



LEFT: Vice Presidential Residence on Observatory Circle.

ABOVE: Statue of Sir Winston Churchill at the British Embassy.

Call A Tour Guide?

An Embassy Row Tour for Your Cell Phone or iPod

ARTICLE AND PHOTOS BY BRAD HATHAWAY

Podcasts are a marvelous way to get a brief blast of information – or a more lengthy lecture. Marvelous, that is, if (and this can be a big “if”) you happen to have an iPod or its equivalent. Now there’s a local podcast series of interest that doesn’t require the highest tech of all. You can get access to a 42-segment walking tour of Washington’s Embassy Row on your cell phone.

Walk up Massachusetts Avenue from Dupont Circle and stand in front of the palatial beaux arts mansion at 2020 Massachusetts Ave. NW, which is now the Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia. Call 202-595-1841 and press 4# and listen. What do you hear? Cokie Roberts relating the history of the house in a four-minute mini-lecture that is packed with interesting information.

It seems that the embassy was originally built for Thomas Walsh, who struck it rich in Colorado. Did I say “rich?” How about an income of \$5,000? A year? No. A month? No. A week? No. At its peak, Walsh’s Camp Bird Gold Mine yielded \$5,000 a day – and that was in the 1870s when \$5,000 was worth what \$95,000 is worth today (and there was no income tax)!

Walsh had this mansion built just in case his new friend King Leopold II of Belgium wanted to visit. Walsh spent almost a million dollars to build

the home and almost three million more decorating it – but the king never did visit.

It is details like these that make this audio tour worth the minutes on your cell phone.

Not all the stops on the Embassy Row Tour are at embassies. Go to Massachusetts Avenue and Q Street. There you will find the statue of India’s Mahatma Gandhi, the father of nonviolent civil disobedience, the doctrine which Martin Luther King Jr. traveled to India to learn about from Jawarharlal Nehru. Unfortunately, Roberts’ text doesn’t include the connection to King’s subsequent devotion to nonviolence.

Across the street from the British Embassy, 3100 Massachusetts Ave. NW, you will find a memorial garden celebrating the third largest selling poet in history, Khalil Gibran. Roberts fills you in on just who Gibran was before turning her attention across the street not only to the British Embassy, but to the statue of Sir Winston Churchill, which famously strides between British and American soil by straddling the property line between embassy and public space.

The circles along Massachusetts Avenue get their own briefings. Roberts describes the fountains and sculptures in Dupont and Sheridan circles (including information on just who these Duponts and Sheridans were.)

Two ways to access the tour: Traditional iPod users can download all 41 parts of the Embassy Row Tour by visiting www.woodrowwilsonhouse.org. To use your cell phone, stop by the Woodrow Wilson House at 2340 S St. NW and pick up a map with the numbers of the tour stops. Then, as you stand before any one of the stops, call 202-595-1841 and enter the stop number followed by the pound sign.

She also explains the history of the United States Naval Observatory and the residence in Observatory Circle which has been occupied by each vice president of the United States since Walter Mondale.

Not all of the segments are narrated by Roberts. A few are by historians and volunteers. But most are by the NPR commentator who is the author of two books that have charmed those interested in the history of our town: "Founding Mothers," which deals with the famous women of the revolutionary period, and "Ladies of Liberty," which carries the series forward through the first ladies of the



first presidents to occupy the White House from John Adams to James Monroe.

The tour is a project of the only presidential museum in the nation's capital, the Woodrow Wilson House (stop #25 on the tour) at 2340 S St. NW. This was Wilson's home after he left the White House. The museum is a property of the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

The Friends of the Wilson House also offer a more traditional kind of tour, which gives people a chance to enter and view some of the more spectacular private homes and embassies in the neighborhood. If the recorded tour sparks your interest, you might want to save Sept. 20 on your calendar for the 25th Annual Kalorama House and Embassy Tour. On that Sunday the French Ambassador's Residence, the Embassy of Portugal and other homes and embassies will be open to those who have purchased a \$30 ticket. Visit www.woodrowwilsonhouse.org for more information.

Brad Hathaway writes on theater and intellectually intriguing opportunities in the nation's capital. He publishes Potomac Stages, a web-based theater resource, and writes for national and regional publications. He lives on Capitol Hill and can be reached at Brad@PotomacStages.com.

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