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A History of 21 University Circle and the International Center



Original architect's drawing

The International Center has been open at 21 University Circle since 1972. The Center's many guests and visitors often ask about the house and its history, for it is indeed a lovely building and a perfect setting for the Center.

The house was originally built in 1914 for Mrs. W. A. L. Trotter and her children by the notable Charlottesville architect Eugene Bradbury. He practiced in Charlottesville from 1907 to 1927 and built many distinguished houses in the area, including the house for General Kearney on Lewis Mountain. The Kearney house is easily seen from the city today and is often mistaken by newcomers for Monticello. Bradbury also built two other houses on the street, at 20 and at 1835 University Circle.

The street numbers of these three neighboring houses are confusing, as indeed are the street numbers around the Circle, a fact that bedevils every visitor. This confusion began when a city official decided that University Circle was really properly 18th Street and that all the street numbers should begin with the number eighteen. Some circle residents went along with this officiousness, but many preferred their old one-and two-digit numbers and simply refused to change. So the International Center at 21 University Circle has 1841 on one side, 26 on the other and 20 across the street.

In 1934, three sisters, Rosalie and Janet Thornton, and Mrs. Carter Thermon, bought the Trotter's house in preparation for their retirements. Their father named it "The Terraces," after one of its most notable features, the gardens that stretched down the hill across what was then the city boundary and into Albemarle County.

The Thornton sisters, along with their three brothers (John, William, and Edward), had grown up in Charlottesville on Monroe Hill. Their father, Dr. William M. Thornton, was a distinguished member of the University of Virginia faculty.

Dr. Thornton (1853-1935) joined the University of Virginia in 1875 and retired as Professor Emeritus in 1931. He served as Professor of Engineering, Dean of the Engineering School, and was Chairman of the Faculty from 1886 through 1896, in the days before the University had a president. The current engineering building was named Thornton Hall in his honor. His first wife, Eleanor Rosalie Harrison Thornton, was also an important member of the University community, and devoted much of her life to raising funds. Fundraising was an important volunteer activity for there was no development office at the time. Her methods were sometimes orthodox and sometimes not so orthodox. It is said that a student who insulted Mrs. Thornton as a part of the trials of being a fraternity pledge later apologized and asked how he could make amends. She answered by saying that he could do so by paying for the "School of Athens" in Old Cabell Hall, and the student complied with her request. The first Mrs. Thornton died in 1920 and Dr. Thornton later married Miss Gertude Waller Massie.

The three Thornton sisters were all talented and accomplished women. They went to St. Anne's School and later studied in Germany. The eldest daughter, Eliza Carter (1877-1969), taught language at the Miller School. She met her husband, Charles R. Thermon, there; he was also a teacher at the school. The second daughter, Rosalie (1879-1969), went to Hollins College. She was an accomplished musician who studied under the Austrian maestro Schnabel, and later taught piano in Boston. She performed in Europe and the United States as a concert pianist before retiring to Charlottesville.

The youngest of the sisters, Janet (1881-1963), went to Bryn Mawr College, and then followed a career as a social worker. She first worked in Boston and later became the director of the social services department of the Presbyterian-Columbia Medical Center in New York where she also taught and wrote on social research.

The three Thornton brothers were equally distinguished. John became a doctor and president of the Wheeling Clinic in West Virginia. William was a professor of chemistry at Loyola College in Baltimore and later at Johns Hopkins University. Edward was an engineer who worked on the Panama Canal; he died of malaria he contracted while working on that project.

The Thornton sisters all shared the University Circle house in their later years, and as members of the Charlottesville community took an active interest in the affairs and progress of the University. Miss Rosalie was one of the founding members of the Wednesday Music Club that met at "The Terraces" for many years. As a result of their interest in the University, they decided jointly to bequeath their home and most of its furniture to the University, hoping that the house could be kept intact to be used as a home for visiting professors. In 1992, the University accepted their offer to dedicate the property, though the sisters retained a life interest and continued to live on University Circle until their death. After Miss Rosalie died in 1969, the University assumed full ownership of the property. The house, however, was never used by visiting faculty, but was rented as a students' residence. Unfortunately, a number of the pieces of furniture left by the Thornton sisters were lost.

During this time, the Committee on International Students, Lucy Hale (then the Foreign Student Advisor), the international students, and members of the community stepped in. For years, the international students had wanted a building that could serve as a home away from home for students, visitors, and the community. When they learned that the University Circle house was available, they prepared a submission to the Board of Visitors, requesting the house and money to restore it. The Board approved this request in 1970. This was a most welcome move, for over the course of the 1960's the number of international students had grown from fewer than 75 to nearly 300, but there had been no corresponding increase in the staff or facilities available to serve them. Lucy Hale, her secretary, community volunteers, and the students did all that there was to be done.

Acquiring the house, however, was just the beginning. A great deal of money was needed to convert the house into a public building, to put in a new furnace, to paint it, decorate it, and to make it a welcoming place. This work was made possible by a generous grant from the Hunter Perry Foundation in Charlottesville. Mrs. Hale oversaw the work, ensuring that the house was restored as the beautiful building we see today rather than remodeled as was the fashion at that time. The house visitors see today is essentially as it was when the Thornton sisters lived here. The only substantial change was the conversion of the large kitchens and the replacement of some interior doors to meet fire safety regulations.

The first resident managers for the International Center were chosen in the spring of 1972, and the Center opened to the community in the fall of that year. But even when it is in beautiful order, a house is not a home without someone to run it. Although the University had provided the house, and had provided for a resident manager, there was still no funding for a program coordinator. Students and others had to run their own programs with no money and very little help; this was very unfortunate. When the house was opened, many expectations had been raised that now could not be met. Finally, the international students came to express their concerns clearly to the University administration, and as a result, the President commissioned a study by the Committee on International Students. Their final report appeared in 1977.

Following the recommendations of this report, the University began to provide funds for a program coordinator. The first coordinator was Nancy Flint (Rudolph). Her successor was Lore Amlinger, who was followed in turn by the present coordinator Lorna Sundberg. Lucy Hale retired in 1986, but has continued her involvement with the Center through her interest in the multicultural library.

The International Center at 21 University Circle has become an important educational, cultural, and social center for international visitors and members of the Charlottesville community. In many ways, the house itself has made this possible. Having the house as a meeting place allows the International Center to serve as the home away from home for visitors and as a focal point for the international and multi-cultural interests of the entire community. Here people can meet and work in a relaxed, unique, and friendly atmosphere.

The International Center is indebted to the many volunteers, staff, and members of the University and local communities. Their interest and support, displayed through their involvement in the Center, continues to provide the expertise and enthusiasm that enables the International Center programs to flourish. The Thornton sisters' generous gift has been well used and is appreciated by all who come here.