



A HOME LIKE NO OTHER

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The President's House of Winthrop University

From mansions to condominiums and everything in between, presidential residences have a long and colorful history on college and university campuses. Many homes on historic campuses like Winthrop's served the institutions' needs of the day and therefore were not always the official home of the college or university leader. Other residences were donated to institutions or constructed more recently and thus serve presidents today but did not in earlier times. Family homes are even rarer as current chief executives must strike a balance between their abode functioning as a private residence and public meeting space.

The Winthrop University President's House stands apart. *The only home in the region that research suggests is original to a historic campus, consistently inhabited by all of the institution's presidents, and used throughout history as their official home, 601 Oakland Avenue in Rock Hill, South Carolina, has cast a long shadow throughout Winthrop's history. The home's unique backstory complements the rich traditions and impressive milestones of the teaching institution that was founded in 1886 in Columbia, South Carolina.*

Origins in Queen Anne Victorian Style

The President's House was built in 1891-92, pre-dating the first building constructed on campus, Tillman Hall (completed in 1895). The home was part of Rock Hill's bid for the fledgling teachers college, which had been operating out of borrowed buildings since its founding. Built by W.H. Stewart in the Queen Anne Victorian style, the original structure was a two and one-half story home of frame construction with clapboard siding, a high mansard roof, corbeled internal end chimneys, gabled attic dormers and a round tower with conical roof. It was one of the first suburban homes built along the streetcar tracks of Rock Hill's Oakland Avenue.



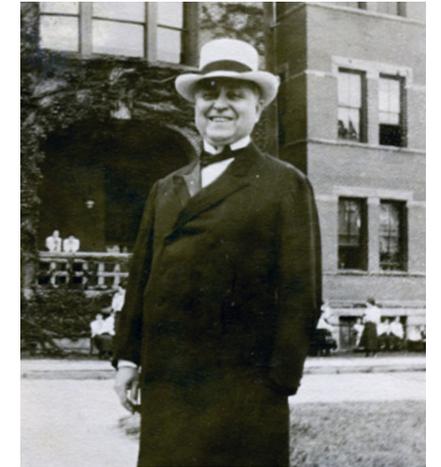
President's House in 1894



A House Becomes a Home

Winthrop's founding president, David Bancroft Johnson, was a longtime bachelor whose top priority was building the teachers college and taking care of his "Winthrop girls." He finally moved from the Margaret Nance dormitory on campus into the President's House in the late 1890s. From that time on, the house has served as the official residence of every Winthrop president. Johnson was joined in the home by his secretary, Mai Rutledge Smith, Winthrop Class of 1898, who became his wife in 1902. The couple raised three children — David Jr., Burgh and Susanne — in the Oakland Avenue home.

The President's House functioned almost as a second office for D.B. Johnson, the visionary leader whose work to create an institution from scratch consumed all his energy and took a tremendous toll on his health. His successor, James Pinckney Kinard, remarked, "I like to think of him as a builder with an almost uncanny power of succeeding where other men would have lost faith and failed.... He possessed the ability to devote himself entirely to an idea, and the power to work for it constantly."



Top: David Bancroft Johnson standing in front of Tillman Hall in 1918



Left: Mai Rutledge Smith Johnson in 1902



The Cost of Living in the President's House

In Winthrop's early years, the president bore all of the expenses of the household. The Johnson family grew fruits and vegetables for their meals and raised chickens and turkeys in a yard near a barn behind the house. They also bore the substantial expenses of entertaining at the house as it also functioned as Winthrop's guest quarters at the turn of the century.

When Winthrop's Board of Trustees met, the trustees would stay with the Johnsons, usually for two nights. The family would temporarily relocate to a shed attached to the back of the house so board members could use their rooms. For commencements, the board would visit for even longer.

The Johnsons also hosted guest lecturers and other important visitors to Winthrop, including social work reformer and author Jane Addams; orator, politician and 41st Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan; and noted British suffragette Emmeline Pankhurst.



Top: print of the Winthrop campus in 1913, showing the President's House with garden and outbuilding

Left: Williams Jennings Bryan



If the House Could Talk, What Stories It Could Tell...

Before the renovations of 1913, the President's House was heated by fireplaces in each room. Wood had to be carried in and upstairs to the fireplaces. During cold weather, fires had to be stoked all day for evening receptions held at the house. In addition, the original floors had no sub flooring. On windy days, the rugs would move with the air flow underneath. Once during a reception, the receiving line stretched down the front hall and out onto the porch. Suddenly, the chandelier in the front hall fell, scattering the guests and creating an uproar, although thankfully no one was injured.

