

ALGIERS, ALGERIA. AMBASSADOR'S RESIDENCE, VILLA MONTFELD



Villa Montfeld, the residence of the American Ambassador in Algiers, was acquired by the U.S. Government on June 13, 1947. One of the most elegant estates in Algiers, it occupies 5.1 acres on the northeast slope of a range of coastal hills that frames the city of Algiers. Its layout and appointments are European, while much of the architectural detail is Turkish and Moorish. The original house was built between 1853 and 1863 and remodeled between 1876 and 1895. The remodeling was supervised by Benjamin Bucknall, an English architect of the Gothic Revival in England and Wales.

Bucknall lived in Wales but in 1878 he settled in Algiers permanently, where he changed his style to neo-Moorish architecture and oversaw the restoration of Villa Montfeld. Bucknall reputedly benefited from the gradual demolition of the lower Casbah (a residential area of Algiers) to acquire antique tiles, pillars, arches, and other decorative features from old Turkish and Moorish houses and used these items at Montfeld. A road, the Chemin Bucknall, was named after him.

Villa Montfeld played a role in recent United States diplomatic history. On November 4, 1979, the American Embassy in Tehran was occupied, triggering the Tehran hostage crisis. In 1980/81, Algeria mediated the crisis. Deputy Secretary of State Warren Christopher shuttled between Algeria and Washington and finally brokered a deal under which the hostages would be released in return for an unfreezing of Iranian assets and a lifting of sanctions. While Mr. Christopher was in Algiers, Villa Montfeld served as his headquarters. The signing of the Algiers Accords on January 19, 1981 by Deputy Secretary Christopher and the chief Algerian mediator led to the release of the hostages and their arrival in Algiers on January 20, 1981.