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# If Walls Could Talk: WKU President's Home

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If These Walls Could Talk: WKU President's Home

By Jonathan Jeffrey

Mid pleasures and palaces

though we may roam,

Be it ever so humble,

There's no place like home.

John Howard Payne (1791-1852)

All houses have stories to tell—gossip about their owners, quips about repairs that left structural scars, complaints about the weather, historical news about important events and visitors, and tales of the first child to patter on its floors and the last patriarch to die in its bosom. Unfortunately houses cannot sit down and wile away the hours in conversation. Their stories are told by their owners, people who have been protected by their walls, those who have found solace, security and succor there. The WKU President's Home at 1700 Chestnut was built as a private residence in 1958 and purchased by WKU twenty years later. Since that time it has been the home to the families of four WKU presidents: Donald Zacharias, Kern Alexander, Thomas Meredith and Gary Ransdell. Now over fifty years old, WKU's executive residence has a unique history.

The land on which the President's Home was built was originally part of the R. C. P. Thomas estate and the stone fence surrounding the lot was part of that farmstead, which was later owned by Harold Sublett. The Sublett farm house sits adjacent to the

President's Home and is owned by WKU and used for office space. The farm was gradually parceled out into smaller lots as developers worked in the area. Clifford Wallace Lampkin purchased the lot at the corner of Logan and Chestnut Streets, as well as several other large tracts in the vicinity, in the late-1950s. A hotelier, who had at one time owned Bowling Green's Mansard and Helm Hotels as well hotels in three other states, Lampkin was always looking for land investment opportunities.

Mr. Lampkin and his wife Sarah Carroll Lampkin were at the stage in life when they were ready to build their final residence, a place that would reflect the social position to which they had obtained and one that could be used extensively for entertaining. Mr. Lampkin was also a local politician of note. He was elected to the city's Board of Aldermen in 1951, became interim mayor in 1953, and was elected to a full mayoral term in 1955. The Lampkins chose James Maurice Ingram as the architect for their new home. Ingram had designed hundreds of residences as well as commercial, industrial and educational facilities in the Bowling Green area, including several buildings at WKU. Ingram's esteemed reputation rested on solidly constructed homes with Colonial Revival details.

After several meetings with the Lampkins in 1957, Ingram planned a two-story, red brick Greek Revival structure, taking full advantage of the wide lot. The home's symmetrical façade features a magnificently detailed doorway featuring sidelights and a fanlight transom as well as smooth pilasters. Ingram further enhanced the doorway with a pedimented portico supported by four columns capped with Corinthian capitals. Two bay windows flanked the front entrance and the other windows featured carved wooden

lunettes above the lintels. Dentil molding was used liberally in the portico and soffit. On the interior the Lampkins requested large entertaining areas near the entrance with special attention to fireplace mantels and moldings, a special coat closet that was to be used for cold storage of Mrs. Lampkin's furs, a secure area in the basement, a master bedroom on the first floor and detached servant's quarters. Ingram incorporated all of these features into his design, including the servant's quarters (over the detached garage) which he linked to the main house via a lovely covered, curved, colonnade walkway. Local lore has it that the large den was designed for a gargantuan Persian rug that the Lampkins had purchased and that the secure area in the basement was for storing Mr. Lampkin's money. Indeed, the house was solidly built; it sits on a foundation of rock pillars capable of supporting a six-story structure.

Interestingly, the Lampkins never occupied this home, and Clifford Lampkin died from a heart attack on August 4, 1959, leaving an estate valued at over one million dollars. The home the Lampkins so assiduously planned was purchased by Frank and Jean Moore for their growing family. Mr. Moore was a civic-minded physician who worked for the Graves Gilbert Clinic. He and Jean resided at 1700 Chestnut for twenty years. The family left the second floor unfinished. Hamp Moore, Frank's son and a Bowling Green attorney, remembers the "cavernous" den and dining room and that it took some time for his parents to furnish the large rooms. He and his buddies took full advantage of the empty den by playing football there when it was unoccupied. A pool table filled a portion of the dining room until more appropriate furniture was purchased. Children from the neighborhood, now middle-aged adults, also recall learning how to skate in the large rooms with their wooden floors and the long hallway at the back of the

house. Moore, and other locals, also relish the memory of using the front lawn's large fountain as a swimming pool on numerous occasions. Moore remembers the neighborhood being physically very similar to today with plenty of young families in the adjoining areas.

