As Bettina would later recall, her father transformed the house with "a picturesque colonial front door covered with trumpet vine, a large living room with a colonial fireplace and mantel."⁷ The family lived in the bungalow for more than a decade before circumstances changed.

With the stock market crash of 1929, Van Tuyl Bien lost his construction business. He converted his parents' house, 54 Elm Avenue, into three apartments to provide rental income. This time of turmoil was compounded by the death of his father Morris, in 1932. Finding it hard to make ends meet, Bien also turned his own bungalow into rental housing.⁸

Starting in 1928, Van Tuyl Bien embarked on a career as an architect. From his experience in construction, he realized that he most enjoyed the creative process of artistic design. His earliest known project, built about 1931, was a pair of buildings he called garden apartments. Set close together, and

facing south on Elm Avenue -- between his parents' house and his own bungalow -- the buildings are still standing in the Takoma Park Historic District. The apartments, built with four units each, are two-story, side-gabled buildings with central entries.⁹

An early example of a single-family house designed by Bien is the Joseph M. Jones House (1934), on Dorset Avenue, in Kenwood. The sprawling Colonial Revival house has several sections, designed to look as though it evolved over generations. While the modest front façade presents a formal entrance from the street, the back of the house has a rambling aspect, with a large bay window and broad porch looking onto a wooded back yard.

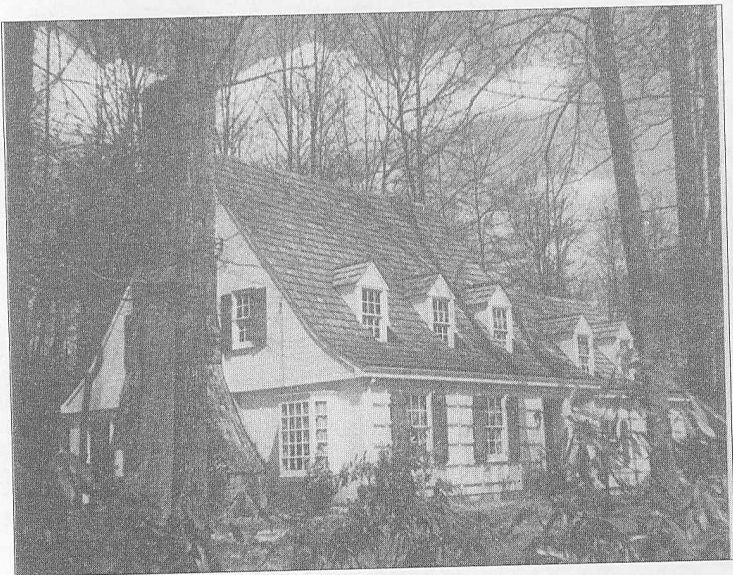
Bien received an honorable mention award from the Maryland Society of Architects for this design. Despite the recognition, Bien struggled to support his family in the 1930s. His daughter Jan recalled: "He remarked ruefully that he received more awards for his [early] work than monetary reimbursement."¹⁰

Bien was actively engaged in educational outreach on architecture topics throughout his career. One of his first publications was the draft text for the booklet *Light Frame Construction* (1930), produced for the U.S. Department of Vocational Education.¹¹

V. T. H. Bien had an affinity for Early American architecture, which was the inspiration for a new house for his own family. Bien designed a Colonial Revival cottage, built in 1935, with a steep, flared roof and a broad, brick chimney.



Joseph M. Jones House, Dorset Avenue, Kenwood.
(Photograph by Clare Lise Kelly, October 2012, site visit with Jan Bien Conn)



The Bien residence, known as Boxford, was built in 1935 on Greentree Road in Bethesda when the sparsely settled area had a rural character. V.T.H. Bien, architect. (Source: Bien Family Collection)

He chose a wooded tract of land off Greentree Road, in Bethesda. The area had a rustic quality at the time. Greentree Road, then known as Cedar Lane, was a rutted dirt road with a patch of green growing down the middle. Family members recall that the large open property of the nearby Baptist Home for Children contributed to the character of a wild undeveloped countryside in the late 1930s.

