

CHANCELLOR'S RESIDENCE



Fig. 1. The chancellor's residence, 1970. [series 9/1, Chancellor's Residence, jf-11]

Built in 1911 as the private home of John and Helen Olin, the house became the property of the University on Nolen's death in 1924. It has since been used as the official home of the University chancellor, in accordance with Nolen's wishes.

John Meyers Olin was a Madison attorney and civic leader, and is often referred to as the "father of Madison's park system". He sold his family's house on Langdon Street to the university in 1910 for \$55,000, after which it was added to and used as a medical clinic, and in the 1920s demolished to make way for the Memorial Union. That \$55,000 was as we shall see a considerable sum for a house in pre-WW I Madison. Olin first bought eight lots in the new University Heights subdivision (lots 8-15 of block 18). for \$24,355.65. He and his wife Helen Remington Olin then began to plan the mansion they would build on the site.

The Olins hired the best help money could buy. To design the house Olin retained the noted Milwaukee firm of Ferry and Clas, the designers of the Wisconsin State Historical Society Library.

Ferry and Clas not only designed the 43-room, 10,000 square foot three story brick and concrete house but most of the furnishings (electrical fixtures, fireplaces, andirons etc.) of the house as well. The general contractor was T. C. McCarthy, who made an entire career of contracting for the University. Other contractors, all known for their work on university buildings, were Fritz Bros. (carpentry), William Owens (plumbing), R. J. Nickles (electrical) and Mueller (heating) . All construction contracts were let on or before April 1, 1911.

The basement is of poured concrete, and all walls above grade are 12 inch thick solid brick, insulated with seaweed and mineral wool. The roof is covered with thirty inch hand-split cypress shingles. All floors and trim in the main parts of the house (including the huge basement billiard room) are quarter sawed red oak, except for the long front hall way, and the large living room on the west, which are marble (since covered with carpet). The house was steam heated. A series of cisterns and electric pumps provided soft water for the house. In order to prevent the erection of utility poles, which were considered particularly ugly in Madison at that time, the electrical and telephone wires were brought to the house in an underground conduit from the south side of the street. The Olin's moved into the house May 8, 1912. The total cost as reported by Mr. Olin was \$68,892.15, exclusive of landscaping costs (by Simonds of Chicago, Misch of Portland, and John Nolan of Cambridge, Mass).¹

In 1922, after the death of his wife Mrs. Helen Remington Olin, John Olin made out his will. In it Olin left the house and property to the university on the conditions that the house be used by them as a residence "of such person as from time to time may hold the title of the office of the academic head of the University of Wisconsin ... and for no other purpose ... provided": 1) that if the property should become unsuitable for the purpose above specified the property may be sold ... and the proceeds may be used to provide for the president a residence in some other location." 2) In case the gift is declined or in case of any non-observance of any condition thereof, the property shall revert to my estate and be sold by my trustees and the proceeds shall become part of 'the Olin Park Fund'."

John Olin died December 7, 1924 and the will was probated January 6, 1925. The regents accepted the property with the conditions January 21, 1925. During 1925 the house was occupied by Olin's brother-in law university professor Arthur G. Laird. President Birge never lived there since he had a house of his own at 2011 Van Hise. When Glenn Frank was chosen president in 1925, he moved into 130 Prospect and lived there until 1937 when he was replaced by Clarence Dykestra. Except for president E. B. Fred who was allowed to spend his tenure (1945-1959) in the old agricultural dean's residence at 10 N. Babcock (during which time the Olin house was used as the "president's guest house"), all university presidents since 1925 have lived in the Olin house. These presidents included: C. A. Elvehjem, F. H. Harrington, John Weaver, Donna Shalala and David Ward.²

By 1945 the house was in need of extensive repairs. The regents spent about \$56,000 on a complete remodelling job. These repairs included: replacement of the hand-fired coal furnace with a gas furnace, rebuilding of the west porch, installation of a modern kitchen, and the replacement of all plumbing, a new fence and a parking lot. This parking area was later replaced by a three-stall garage. In regard to the idea of a garage on the property Olin wrote " I do not make it an absolute condition of the gift that no garage building would ever be erected upon any part of these grounds, but I do express it as a strong wish that this may not be done, because I do not see how such a building can be erected on any part of these grounds without very much disfiguring the same."³

1) Homestead Property as a Residence of the President of the University, John Olin, Archives Olin House Subject Folder.

2) Madison City Directories.

3) Fred, E. B. Memorandum to Regents, July 9, 1952; Archives Olin House Subject Folder.