

# The Life and Death of 30 Ferncliff Place

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*"If only those walls could speak."*

Most people disregard a house's ability to live. For them, life is an exclusive scientific and religious phenomenon separated from the natural world of lumber and brick. If one observes life as a child's first breath of air or a flower leaning to reach more sunlight, this is certainly true. Imagine a house as assuming the life of the people calling it home. Like any individual, it consists of the memories and stories that occur in its presence. Words are not used to exemplify its beauty, as most of its stories are lost in the shuffle of life and never find their way to words. For a house that remains part of our landscape, these words are not needed. The walls breathe a story that can never be recorded and therefore never duplicated. Families and eras will come and go, a cycle repeating long after our lives are through. If still standing, these stories are never complete. Unfortunately, walls cannot speak in demolished houses. This narrative has ended for them, as they will only be remembered through photographs and words. In Springfield, Ohio, this story has ended for the house and home that sat at 30 Ferncliff Place. Once great, it now lives through narration alone.

In a city described as "booming" in the 1880s, due to its important role in the modern industrial revolution, this house was born to Cyrus A. Phelps in 1887.<sup>1</sup> While Phelps, a cashier at a local bank, provided the finances for his new home, it was most likely Charles Cregar who supplied the vision. Cregar helped shape much of late nineteenth century Springfield, including City Hall, the market, and numerous churches dotting the city landscape.<sup>2</sup> It is appropriate that he should design such a prominent house in appearance to sit among the Ferncliff mansions. Out an east window one would see the King mansion, set upon a hill overlooking a growing metropolitan area in the front and Wittenberg College to the rear. To the west sat the grand white Geiger mansion, home to both a Wittenberg founder and its first graduating female.<sup>3</sup> For years to follow, the Phelps house would sit among these mansions overlooking the city their owners helped to build.<sup>4</sup>

Phelps is an individual to which little information survives. He was the first cashier and founding member of the First National Bank in Springfield, Ohio. There he worked for twenty-six years before building the house at 30 Ferncliff Place for his family to live.<sup>5</sup> In their home, Phelps' five children might have had many roles maintaining their living, including his only daughter, as their mother died years prior.<sup>6</sup> Two sons had regular jobs, with the eldest working at the bank as a clerk. Phelps left the bank in 1899 and sold the property two years later to John and Glenna Webb.<sup>7</sup> John Webb made his fortunes in the railroad industry, working various jobs in the field. Shortly after moving into the house, John was President of the Columbus, Delaware and Marion Railway Company and ran his own railroad construction company when he moved to New York 1910.<sup>8</sup> Passing from railroad tycoon to

industrialist, the Webbs sold the property to entrepreneur William H. Stackhouse.<sup>9</sup> Stackhouse, like the house itself, characterized Springfield at the turn of the century. He was a wealthy industrialist in the American city that defined the word. Industry brought Stackhouse to Springfield, as part owner and branch general manager of the Bettendorf Metal Wheel Company, and made him a name of national repute. While calling 30 Ferncliff Place home, he was twice an advisor to President William G. Harding and president himself of both the Chamber of Commerce and Manufacturers' Association. Stackhouse moved from the house in 1922 when he became general manager of the entire company, based in Iowa, and moved his permanent residence there.<sup>10</sup> Though maintaining a residence in Springfield, Stackhouse did not require such an expensive and elaborate mansion.

The house at 30 Ferncliff Place sat through two forlorn years vacant while Springfield continued to grow. The city surrounding this empty house added roughly ten thousand people by 1925 when Dwight Roush bought the property and began his own sanitarium.<sup>11</sup> The house underwent obvious remodeling to accommodate such a practice after years of being solely a private residence. This property became both a medical practice and home to Roush, his wife, and various nurses for over twenty years until they abandoned it during World War II. After another brief vacancy, the house was carved into nine different apartments, a fitting fate for a house now so close to a growing Wittenberg College. For fifty years, 30 Ferncliff Place was home to hundreds of renters until it was purchased by the Delta Sigma Phi fraternity in 1992.<sup>12</sup> Though renovated and used as their fraternity house from 1993 to 2001, neglect allowed University politics to take control. The University purchased the house in 1998 from a struggling fraternity and ended 30 Ferncliff Place's impressive one hundred and fourteen year life in one day to make way for new low maintenance student apartments.<sup>13</sup>

While people often copy architecture and styles, a house can never be duplicated. There are paths worn into the floorboards that can only come with a hundred years of walking and children running with their friends. There are scratches in tiles from long forgotten accidents and soot marks on window ledges from a recently replaced wood heater. The traits breathe its life and history to anyone entering its doors. The Phelps' home and Cregar vision at 30 Ferncliff Place had a story all its own. These walls can no longer speak and we are now forced to remember this marvel of a home through lonely words and dusty archives. Selected Bibliography

### Works Cited

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Tom Wolf to Nathalie, 22 March 1999, Ohio Historic Preservation Office, Columbus, Ohio, 1. The name and date are from *Williams' Springfield City Directory For 1887-88* (Cincinnati: Williams and Co, 1887), 317. Tom Wolf only presupposes this as a possible theory. This educated assumption is due to the architectural and structural similarities to Cregar houses and its date of construction coinciding with the height of his work. While there is no documentary proof of this postulation, all evidence supports this theory.

<sup>2</sup> Wolf, 1. This is drawn from architectural styles from across the city. Most features of the house belong to Cregar's style. This is only an educated supposition as no documentation of the architect survives.

<sup>3</sup> *A Biographical Record of Clark County Ohio*, (Chicago: S. J. Clarke Publishing Company, 1902), 84-6. H. R. Geiger actually replaced a professor that left after the first year, but he is regarded across most accounts as a founding member of the University. Alice Geiger is listed in some accounts as one of the first to graduate from Wittenberg.

<sup>4</sup> *Williams' Springfield City Directory for 1887-88*.

<sup>5</sup> *First National Bank: 63 Years of History* (1914), 6-7.

<sup>6</sup> *Williams' Springfield City Directory for 1887-88*, 317.

<sup>7</sup> Deed Record, Clark County Recorders' Office, 14 October 1901, v. 135, 44

<sup>8</sup> A discrepancy exists between this paper and earlier versions. It was originally thought that the Webb family did not live at the property due city-wide address changes. From 1887-1908 the property was listed as 2 Ferncliff Place. This changed to 30 Ferncliff Place in 1909. *Williams' Springfield City Directory for 1908*, 753. 1909, 685. 1910, 697. 1911, 673.

<sup>9</sup> Deed Record, Clark County Recorders' Office, 22 March 1910, v. 169, 178.

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<sup>10</sup> "W. H. Stackhouse, Aid to W. G. Harding, Dies," *Springfield Daily News*, 5 July 1935, p. 1-2. and Williams, 673.

<sup>11</sup> *Williams' Springfield City Directory for 1923. and Williams' Springfield City Directory for 1925.*

<sup>12</sup> Numerous *Williams' Springfield City* directories were used to gather this information.

<sup>13</sup> Crista Kunkel, "Delta Sigma Phi Fraternity to Relocate from 30 W. Ferncliff to 926 N. Fountain," *The Torch*, 3 April 2001, p. 3.