The family moved to Boxford in the winter of 1935-36.¹² Daughter Bettina recalled in later years how integral the living room was to the family at Boxford:

It had a huge living room, about 32' x 16', with a fireplace that took three-foot logs. Our father under-radiated the house on purpose, so that we would have to depend on the fireplace for heat in the winter. The wall facing the fireplace was lined

with bookshelves. The living room ceiling was constructed with random-width boards which were supported on three huge hand-hewn beams (each about one-foot square).¹³

Bien instructed the workmen how to use traditional construction methods to build the house. He personally located large trees for the beams and showed the workers how to shape them with an adze. Bettina recalled how the cuts of the workman's adze were still visible when the beams were in place. The interior woodwork was stained a rich brown, contributing to the warm, rustic feel of the living room. Bien outfitted the house with furniture that he built himself. That succeeding generations continue to enjoy his furniture is testimony to his woodworking skill.¹⁴



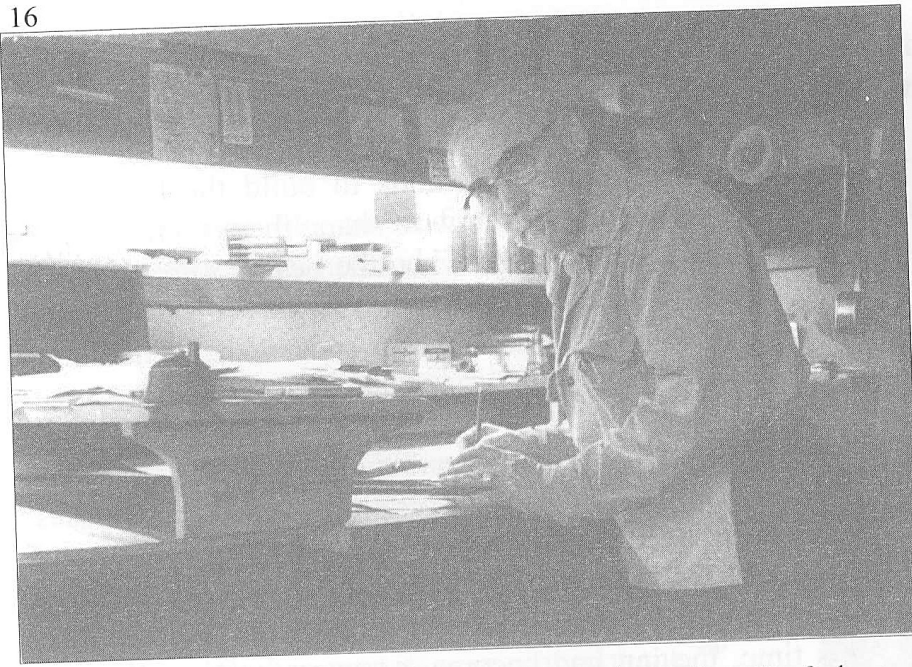
The living room at Boxford was multi-purpose with space for seating, dining, a library and piano. To the right of the fireplace was a tete-a-tete area, shown here in a painting by Bertha C. Bien, wife of V.T.H. Bien. (Source: Phyllida Bien Walker, Bien Family collection)

In addition to using traditional building methods, Bien's architectural designs drew inspiration from period houses. Boxford's hearth and mantel were mirror images of originals found at the Wayside Inn in Sudbury, Massachusetts, made famous by Longfellow's poem. By this time, the inn had become a mecca for New England architecture, drawing public attention to Colonial era history, predating the restoration of Williamsburg that became a touchstone for southern Colonial buildings. Henry Ford purchased the Wayside Inn property in 1923, envisioning a living history museum of American history and crediting admiration for Longfellow as his motivation for the project.¹⁵

Back at Boxford, Bien designed a pass-through woodbox built into the chimney base which could be filled from the exterior, made accessible through an interior cabinet on the left side of the hearth. A secondary box for kindling located on the right side of the fireplace, also accessible by interior and exterior doors, had the appearance of a bake-oven traditionally built into such a hearth. This woodbox design is found on many of Bien's houses, including his Wescataway retreat (see below).¹⁶

Living room, fireplace, mantel, and hearth at Boxford were all visible through a wide opening at the left of the center hallway. At the back of the hall was an entrance to the kitchen, from which a door led to the dining area, located at the rear of the large living room area. To return to the hallway, there was on the right a gracious staircase with wide treads and easy risers. A passage behind the stairs led to the two-car garage. In the basement at Boxford, Bien kept an architectural office with his drafting table and photographic dark room.¹⁷ Years later, a two-car garage was added with a second-level workshop for Bien's woodworking hobby. Bien was known to say he couldn't afford to buy antiques in keeping with his house, so he made them.

The style that V.T.H. Bien developed was a revival of Early American folk housing typical of the Mid-Atlantic and New England where Bien grew up, received his training, and traveled. Colonial Revival architecture achieved new popularity in the New Deal era, which was a time of rediscovery of American regional identity. The Historic American Buildings Survey, established in 1933, documented regional distinctiveness in a nationwide survey of early American architecture.



