

A Brief History of Harcourt House
Official Residence of the President of Case Western Reserve University
Notes for Comments at a Reception for the Estate Planning Advisory Council
Richard E. Baznik
Director, Institute for the Study of the University in Society
September 6, 2006

We're about to celebrate the 100th birthday of this home. For most of its life it has been known as the "Halle house," but it wasn't always so. It was built in 1906 and 1907 for the family of Jerome Zerbe, who owned a coal company, based on a design by the noted architect Abram Garfield, son of the President James Garfield.

This was a prestigious location, perched on a ridge overlooking Cleveland, and was sought after by leading families moving eastward to escape the overcrowded city. Cleveland was then the 5th or 6th largest city in the country, its streets swollen by waves of immigrants from throughout the world, and its air increasingly polluted by smoke from burgeoning factories. That doesn't sound inviting, I know, but it was the Silicon Valley of its day, the place where inventor and investors came to build new companies.

Stretching out eastward behind the house was the Euclid Golf Club, which opened in 1901 with an 18-hole course and an elegant clubhouse. Golf was then just becoming popular in this country. The Club had a problem, however: its front nine holes were on land leased from John D. Rockefeller, who was a golf enthusiast but who for religious reasons would not allow golfing on his land on Sundays. Members grew tired of having to play the back nine twice on the Sabbath, and the Club closed in 1914.

One of the Zerbes' children, young Jerry, turned out to be a pretty colorful fellow. As a child, he and his friend Billy Gill, who lived across Harcourt, would throw eggs from the Gills' hen house down on cars and trolleys motoring up Cedar Hill. He later went on to be a society reporter and pioneer paparazzo, or celebrity photographer - though he worked hard to build close relationships with the stars whose pictures he took. In a 1951 cocktail recipe book, *Bottoms Up*, he is credited with inventing the vodka martini. Interesting, but the best was yet to come.

Jerome Zerbe's coal business went into a slump after a decade or so as natural gas was taking over from coal, and after World War I the home was sold to Samuel Halle, co-founder of the Halle Brothers stores. Some of you will remember when Halles was the upscale department store in downtown Cleveland - a painting of the Euclid Avenue entrance to the store hangs in the corner of this room.

In the hands of the Halle family, the house became a gathering place for leaders in the arts, fashion, business, and world affairs. Among the people the Halles hosted were such luminaries as author Sinclair Lewis, explorer Admiral Richard Byrd, and composers George Gershwin and Cole Porter, who is said to have written part of the song "Night and Day" on the piano that was in the living room. Winston Churchill was

an overnight guest in 1932 during a lecture tour of the U.S., and slept in one of the second-floor bedrooms that now sports a brass plaque identifying it as “The Churchill Room.” During that visit, the Halles’ cook, an Irish woman named Kitty, was so upset by what she understood to be Churchill’s stand on the question of Ireland that she refused to cook for him, though his charm seems to have won her over.

The Halles’ daughter Kay, who died less than a decade ago, was a journalist and a World War II intelligence operative – a spy – for the U.S., and was called “Mata Halle,” a reference to an earlier *femme fatale* who had also been a spy. She was often linked romantically with Churchill’s son Randolph.

When Samuel Halle died in the 1950s, ownership of the house passed to others, some of whom rented it out. In the 1980s, we’re told, the kitchen was completely remodeled several times by visiting Middle Eastern royalty who leased the home for their families while they were receiving medical treatment here.

In 1987, when Agnar Pytte was named the new President of Case Western Reserve, he suggested that the official residence should be closer to the campus than the Manor House at Squire Valleevue Farm, 16 miles away in Hunting Valley, where his two predecessors had lived. He wanted easier access to the campus so he could attend evening and weekend events there, and so faculty, staff, students, and alumni could more conveniently attend events at the house. At the request of the trustees, we looked around the neighborhood and found this home for sale by the estate of its previous owner. We purchased it in the summer of 1987, spent a year renovating it, and Ag and Anah Pytte moved in early in 1988. When Ag retired in 1999, his successor, David Auston, and his wife moved in, but they stayed only until 2001.

Dave Auston’s successor, Edward Hundert, decided he and his wife Mary needed a private home suitable for their three young children, so Harcourt House was not used as the President’s actual residence from 2001 until Greg and Lynn Eastwood moved in just a few months ago. I think I speak for the entire University community when I say it’s great to have a presidential family living here again.

Throughout the nearly two decades the University has owned the house, even when the President has not actually lived here, it has been used regularly for events such as this one, as well as for meetings and other gatherings. The first floor is set up as public space, and the private residence is on the second floor.

Our distinguished guest Winston Churchill once said, “First we shape our buildings, then they shape us.” He was referring to the rebuilding of the House of Commons after it was bombed during World War II, but I think the same sentiment can be applied to using a wonderful, old home such as this – or to the impact of long-term gifts that come to the University. They have lasting impact even as circumstances change over time, and they are very important to us. I would like to thank you personally for all you do to make this support available to the University.