One day in 1972 Ed Alford, of Bellevue, Michigan but with local Bowling Green ties, entered the driveway at 1700 Chestnut and struck up a conversation with Frank Moore. Before leaving, Alford actually offered to buy Moore's home despite the fact that it was not on the market. Thinking quickly on his feet, Mr. Moore suggested a price and Alford accepted it. Thinking even more quickly, Moore surmised how to break this unnerving news to Jean who was busy inside. Later in 1972 Mr. Alford moved into the home and what had once been a very public residence became monastic. Mr. Alford, a retired bachelor, allowed the home to deteriorate and covered all the windows with tin foil. This led to endless speculation in the neighborhood, including the story that he used the foil to reflect signals beamed from satellites.

In 1979, WKU was searching for a new president and university officials were seeking a new residence for their top executive. They were hunting for a larger home that would lend itself to entertaining while still meeting the domestic needs of WKU's first family. Concurrently the house at 1700 Chestnut became available, as Mr. Alford was in deteriorating health. The house met most of the preferred requirements for the new President's Home: proximity to campus, larger entertaining areas, adequate living space for an average family, possibilities for additional parking, and a carefully landscaped lawn that would act as another entertainment venue. The College Heights

Foundation purchased the house in 1979 for \$165,000, and the Board of Regents approved \$66,000 for needed furnishings and renovations, which included finishing out the second floor. The second floor living space was necessary, because Dr. Donald Zacharias, the first President to occupy the home, had three children: Alan, Eric and Leslie.

Each subsequent president has utilized the home for both the comfort of his family and for the advancement of WKU, but few have entertained with as much aplomb as current President Gary Ransdell and his wife Julie. They utilize the large interior rooms as well as the 1 1/3-acre lawn to full advantage. A home reflects the lives of its owners, and during the Ransdells' tenure the President's Home has exhibited gracious hospitality to all. "The most memorable thing about a visit to the President's Home," declares Lucinda Anderson, WKU's Director of Special Events, "is her (Julie's) graciousness and genuineness. By the time she is finished talking with a new student she knows who their parents are, if they have a dog, [and] what classes they like. She sees to it that their visit feels like going home." Home is indeed a special place!

Sidebar

#### Other WKU Presidential Homes

Two other Bowling Green homes have served as the official residence for WKU's presidents. The first was built in 1929 on the northwestern side of College Hill and today serves as the Craig Alumni Center. During most of his presidency, Henry Hardin Cherry occupied his own home on 15<sup>th</sup> Street only a short block from his office in Van Meter Hall. He eventually agreed with the Board of Regents that a more "spacious home" on campus would allow him greater interaction with students, faculty and alumni. Louisville architect Brinton Beauregard Davis designed a striking Federal-style masonry home that was completed in 1931 at a cost of \$26,050 for the president. Perched on the hill's perimeter, the house's salient architectural features included a rounded portico with second-story balustrade, limestone quoins, dormers, bracketed eaves and lovely

paneled chimneys. President and Mrs. Cherry occupied the home from 1931 to 1937, followed by Presidents Paul Garrett and Kelly Thompson. When President Thompson moved to the new presidential home on State Street, the Alumni and Placement Office occupied the former campus residence. In 1968 the Board of Regents recognized William J. "Uncle Billy" Craig for his dedicated service as faculty member, placement director, and secretary-treasurer of the WKU Alumni Association by renaming the former president's home the W. J. Craig Alumni Center.

The second presidential home was located at 1536 State Street. Kelly Thompson spent the last three years of his presidency there and Dero Downing lived there his entire presidential tenure. Local architect James Maurice Ingram designed this charming Colonial Revival home in 1939 for Merrill E. Schell, who taught for WKU's Math Department from 1929 to 1966. The Schells occupied the five-bedroom home until 1964. WKU purchased the home in 1965 and used it as a temporary student center. After renovations were completed in October 1966, Kelly Thompson's family moved into the home. Altered over the years, the home has lost some of its Colonial Revival detailing, but it retains its most distinctive feature, the rough ashlar Warren County limestone exterior. Since the current presidential home at 1700 Chestnut Street opened, the old Schell house has housed a number of WKU offices and today is the site of WKU's International Center.