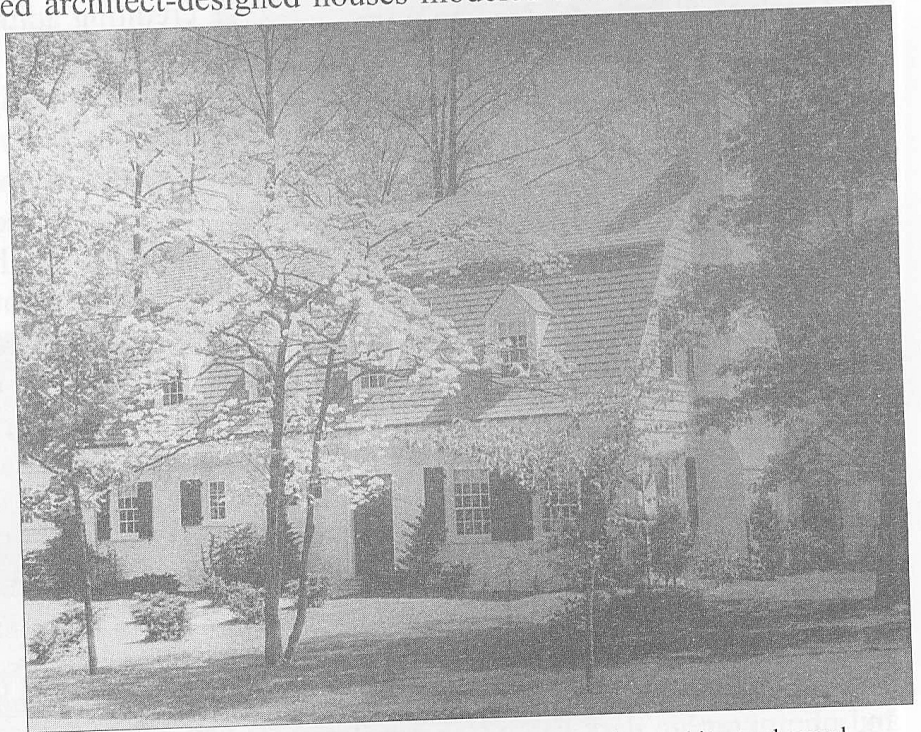
Self-portrait of Van Tuyl Bien at his drafting table, in his home office at Boxford. Photograph by V.T.H. Bien, c1958. (Source: Bettina Bien Graeves)

Architectural journals and popular magazines of the era also promoted historic American buildings. Bien traveled throughout the East Coast, photographing old houses.

In the 1930s, the overwhelming majority of homeowners preferred traditional style dwellings. An *Architectural Forum* survey of 1936 found that more than half the respondents favored Colonial Revival houses. Almost a quarter chose English Tudor style, the next most popular category. Only about a tenth of those surveyed preferred modern style houses. By this time, the revival of Colonial era architecture had been popular for more than a century.

Houses built in traditional styles made good marketing sense for developers and were considered a sound investment for property owners.¹⁸ A local example is Burnt Mills Hills (1934), in Silver Spring, where developer Roberts Latimer featured architect-designed houses modeled after historic dwellings found throughout the Eastern United States.¹⁹

Van Tuyl Bien modeled his 1938 design for a Dutch Colonial residence in Kenwood after historic houses located in the Hudson Valley of New York State. Architectural features included the hallmark gambrel roof, leaded glass windows, random-width plank floors, and large fireplaces. The house was purchased by E. Barrett Prettyman, who became a U.S. Federal judge, and the design received a merit award from the Maryland Society of Architects. The house still stands in an excellent state of preservation, at 5306 Woodlawn Avenue.²⁰



Bien's design for the E. Barrett Prettyman House received an architectural award from the Maryland Society of Architects. This view of the house, located at 5306 Woodlawn Avenue in Kenwood, dates from 1938. (Source: V. T. H. Bien photograph, Bien Family collection)

In 1942, Bien was elected to the American Institute of Architects. He had been a founding member of the Maryland Society of Architects and served as an officer of that organization from 1937-1943, before it merged with the American Institute of Architects. He wrote articles on construction for *Architectural Record*, *House Beautiful*, and *Country Home*, and was a lecturer at American University. Bien also took an interest in local history, serving as president of the Takoma Park Historical Society and a member of the Montgomery County Historical Society.²¹



Parkwood Elementary (1952), at 4710 Saul Road, in Kensington, featured a bold entrance with contrasting limestone block and decorative brickwork, and classrooms brightened by large steel-sash windows. (Source: V. T. H. Bien photograph, Bien Family collection)

As residential construction went on hiatus during World War II, Bien's experience in naval design again became valuable. He worked on PT boats and cargo vessels in Annapolis yacht yards to make ends meet. Immediately following the war, Bien embarked on a series of designs for public schools in Montgomery County. His projects included additions to Glenmont Elementary School (1946), at 12210 Georgia Avenue, and Westbrook Elementary School (1947), 5110 Allan Avenue, in Bethesda. He had the opportunity to design a new school with the commission of Parkwood Elementary (1952), at 4710 Saul Road, Kensington.

