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The Restoration of Longwood House: 1967-1969

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*The Restoration of
Longwood House*

1967—1969



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1967—1981

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Preface

The history of Longwood House that follows was initially written in the fall of 2002. This was done at the request of Dr. Raymond Cormier, the husband of Longwood University's visionary President, Dr. Patricia Cormier.

My wife, Mary, and I were invited to a luncheon at Longwood House in November of that year. The visit included a room by room tour with Mary describing what took place when Longwood House was restored during the 1967—1969 time period. A tape of that tour and a copy of what I wrote was subsequently placed in Longwood's archives.

I returned to Longwood on April 24, 2004 to attend the dedication of Brock Commons. This campus unifying feature was made possible by a very generous gift from Joan and Macon Brock.

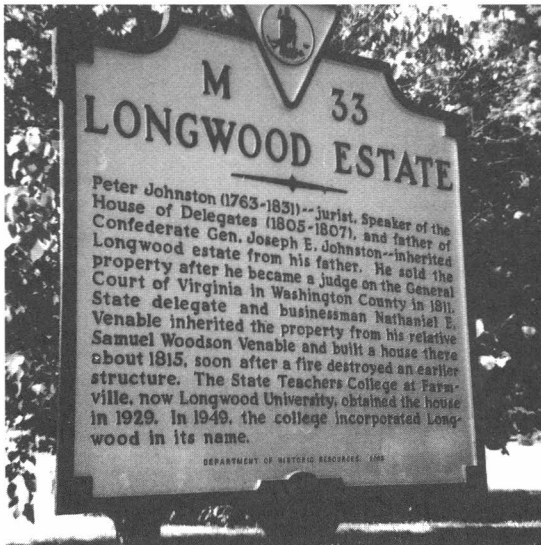
Many alumni and retired faculty were present for the dedication. In the course of several conversations the restoration of Longwood House was discussed. I was urged to publish the history of that restoration. This publication is a response to that request.

Dr. Henry I. Willett, Jr.
August 2004

Introduction

Longwood University takes pride in Longwood House and its surrounding grounds, Longwood Estate. The house and estate were purchased by the institution in either 1928 or 1929, depending on which source you cite. The early history of Longwood House has been well chronicled, both before and after its acquisition. Perhaps the best of these is "The Story of Longwood " by Jane Waring Ruffin. This was written in 1946 and was published by the State Teachers College, Farmville, Virginia.

A brief summation of the early history is found on the historical marker placed at Longwood House by the Commonwealth of Virginia. A photograph of that marker is printed below.



In the years following Jane Ruffin's publication, little was written about Longwood House. We do know that Longwood House was used fairly extensively for social

activities in the 1950s and early 1960s. This was to change, however, and diminished upkeep and maintenance resulted in severe deterioration.

What is not commonly known is that Longwood almost lost Longwood House in the late 1960s. This publication tells the story of what occurred during those eventful years and how Longwood House was ultimately saved and restored.

The History

In the fall of 1967, I was offered and accepted the presidency of Longwood College, effective December 1, 1967. Late in the fall, my wife, Mary, and I were asked by the Executive Committee of the Board of Visitors to come to Longwood to participate in the selection of a site for a new home for Longwood's President. The General Assembly had appropriated \$88,000 for this home.

At that time, the President resided in what is now the Alumni House on High Street. During the presidency of Dr. James Newman, discussions were held as to the need for a new president's home to be located on the grounds of Longwood Estate. One plan called for the construction of a new home, which would then be connected to Longwood House. Longwood House would be renovated and used for banquet and other college functions. Architect Ben Johns was hired to begin this planning.

It was soon evident that the cost of such a dual project would be well in excess of any amount that could reasonably be anticipated from the legislature. This plan was scrapped and architect Allen McCullough was tasked with drawing plans for a new home. The location of this facility was the topic of discussion for the fall 1967 gathering. Longwood House itself would be left in its unoccupied state.

This fall 1967 meeting was held on the grounds of Longwood House. Present were the Executive Committee of the Board of Visitors, Mr. McCullough, Longwood staff members, and the Willetts. It should be noted that Longwood House had enjoyed extensive use for receptions,

parties, and sorority functions. It also had housed the College Tea Room, golf course locker rooms, and had served as a residence for former Dean Richard "Dick" Brooks. In the mid 60s, however, it was closed and remained so at the time of the fall 1967 meeting. There had been severe deterioration of the house.