— From the oral history of Mai Johnson recorded by Winthrop archivist Iva Bishop in 1964



Renovations Rule in 1913

A 1913 renovation of the President's House affected the interior and exterior of the home, modernizing and changing its outward appearance. All of the Victorian elements were removed; the structure was put on logs and pulled 50 feet back from the street by oxen; a rectangular arcaded conservatory annex was added on the south side of the house; and the entire structure was veneered with brick. The original wood porch was replaced with square masonry corner pillars and Doric wood columns. In 1959, a new masonry garage and an arched breezeway connecting the garage and house were added.



Top left: south side of the President's House after renovations in 1913

Top right: north side of the President's House in the 1920s



Home of Presidents Past and Present

While Johnson was the longest-serving Winthrop president (42 years) and thus inhabited the house longer than any of his successors, each one also made the home his or her own.

James Pinckney Kinard (1929-34)

Shelton J. Phelps (1934-43)

Henry R. Sims (1944-59)

Charles S. Davis (1959-73)

Charles B. Vail (1973-82)

Philip Lader (1983-85)

Martha Kime Piper (1986-88)

Anthony J. DiGiorgio (1989-2013)

Jamie Comstock Williamson (2013-14)

Daniel F. Mahony (2015-present)



Shelton J. Phelps in 1935



Henry Sims and his wife in late 1940s

The Much-Discussed Eleanor Roosevelt Bathroom

First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt spoke at Winthrop on April 27, 1940. Mrs. Roosevelt's positions on various political issues were not embraced by many Southerners at that time. However, President Shelton Phelps believed that Roosevelt was the best informed woman in America and was proud to host her on campus. Since she was to stay overnight in the President's House, her staff toured the residence in advance. President Phelps was informed that the First Lady needed a private bathroom. One on the second floor was hastily constructed.



A reception for Roosevelt was held in the President's House on the afternoon of her visit with more than 500 guests including South Carolina's Governor at the time, Burnet Maybank, Rock Hill city officials, college faculty and staff, and 50 students of the highest academic standing. From a balcony of the house Roosevelt greeted the entire student body who had gathered in the garden. She also spoke in Byrnes Auditorium (then called the College Auditorium) to a capacity crowd later that evening.



Interestingly, Roosevelt's plans changed, and she was unable to return to the President's House, spending the night in Charlotte, North Carolina, instead. She never actually visited the Eleanor Roosevelt bathroom!



Mai Rutledge Smith Johnson
with daughter Suzanne
in 1921

An Old Family Home

The President's House stirs pride and emotion among Winthrop's alumni even today as they visit and contemplate Winthrop's founding and history. They recognize the vision and sacrifices of D.B. Johnson and his selfless focus on building a unique institution that advanced the state and yet felt like a family. His spirit remains and is felt most acutely in this home. It is still viewed as a place for the university and community to connect, a place of fellowship and fond memories.



President Dan Mahony, wife Laura, children Gavin and Elena, and “first dog” Washington.



Top left: D. B. Johnson holding Suzanne in 1921

Top center: Mai Johnson with Suzanne in 1921

Top right: Cackie, Mary, Charlotte and Mary B. Davis in 1962

Right: Philip, Mary Catherine and Linda Lader

Nurturing Historical Roots

Since Dan Mahony, wife Laura and children Gavin and Elena moved into the President’s House in 2015, they have embraced the home’s history and made efforts to locate and preserve historical artifacts such as china, silverware, furniture and finishes. Historic photos adorn the main floor rooms, including photos of the families who have lived there. Only the Johnsons, Davises, Laders, and Mahonys had children young enough to live with their parents at the President’s House.



A Welcoming Space

The President's House today is not only a family home. As it has through the years, the house remains a venue for relationship-building with Winthrop's many and varied constituents. The Mahony's host a number of events — from intimate dinners to bustling receptions — in any given year. They enjoy opening Winthrop's home to the community, as traditions like faculty teas and senior receptions evolve to friend-raising events and other special gatherings.

This unique residence also reflects Winthrop's spirit and connections through the artwork of Winthrop alumni and faculty, thanks to the generosity of Harriet and Martin Goode who donated work from their private collection to be displayed in the house beginning in 2016.





No Place Like Home

From Winthrop's earliest days in Rock Hill, the Oakland Avenue home shone as a welcoming beacon, symbolizing Southern hospitality and a haven for "Winthrop daughters" who prepared for their futures while far from their family homes. From those days to these, the Winthrop presidents who have lived in the house have committed themselves to shaping young people into leaders of tomorrow and shared this important duty with their families. For all who have called the President's House home over the years, there are undoubtedly fond memories of living on a beautiful Southern campus and regularly interacting with promising Winthrop students.

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