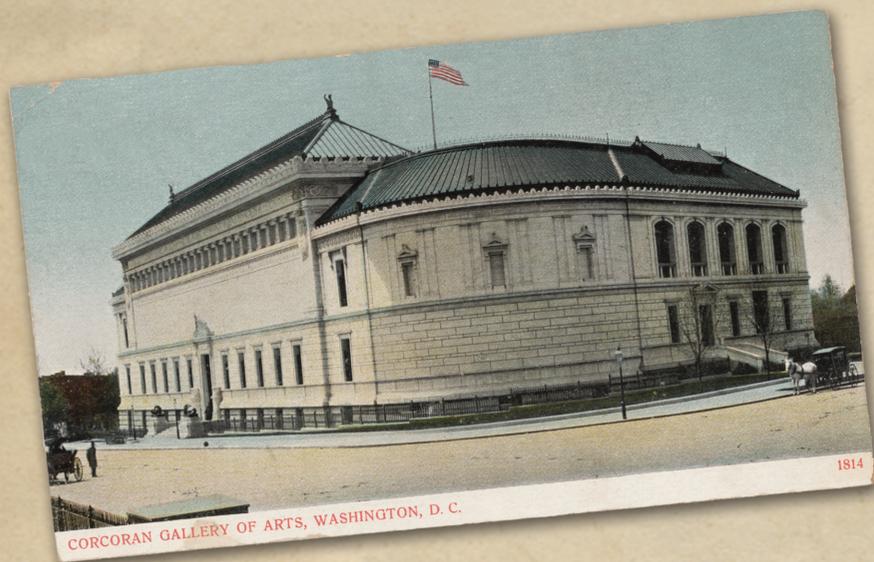


William Wilson Corcoran

William Wilson Corcoran, prominent Georgetown businessman and philanthropist, MAC stockholder and trustee, and Southern sympathizer, spent the bulk of the Civil War years living abroad.

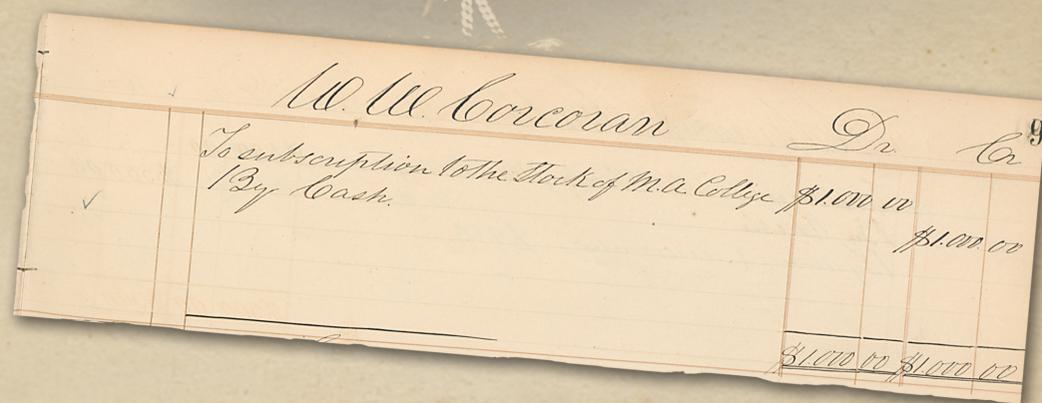
Corcoran was born in Washington, D.C., in 1798 to Thomas Corcoran, a prosperous leather maker and politician who served as mayor of Georgetown and later postmaster. He attended private school until age 17, foregoing additional education to become a clerk in a dry goods store owned by his older brothers. Corcoran soon became the senior partner in an auction and commission firm, but it failed following the Panic of 1819. He then took over the management of his father's affairs, his introduction to the world of finance. In 1840, he and family friend Elisha Riggs formed Corcoran & Riggs, which under the solo name Riggs, would dominate Washington-area banking for over a century.

By the time the Maryland Agricultural College opened its doors on October 5, 1859, W. W. Corcoran had already retired from his successful banking career to devote himself to philanthropy. He was among the dignitaries in attendance at the college's opening ceremony, having enrolled his 14-year-old nephew, James, as a student. That same year, he began construction on the Corcoran Gallery of Art to house his expanding collection.



Although he once wrote to his wife of a disturbing incident that "almost made an [abolitionist] of me," he was a staunch, and later unrepentant, supporter of the Confederacy. While he hoped optimistically that war would be avoided, he placed the blame for it squarely on the North, writing that "The South should have her rights in peace."

Early in the war, he was briefly jailed for activities sympathetic to the Confederates but was released when powerful friends, including U.S. Navy Secretary Gideon Wells, interceded on his behalf.



Corcoran, a widower, spent the rest of the war in Paris with his daughter and son-in-law, George Eustis, Jr., secretary to a Confederate diplomat. He moved much of his personal wealth overseas as well, but his real properties in the District of Columbia were used extensively by the federal government.

His return to Washington after the war was noted in several newspapers including the pro-Union *Washington Sunday Chronicle*, which editorialized: "However many have differed with him during the war, none can doubt his practical benevolence, his princely liberality, or his unquenchable public spirit." He gradually repatriated his money and established ties with the administration of Andrew Johnson. He founded the Louise Home for Women in honor of his deceased wife and daughter and supported numerous charitable organizations and educational institutions, including an orphans' asylum and the Columbia University, later George Washington University. He also founded Oak Hill Cemetery, where he, his wife, and daughter are all buried.

At his death in 1888, the headline of his obituary in the *Washington Post* read "An Honored and Useful Career Devoted to Good Works."