

The Correspondence of David E. Finley and Jacqueline Kennedy

WILLIAM B. BUSHONG

Born at his parents' home in York, South Carolina, David E. Finley (1890–1977) was a man of small physical stature, quiet and soft spoken. The forces of ambition, taste, and his vast network of social and political connections made him a towering figure in the cultural life of 20th-century Washington, D.C. Finley came to Washington as a young boy. His father, David Edward Finley, was a congressman from South Carolina (1899–1917).

Finley graduated from the University of South Carolina at age 19 and obtained a law degree from the George Washington University in 1913. He became a tax attorney and, through a position at the Department of the Treasury, in 1927 during the Coolidge administration, met and soon became the special assistant to Secretary Andrew W. Mellon. When Mellon was named ambassador to Great Britain in 1931, Finley served as counselor at the American Embassy.¹ He married Margaret Eustis, a granddaughter of William Wilson Corcoran, founder of the Corcoran Gallery of Art. Both would remain active in civic and social affairs, she the volunteer pillar of the American Red Cross.

When Mellon left government service in 1933, Finley returned to Washington and opened law offices with Mellon as his chief client. Through this friendship and professional association, Finley would fulfill Mellon's plans to create the National Gallery of Art and became its first director, serving from 1938 to 1956. Mellon left his great art collection and the necessary funds to build a national gallery to the United States just before his death in 1937. Finley's involvement in the cultural life of Washington

deepened as he oversaw the construction of the great neoclassical marble gallery designed by John Russell Pope and directed the opening of one of the world's great art museums. He accepted positions as the chair of the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts (1950–63) and the founding chair of the National Trust for Historic Preservation (1950–62), and he was a member of the art commission at the Smithsonian Institution that founded the National Portrait Gallery.

Finley's prominent role as a guardian of Washington's cultural and historic landmarks led to a trusted position as an adviser to Presidents Franklin D. Roosevelt, Harry Truman, Dwight D. Eisenhower, and John F. Kennedy. Finley's grace and courtly manner as an elder statesman of the arts with decades of experience and with artistic, architectural, and historical expertise made him the perfect foil to a young, ambitious, and charismatic Jacqueline Kennedy. Mrs. Kennedy's drive to preserve Lafayette Square and to restore the furnishings and fine arts collections of the White House were made possible by her collaboration with this veteran of Washington's culture wars. Finley was a key player in the fight to preserve Lafayette Square and served as the first chair of the White House Historical Association, founded in 1961.

The transcribed letters published here provide a glimpse into the mutual admiration, the common interests in art and architecture, and the friendship that Mrs. Kennedy held with "Mr. Finley," as she always called him. The letters are both personal and poignant. Mrs. Kennedy's first letter, written as a plea to David Finley to stay

David E. Finley during his tenure as chair of the Commission of Fine Arts, 1950–63.

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involved with her causes at the White House, insisted that he should never end his work with the association. Finley's reply assured her of his steadfast interest in the association and thanked Mrs. Kennedy for accepting his intent to retire from the fine arts commission. The second exchange of letters underscored the personal connection and commitment to the fine arts that made their collaboration so powerful. It was clear that both Mrs. Kennedy and Mr. Finley viewed the future of the White House Historical Association as far

Mrs. Kennedy sits at her desk to compose a letter in 1961. Her letters to Finley were filled with sentences separated by dashes—telegram-like—trusting that her reader well understood her manner and presentation of ideas.



more than just a vehicle for the publication of a guidebook. In these letters was the vision of a budding historical and cultural institution that would last forever.

1. Biographical information for David E. Finley was compiled from materials on file at the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts, National Building Museum, Washington, D.C., and the *Washington Post*, February 2, 1977. The White House Historical Association would like to thank Maygene Daniels, chief archivist at the National Gallery of Art, for informing the association of the existence of these letters in the David E. Finley Papers, Gallery Archives, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

March 22, 1963

Dear Mr. Finley

It absolutely broke my heart when the President came home the other day and told me of your adieux—

I suppose I knew in the back of my head—I think you told me once—that you would be resigning sometime—but I never dreamed that such a terrible thing could happen—while I was alive—

It is inconceivable to think of existing without you—What will I do? You have been such a marvelous and unselfish helper—and your fantastic backing and loyalty are what gave me the courage to do all the things people said we were mad to attempt—

The President told me you were the only person who stood by President Truman on his balcony problem!—I didn't know that—but I should have—because it is so like you.—and I could never find words to express all the gratitude and affection and indebtedness I will feel for you until my dying day—

This letter is really outside the realm of protocol or whatever governs official life—but I told Jack I was going to write to you—and he said yes you must—When you handed your letter to the President—does that make your resignation irrevocable?

I can imagine that being head of the Fine Arts Committee is exhausting and has so many official things connected with it that you must have been longing for years to escape them—

Now I understand there are 6 or 5 Vacancies—and all the suggestions that pour in of course I would love to go over with you—but I was just wondering—Could you not stay on the committee even if you could no longer bear to be its chairman? . . .

