

KNAPP GRADUATE CENTER



Fig. 1. The Knapp Graduate Center in 1957. The wrap around porch was removed and the smaller current porch was built in the mid-1960s. [series 9/2, Knapp Graduate Center, ns-1512]

The Knapp Graduate Center was built in 1854 as a private residence by Julius White. In the next 30 years the house was the home of several socially prominent Madison families. The house served as the state governor's mansion from 1885 to 1950. In 1950 the house was sold to the University and became the Knapp Graduate Center.

In 1854 the prominent businessman and legislator, Julius T. White¹ and his wife Catherine built one of the first mansions of local sandstone on what became known as Mansion Hill. He selected the site "for its magnificent elms and its view of Lake Mendota below." He purchased almost the entire block, from real estate dealer George Delaplaine, believing that it would become a desirable residential area.² White was an art collector and had a leading role in the artistic and social life of Madison until his departure in 1857. White sold the house to George and Emeline Delaplaine from whom he had originally purchased the land. The Delaplaines followed White's habit of lavish and frequent parties and entertainments (with notable guests such as Horace Greeley) for more than a decade. In 1868 they sold the house to J. G. Thorp³ and his socially ambitious wife Amelia Chapman Thorp, a newly wealthy couple, for \$18,000. The Thorps came from Eau Claire where they had compiled a fortune in the lumber business, but felt socially constrained. The mansion was regarded as the loveliest house in town at that time, and Mrs. Thorp "ruled Madison's social community from this house until 1883, a reign whose crowning achievement was the marriage in 1870 of her 20 year old daughter Sara to the 60 year old world famous violinist Ole Bull."⁴ Bull married Sara privately in

Norway, then they remarried in Madison to provide Mrs. Thorp with a chance to parade her catch to Madison society. This wedding was the most lavish social spectacle in Madison's history. The Thorps altered the house to make it more suitable for entertaining, opening the rooms, adding hardwood floors and the rear wing. Bull used the mansion as his American home, altering the grounds and building according to his Norwegian tastes.

In 1883 the Thorps sold the mansion to governor Jeremiah Rusk for \$15,000. Rusk lived in it for two years, then in 1885 sold it to the State of Wisconsin for \$20,000 for use as a permanent executive mansion. All seventeen governors from 1885 until 1949 lived there. The house maintained its social standing and festive reputation throughout this period. After a newer governor's mansion was purchased in Maple Bluff in 1950, the state sold the house to the University for \$60,000, the money coming from the earnings of the Kemper K. Knapp⁵ endowment fund.

The University used it as a center for graduate students. Those chosen to live there were students who were within one year of their Ph.D. and were to live together and discuss their respective specializations with each other at regular seminars. This scheme (largely championed by Professor William Kiekhoffer) was an attempt to offset some of the drawbacks of increasing specialization on the part of scholars. The University also intended the 52,000 square foot lot to be used for the eventual construction of additional housing units for graduate students.⁶ Originally there were twelve graduate students selected from hundreds nominated by the faculty, based on their wide range of interests, level of scholarship and likelihood of contributing to the experiment. They predictably became known as the twelve disciples. According to contemporary accounts this experiment worked very well, the participants believed that it was a strong contribution to their education, president Elvehjem and the Knapp directors were happy. But such a huge and old building was expensive to run and maintain and would "require a considerable expenditure to place in good condition."⁷ It was neither well located nor well adapted for the purpose of the graduate center. So in 1957 the regents voted to sell the mansion and use the money to build a more suitable building. This sale never took place. The mansion is still the Knapp Graduate Center, and according to interviews with current [1993] students the house continues in its tradition of a lively social center.

1) Born in 1816 in New York, Julius White went into business in Illinois, and moved to Madison in 1849. He became a colonel in the Illinois Fremont rifles, became a general, lost his command at Harper's Ferry in September 1862, was captured, released, and arrested by the government. His trial for failure of duty exonerated him completely. He resigned his commission in 1865, and returned to business in Illinois. General White died in 1893. National Cyclopaedia of American Biography, Vol. 4 p. 335.

2) This optimism was in spite of the fact that the land was involved in a lawsuit against Leonard J. Farwell, a local developer who had built a mill at the mouth of the Yahara River which raised the water level in Lake Mendota by four feet. Delaplaine and his partner Elisha Burdick sued Farwell for damage to their real estate holdings along the lake [Dane County deed 25/102 July 15, 1854]. It is also reported that Delaplaine was the subject of ridicule for his unsuccessful attempt at Madison's first central heating system [Barbara Anne Lyons, *The Mansions on Mansion Hill*].

3) Joseph G. Thorp was born on April 28, 1812 in Otsego County, New York. He built up a merchandising partnership in New York, then in 1856 moved the business to Eau Claire, Wisconsin. He went into the lumber business and amassed a fortune of more than a million dollars. He became a state senator in 1866, and maintained a large home in Eau Claire as well as the lavish mansion in Madison. He eventually sold the lumber business to Weyerhaeuser (1887). Thorp retired to Cambridge Massachusetts, where he lived with his daughter Sara (the widow of violinist Ole Bull). Thorp died on Jan 15, 1895. *Dictionary of Wisconsin Biography* p. 351.

4) National Register of Historic Places--Nomination Form (1972). Wisconsin State Historical Society Historic Preservation site file.

5) Kemper K. Knapp was a graduate of the University (a B. S. in 1879, and an LL.B. in 1882) who left to the University an endowment of nearly 2.5 million dollars on his death in 1944.

6) *Wisconsin Alumni Magazine*, February 1950 p. 5-6.

7) *Regent's Minutes*, May 11, 1957 p. 11.