There he provided large expanses of steel sash windows to bring light into the classrooms and featured a bold entrance with contrasting limestone block and decorative brickwork. Commercial projects included the Hampden Hall apartment building he designed in 1940, and restoration of the Hiser Theater in Bethesda (no longer standing). Bettina Bien Greaves recalled woodwork in the theater lobby and an auditorium ceiling outfitted with lights that looked like stars when the lights were dimmed.²²

Bien was glad to return to residential design, his main interest. One of Bien's grandest houses was the Captain L. M. Harding House, 8100 Hampden Lane in Bethesda. Built in 1949, the Norman style house featured a winding staircase inspired by ship construction, a harkening back to Bien's experience as a naval architect. Bien's design received a merit award from the Washington Metropolitan Chapter of the American Institute of Architects.²³ In College Heights Estates, in Prince George's County, Bien designed several substantial Colonial Revival houses between 1952 and 1957.²⁴

In 1950 Bien designed a summer cottage for his family, called Wescataway, which was built on a tributary of the Potomac River, in Montross, Virginia. The house has two wings that join in a V-shape to complement the point of land on which it is located. One wing accommodated common living areas, while the other held private and service functions of kitchen, bedroom, and bath. Bien designed a large chimney where he repeated a favorite feature of a pass-through woodbox.²⁵



Nautically-inspired staircase of the Captain L. M. Harding House (1949) at 8100 (formerly 7328) Hampden Lane, which is located in the Greenwich Forest Historic District, designated in 2012. (Source: V. T. H. Bien photograph, Bien Family collection)



Van Tuyl Bien, at his vacation home, Wescataway, on the Potomac River, in Montross, Virginia. A hallmark feature of many Bien houses is a living room woodbox which has exterior access.
(Source: Bettina Bien Graeves, Bien Family collection)

Bien taught classes in home building at American University from 1951 to 1953. At the time of his death in 1960, Van Tuyl Bien was creating the Burning Tree Village subdivision, near his Boxford home in Bethesda.²⁶

Members of the Bien family were saddened to discover that Boxford had been demolished in 2009. Yet Bien's legacy lives on in houses he has designed, and in handcrafted heirlooms. V.T.H. Bien's three daughters still own sturdy furniture their father made -- from bookcases to bureaus, drop leaf tables and bedsteads. Several of Bien's houses have been preserved in historic districts in Montgomery County -- Takoma Park, Somerset, and Greenwich Forest -- so they may be enjoyed by county residents for generations to come.²⁷

About the Author: *Clare Lise Kelly* is an architectural historian with degrees from Cornell University and the University of Vermont. Research and Designation Coordinator for M-NCPPC's Historic Preservation section, she has written about the architecture and settlement patterns of Montgomery County for over 20 years and is instrumental in the protection of historic resources through designation on the *Master Plan for Historic Preservation*. Kelly (formerly Cavicchi) is the author of *Places from the Past; the Tradition of Gardez Bien in Montgomery County, Maryland* (2001). She lectures at the University of Maryland's School of Architecture and is a collaborator and frequent guest of the County Cable Montgomery's *Paths to the Present* and *Montgomery Plans*.

Notes

¹Text as it appeared on the Currier & Ives print, "The Wayside Inn" (1864), which was adapted from Longfellow's original 1862 epic poem, *Tales of a Wayside Inn*.

²V.T.H. Bien was born February 15, 1887 and died August 19, 1960. Major sources of information on his life are his family papers, correspondence with his daughters, and the records of the American Institute of Architects.

³Biographical information on Morris Bien in William D. Rowley. *The Bureau of Reclamation: Origins and Growth to 1945*. Government Printing Office, 2006, pp147-149; Donald J. Pisani, *Water and American Government: The Reclamation Bureau, National Water Policy, and the West, 1902-1935*. University of California Press, 2002.

⁴Correspondence, Bettina B. Graeves to Clare Lise Kelly, September 27, 2012. Photographs of the Bien family house, 60 Elm Avenue [now 54 Elm], photograph album in possession of Bettina B. Graeves, Hickory, NC.

Correspondence, Jan Bien Conn to Clare Lise Kelly, September 28, 2012.

