

Hickory Hill after the Jacksons

*John Q. Barrett**

Copyright © 2009 by John Q. Barrett.
All rights reserved.

As I wrote last week, Robert H. Jackson purchased Hickory Hill, a large, beautiful antebellum house and almost six acres of land in McLean, Virginia, in summer 1941, just before his Supreme Court nomination was confirmed by the Senate. Jackson, who apparently was the sole purchaser, paid over \$48,000 in cash to the sellers, Leo and Leonora Rocca. After making renovations to the house and building a stable for horses, Robert Jackson and his wife Irene lived at Hickory Hill for the rest of his life. They regularly hosted family and friends as houseguests, including their grown, married children and, beginning in 1946, their grandchildren.

When Justice Jackson died in October 1954, his will left the bulk of his estate, including Hickory Hill, which Virginia probate court valued at \$75,000, in trust for the benefit of his widow Irene. In spring 1955, after Irene had lived alone in the house for six months, the trustees, who were her son and son-in-law, put Hickory Hill on the market at her request. (To a friend, she wrote a few months later that she “couldn’t face another winter in our house in McLean...”¹) There were many prospective buyers and, by that summer, Hickory Hill was sold. In October 1955, Irene Jackson, age 65, moved to an apartment in the Kennedy-Warren on Connecticut Avenue in Washington. She lived there happily, and she also traveled regularly, visiting relatives in New York City and New York State and sites around the world, until she was disabled by a serious stroke in December 1982 and moved to a nursing home.

In summer 1955, Irene Jackson sold Hickory Hill to Senator John F. Kennedy (D.-MA) and his wife Jacqueline. They had, since their September 1953 marriage, lived in Georgetown, but Hickory Hill—located not far from a Jackie childhood home—offered style and space for the

* Professor of Law, St. John’s University School of Law, New York City, and Elizabeth S. Lenna Fellow, Robert H. Jackson Center, Jamestown, New York (www.roberthjackson.org). An earlier version of this text was posted to my Jackson Email List on July 17, 2009.

For a selected archive of Jackson List posts, see my homepage at www.law.stjohns.edu. To subscribe to the Jackson List, which does not display recipient identities or distribute their email addresses, send a note to barrettj@stjohns.edu.

¹ Irene G. Jackson, Washington, D.C., to Frances & Don Dailey, Rochester, NY, undated, mailed Dec. 17, 1955.

HICKORY HILL AFTER THE JACKSONS

family they hoped to start soon. They paid Irene Jackson \$125,000 for the property.

By early 1956, the Hickory Hill Kennedys were expecting a baby. Jacqueline Kennedy, during the pregnancy, spent a significant amount of time planning and then, after construction, decorating a nursery in the big house. At the Democratic national convention in Chicago that August, Senator Kennedy sought and nearly obtained the Party's vice presidential nomination. Soon thereafter, Mrs. Kennedy suffered a miscarriage (her second). In the aftermath, she could not bear the sight of Hickory Hill. She and the Senator soon sold the property.²

The late 1956 buyers of Hickory Hill were another Kennedy brother and his wife. At that time, Senate committee lawyer Robert F. Kennedy and his wife Ethel had five children and barely fit in their Georgetown home. Hickory Hill, for which they paid the same \$125,000 price that JFK and Jackie had paid less than two years earlier to Irene Jackson,³ fit their immediate needs. As their family grew (ultimately to eleven children), they built a significant addition to the house and made other changes.

Robert Kennedy lived at Hickory Hill for the remainder of his life, including the years (1961-64) when he served, as Jackson had just before his own Hickory Hill years, as Attorney General of the United States. It became, as RFK's home, the famous site of swims, seminars, pet shows, high governance, family love and relaxation and, again, greatness in American public life.

² See DORIS KEARNS GOODWIN, *THE FITZGERALDS AND THE KENNEDYS: AN AMERICAN SAGA* 785 (1987) (citing JOSEPH F. DINNEEN, *THE KENNEDY FAMILY* 207 (1959)).

³ See ARTHUR M. SCHLESINGER, JR., *ROBERT KENNEDY AND HIS TIMES* 150 (1978).