Shortly, after the initiation of site discussions at the fall 1967 meeting, Mary asked that we be allowed to tour Longwood House. She and I had attended a wedding reception in the house some years previously. Following the tour of Longwood House, Mary asked Mr. McCullough if in his professional judgment Longwood House was worth restoring. His response was a firm yes.

The entire thrust of the meeting then changed. Restoration became a major agenda item for the Board of Visitors. As a result, I was directed to ask Governor Mills Godwin if the \$88,000 appropriation for a new home could be applied to a restoration of Longwood House. After consultation with the appropriate state agencies, Governor Godwin approved the transfer with the understanding that there would be no further requests for state funds for this project. In the process of review by state agencies, it was determined that Ben Johns was the architect of record for any Longwood House restoration. Mr. Johns was contacted and planning began.

It soon became apparent that the house could not be restored within this amount available, based upon Mr. Johns' recommendations. As a result Mr. Johns was paid for his services from the \$88,000 and relieved of further involvement. The college became the general contractor and a planning committee was formed. This informal

group consisted of Lt. Colonel John Carr, Longwood's Vice-President for Administration, Mr. Leon Henderson, Director of Buildings and Grounds, and Mary Willett. Colonel Carr had had extensive experience in restoring his own home in Meherrin, Virginia.

As noted, Longwood House had deteriorated during the several years that it was closed. Only a decision to leave the heat on prevented more extensive damage. The basic approach to restoration was to make the home livable and functional while maintaining its distinctive character and qualities.

Only one significant change was made to the exterior. If one views very early photographs and renderings of Longwood House from the west toward the college you would note three upstairs and two downstairs sets of windows in the main body of the house. More recent pictures depicted an additional smaller window to the right of center, both upstairs and downstairs. As part of the restoration process, those smaller windows were removed in order to return to the original symmetry of the house.

Plumbing and electrical systems were replaced throughout the house. At the time of the restoration electricity was deemed to be the most economical form of heating. It, therefore, was used for both heating and cooling. Sheet rock was installed in ceilings where plaster was removed for wiring and piping.

The entire house had to be completely repainted. This involved both the interior and exterior and included all three floors.

Work on the first, main, floor began with a complete overhaul of the kitchen. A pantry was removed to

allow for kitchen enlargement. The fireplace in the kitchen was uncovered and an old mantel was brought in and installed. A breakfast room was situated off of the dining room. Additional changes on the first floor included adding a guest bathroom in the back hall and placing bookcases in the living room. A sink was added in the sunroom.

The major change on the second floor was the redoing of all four bathrooms. There were four bedrooms situated on that floor and each was provided with a full bath. There was a small library on the front of the house, leading onto a porch. Bookcases were placed in the library. Decking on the porch was redone in order to make that area usable.

The third floor of Longwood House was in reality a loft with no clear definition of rooms. This was changed to provide for two bedrooms and several enclosed storage areas. Two bathrooms were added since previously only a sink was available.

The basement required a number of changes in order to make it functional. In the largest room the fireplace was uncovered and carpet was laid down. The bathroom was enlarged. Those changes complemented an existing doorway to the outside, allowing the basement to be utilized for a number of functions.

Along with the restoration of the house itself, it was deemed important to consider access. As a result, a circular driveway was placed in the front of the house along with a parking area.

The grounds surrounding Longwood House also received attention. In addition to the planting of a number

of shrubs, there were two major projects. The first involved thinning and pruning the extensive boxwoods in an effort to preserve them. The second project was to plant a double row of pine trees on Johnston Drive running beside Longwood House.

The Longwood House restoration took two years. Twenty-four months elapsed between that fall day when the restoration decision was made and moving date for the Willetts in November of 1969. The restoration process was not always smooth. There were obstacles and hurdles, with the limitations on funding posing the major challenge.

The importance of the decision to restore Longwood House must be recognized. On the one hand, allowing Longwood House to deteriorate, adjacent to a new home, would have projected an image that simply would not have been acceptable. Instead, restoration has provided both Longwood and the community with a facility in which they can take great pride. Residing at Longwood House greatly enhanced one's quality of life. This was particularly true for those of us who had young children growing up in this environment, including our Rodney, Scott, Todd, and Henry III.

The restored Longwood House provides Longwood's Presidents with a venue where they, and others, can connect with the wide range of constituencies involved in higher education. This is critical to the advancement of the institution. The decision to restore on that fall day in 1967 has contributed significantly to Longwood and her mission.