⁵Edwin Bateman Morris, "V. T. H. Bien: Architect Biography," Baldwin Memorial Archive of American Architects, September 18, 1960, American Institute of Architects archives. R. R. Bowker, *American Architects Directory*, 1956. McKinley is now Robert Gould Shaw Junior High School, 1616 Marion Street NW.

⁶*The Washington Post*, June 13 and July 18, 1915. *Who's Who in the Nation's Capital*, Washington, DC: Consolidated Publishing Company, 1921. Jan Bien Conn, "Van Tuyl Hart Bien," Biographical Sketch. Correspondence with Clare Lise Kelly, August 2012.

⁷Correspondence, Bettina Bien Greaves to Clare Lise Kelly, August 20, 2012.

⁸Graeves, August 20, 2012, op cit. During the Depression, Van Tuyl Bien and family lived at his mother-in-law's house in Connecticut.

⁹Daughter Bettina Bien Greaves recalled that the family called the buildings Garden Apartments. The buildings are also labeled "Garden Apartments" on the Klingé Atlas of 1931. *American Architects Directory* lists 1930 as the date that Bien

started his practice. On his application for membership in the American Institute of Architects, Bien listed 1928 as the date he became a practicing architect. AIA Archives.

¹⁰Conn, Biographical Sketch, op cit.

¹¹Morris, op cit. American Institute of Architects Archives.

¹²The house was located at 6745 Greentree Road, Bethesda.

¹³Graeves, August 20, 2012 and September 27, 2012.

¹⁴Correspondence with author: Graeves, August 20, 2012, op cit; Jan Bien Conn, September 28, 2012; Phyllida Bien Walker, September 28, 2012.

¹⁵According to the Wayside Inn Foundation, Ford's efforts helped inspire and inform John D. Rockefeller, Jr. in his restoration of Williamsburg. <http://www.wayside.org/history/ford>

¹⁶Jan Bien Conn to Clare Lise Kelly, September 28, 2012.

¹⁷The master bedroom above the living room was later converted into a mother-in-law suite for Lilla Bien, Van Tuyl's mother, who moved here from Takoma Park. At that time, the garage was converted into a new master bedroom suite with full bath. Beyond the ground-floor bedroom suite, the new full two-car garage was built. An invalid in later years, Bertha (Babbie) Bien recorded the interior of the house with watercolor paintings which have been preserved by her daughters.

¹⁸*The Architectural Forum*, November 1936. David Gebhard, "The American Colonial Revival in the 1930s." *Winterthur Portfolio*, 22:2/3 (Summer/Autumn 1987), pp 109-148.

¹⁹"Burnt Mills Hills," Maryland Inventory of Historic Properties research form, Clare Lise Kelly, January 2012. http://www.montgomeryplanning.org/historic/burntmillshills/documents/burnt_millshills_research_formcompressed.pdf

²⁰*American Architects Directory*, op cit. Van Tuyl Bien photographs, Bien family collection (alternatively identified as the Mendelson House). *The Washington Post*, November 7, 1937; November 6, 1938. Prettyman House site visit, Clare Lise Kelly and Jan Bien Conn, October 2012. Prettyman listed in Congressional Directories, 1940s-60s. The E. Barrett Prettyman Courthouse (1949), 333 Constitution Avenue, NW D.C. is named in the judge's honor. Among Bien's projects in Kenwood is the Annex for the Kenwood Golf & Country Club (1950), according to the *American Architects Directory* of 1956.

²¹Morris, op cit. American Institute of Architects Archives.

²²Correspondence, Bettina Bien Greaves to Clare Lise Kelly, August 29, 2012. William Offutt, *Bethesda: A Social History*, p 447.

²³American Architects Directory, 1956. EHT Traceries, "Greenwich Forest Historic District," MIHP research form, June 2009. According to Traceries' research, Harding had conceived the design for the house years before it was constructed in 1949. www.montgomeryplanning.org/historic/documents/RevisedGreenwichForestHD_MIHPform_8202009.pdf

²⁴EHT Traceries, "College Heights Estates Historic District," National Register nomination, March 2009. <http://www.pgplanning.org/Assets/Planning/Historic+Preservation/HPC+Agenda/CHE+Nomination.pdf>

²⁵The house is located at 419 Hickory Point Drive, in Westmoreland County, Va. Jan Bien Conn correspondence, September 28, 2012.

²⁶V.T.H. Bien obituaries, *Washington Star*, August 21, 1960; and *The Washington Post*, August 21, 1960. Burning Tree Village, Plat 4754, November 1956.

²⁷These historic districts are designated on the Montgomery County *Master Plan for Historic Preservation*, and are protected by the County's Preservation Ordinance.

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