Or maybe when they form the new committee there will be someone on it whom you think should eventually be the chairman—I have no idea how it all works—and I feel you are rather a Kindred soul.—as I hate committees & group discussions & all the pomp & ceremony that leads to no result—so if you want to escape it I don't blame you—but maybe you could be a lofty advisory chairman—with solemn promises you would never have to write letters or go to meetings—

(One thing you can NEVER do is resign from the White House Historical Association—! please promise that)

So could you please think about just staying on as an advisor OR Eminence Grise—I will be there one year more and I cannot face it without you—and if we find ourselves there for longer!

Please forgive this letter if it sounds pestering or desperate—I really want you to be happy—as you have done more than anyone to make my life happy and all our hopes come true—but I don't want you to ever feel you are being pressured to do something you are so glad to be rid of. I just wanted you to know how desperately you will be missed—& if there is some secret—that is not the right word—unorthodox is better— —way you can think of to still be there—please do wrack your brain and come up with it—(& tell me soon!)

With the greatest affection and appreciation

Jacqueline Kennedy

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President and Mrs. Kennedy cross the South Lawn of the White House. The Truman Balcony on the South Portico was one of the topics discussed by Mrs. Kennedy and Finley in their correspondence.

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Mrs. Kennedy
The White House

March 27, 1963

Dear Mrs. Kennedy:

I was deeply touched when I came home yesterday afternoon and read your letter. It was such a kind, spontaneous and understanding letter; and it made me very happy to say that I have been of help to you in the splendid work you are doing, not only for the White House but for Lafayette Square and the other things here.

I want to continue to help you and will always be delighted to have you (and also The President) call on me when there is something I can do. And, of course, I shall continue to be member of the White House Historical Association and of your Fine Arts Committee on the White House.

I have enjoyed my work with the Commission of Fine Arts and do not mind "meetings and letter writing" in the least. My life has been full of them, even in the much more enjoyable job of director of the National Gallery. But I never want to over-stay my time; also I should get my papers in order, especially those about the formation and growth of the National Gallery, and write down some of the things that should be recorded.

I hope you do understand and will let me continue to help you whenever I can do so. I greatly value your friendship and shall always keep your letter as one of my most precious possessions.

With great appreciation and kindest regards, I am

Most sincerely yours,

David Finley

P.S. I must be quite honest about President Truman and the balcony. I agreed with the other members of the Commission that an eighteenth century Georgian house, such as the White House, should not have the line of columns broken by a balcony, as was done in the nineteenth century plantation houses. But the line of columns at The White House had already been broken by the awning; and after we had given our advice to The President, I felt our responsibility had ended and Mr. Truman should not have been involved in public controversy about the matter. In any event, Mr. Truman and I were friends and I was very pleased when he re-appointed me to the Commission.—D.E.F.

August 22, 1964

Dear Mr. Finley—

This little gold box comes with a long story attached to it—

President Kennedy was going to give you the Citation of Merit this last July 4.

He had created it the year before—for people who had given great service to their country—All your years on the Fine Arts Commission—all the wonderful things you did—and then your time ended—during his term—which was sad for him—Because he so deeply appreciated all you had done to make his dream of what the White House should be—come true—and all that you had done before.

Your loyalty—your approval of his vision—all your help in those shining years—to ensure that the President's House would be forever what it should be—Your painstaking care with the White House Historical Association—which now will last forever—

When I finally collected my thoughts this winter—I felt so terribly that you would never receive the Citation from him—I thought of giving you the document—but it wouldn't have had his signature—so I had this little box made—but I couldn't bear to give it to you—It would have revived so many memories—I just kept putting it off—But now—as I make a change to a new life in a new city—I cannot leave without sending it to you—

It comes with my devotion—and my great sadness that we could not have all been there together in the Rose Garden—his beloved garden—to see you receive the Citation of Merit from President Kennedy—so please accept this poor substitute—

With love from

Jacqueline Kennedy

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Little Oatlands
Leesburg, Virginia

August 29, 1964

Dear Mrs. Kennedy:

I cannot tell you how deeply touched I am by the beautiful gold box with its inscription, and especially by your letter, telling me of President Kennedy's intention of giving me the Citation of Merit last July 4th for my service to the country. The knowledge that he wanted me to have it means a great deal to me.

I have always felt that one is fortunate to have an opportunity to do anything of value for our country; and it made me very happy to be of any help to you and President Kennedy in making the White House what it ought to be and as you both wanted it to be. It was a splendid work which you both did and I hope the White House Historical Association can be useful in providing the books and funds for carrying the work in the future.

During my last years with the Commission of Fine Arts, it was both an inspiration and support to have a President who cared so greatly about the city of Washington. I can never be sufficiently grateful for what he did about Lafayette Square and many other things. All that made "those shining years" very happy ones for me and for many others. What he did and inspired will leave an indelible impression on the country.

It makes us very sad to have you leave Georgetown. But you will come back, I know, from time to time and your friends will be there waiting for you.

I shall always treasure your letter and the beautiful box as a symbol of President Kennedy's intention, and with affection and gratitude, I am,

Your friend,

David E. Finley

Mrs. John F. Kennedy
Room 12, Executive Office Building
Washington, D.C.

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Mrs. Kennedy snapped this photograph of the president and David Finley standing in the president's bedroom at the White House, June 28, 1961. Mr. Finley had donated the 18th-century American highboy, also in the picture, and he later ribbed Mrs. Kennedy for including Bill Walton's knee in the frame.