



Duke Mansion *of Distinction*

A grand estate that once ranked as the second-largest private home in North Carolina survives as an elegant bed-and-breakfast inn, an executive conference center, and a touchstone to some of our state's most prominent families.

BY LYNN JESSUP

After a circuitous nighttime ride, the taxi driver pulls his cab up to a huge home surrounded by tall oaks swaying in the wind and rain.

"I never heard of this place," he mutters. Through the downpour, the gabled three-story mansion resembles a Hollywood movie set. Huge, white columns flank a towering door, which is opened, butler-like, by a mustachioed man. "Welcome," he says, "to the Duke Mansion."

Inside, light shimmers from a huge chandelier in the foyer, and the perfume from an enormous flower arrangement fills the air. A black cat slinks through the door and into the library. "That's Pilgrim," notes Jerry Berne, house manager for the evening. "He lives here along with his brother, Buck. They kind of adopted the house."

And who could blame them? Nestled in four wooded acres on Hermitage Road in Charlotte's Myers Park, the Duke Mansion — all 32,000 square feet of it — just might be the best-kept bed-and-breakfast secret in the state.

Admittedly, a bed-and-breakfast des-

ignation seems somehow diminutive for a 32-room house that for years was the second-largest dwelling in North Carolina, next to the Biltmore Estate, and was home to some of North Carolina's most prominent families. Indeed, the Dukes slept here — James Buchanan ("Buck"), wife Nanaline, and daughter Doris. So did the Cannons of Cannon Mills, along with their friends and fellow textile magnates, the Linebergers.

And it's seen its share of movers and shakers — President John F. Kennedy was a guest — as well as onlookers who came to admire the majestic Colonial Revival architecture and gaze at the Romanesque fountain spraying water 150 feet, or about 10 stories, into the air.

During its history, the grand house very nearly met its demise — once by fire, once by development. It's a house that was given away twice. A house divided, then made whole again.

Sometimes it seems that fate has the upper hand in the preservation of historic houses. Even historic commis-

sions and national designations are no guarantee that important homes will be saved. Fate was no stranger to the Duke Mansion, but its whims were beaten back by the determined vision of a few. Nowadays the Duke Mansion survives and thrives thanks to gifts from its parent organization, the Lynnwood Foundation. Donors include corporations such as the company James B. Duke himself founded, Duke Energy.

"If it weren't for people's financial contributions and their contribution of time, we could not make this work at all," says Cyndee Patterson, president of the Duke Mansion.

And there's revenue from guests who book rooms for business or pleasure. Some request the sumptuous bedrooms of Duke and his wife — two adjoining rooms, handsomely decorated with antiques and art, that open through tall French doors to a screened sleeping porch. Across the hall from the Dukes' bedrooms, the room where little Doris Duke slept and played has been turned into a conference room.

But it's easy to imagine it as the bedroom of a child who eventually became one of the world's richest and most eccentric women.

The Dukes were probably the most famous family to live in the house, and although the estate was called by a couple of other names, the community always knew it as the Duke Mansion. So the Duke Mansion became its official name in 1998, when it first opened its doors to the public as an inn and conference center.


But first, it was home.

Fit for a Duke

The original house was built in 1915 by Zebulon Taylor, president of Southern Electric Power Company, which later became Duke Power. "Buck" Duke, Taylor's friend and colleague, bought the house from Taylor in 1919, tripling the size and expanding the property surrounding it. Duke's budding hydroelectric power business made it necessary for him to establish a residence in his native North Carolina. (Duke, founder of American Tobacco Company, also owned a Fifth Avenue town house, a house in Newport, Rhode Island, and a massive 2,000-plus-acre estate in New Jersey.) Also, he wanted his young daughter Doris to get to know his home state. The resplendent Southern mansion was the perfect place for the Dukes to call home.

Taylor had christened the house Lynnwood, a name Duke retained, and the mansion served as Duke's only North Carolina residence in his later years. He visited mostly in winters for about six years. In December 1924, Duke set up the Duke Endowment, one of the largest foundations in America, in the solarium of the home.

Nine months later James Duke died, and more than \$50 million was appro-



Visiting Duke Mansion

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www.dukemansion.org

priated to the endowment. Duke, whose generosity was legendary, left a significant portion of that endowment to a Durham college named Trinity, now called Duke University.

When Duke died, his wife, who never found Charlotte quite to her liking, sold Lynnwood lock, stock, and barrel to Charlotte Buick dealership and WBT radio owner, C.C. Coddington. Coddington lived there until his death four years later. Then, in 1929, Lynnwood opened its doors again, this time to a textile family — Mr. and Mrs. Martin Cannon of Cannon Mills.

Keeping up appearances

The Cannons renamed the house White Oak and began nearly three decades as residents. In an effort to

Inn amenities include made-to-order meals in the main dining room.

sustain its preservation, the Cannons left the house to Myers Park Presbyterian Church in 1949.

In 1957, Henry Lineberger, also a textile magnate, purchased the home from the Presbyterian church. His wife, Clayton, had grown up in the house across the street. The Linebergers planned to restore the home to its original glory.

"As a child, it was just home," says Sayre Lineberger, who was nine years old when her family moved from Belmont to the mansion. "We lived in all the rooms and we loved it." She recalls the towering 18-foot

Christmas tree that stood in the foyer during the holiday season, complete with old-fashioned ornaments and a beautiful angel tree-topper.

"None of those little twinkle lights," Lineberger says, laughing. Today, a reminder of those brilliant holidays still hangs in the mansion's dining room — a chandelier that Henry Lineberger gave his wife one Christmas. It's one of several stunning lead crystal works of art throughout the house.

Sayre recalls a winter night in 1966 when a fire threatened to consume the mansion. "It was really devastating to stand in the yard in the freezing cold and watch it burn," she says.

Everyone from the fire department to insurance adjusters told Clayton Lineberger the house was unsalvageable, but she was adamant. The house would be restored no matter how much it cost.

"If it hadn't been rebuilt, it would have had to be torn down," Sayre Lineberger says.

In addition to their tireless work on the mansion, the Linebergers, avid

gardeners, worked to make the grounds a showplace.

In a Junior league of its own

After Henry Lineberger's death in 1976, the house was bequeathed to the Duke Endowment, and work began with the Junior League of Charlotte to try for the first time to turn the home into a conference center. Deed restrictions and lack of cooperation from neighbors precluded the effort.


Even though it had achieved local, state, and national historic status, the house had become a white elephant. Developers saw an opportunity, and plans were made to turn the Duke Mansion into condominiums, dividing the home into residential quarters.

Dee and Rick Ray, owners of the sports media company Raycom, were among people who considered buying one of those condos. When they saw the house, they were smitten.

"They came to look at a condo and decided to buy the whole house," Patterson says. The Rays began another era of restoration and transformed the home back into a single family dwelling. Serendipitously, the Duke Mansion was saved again, and the Rays lived in the house until their move to Florida in the mid-1990s.

By that time, wheels were in motion to save the house for good. In 1996, under the auspices of Duke Energy and its leader Bill Grigg, a foundation was set up to preserve the house and make it available to the community. The Lynnwood Foundation (so called after the mansion's first name) raised some \$12 million to purchase the house. The home reopened as an inn and conference center for public use. But despite the encouraging outlook, the house still wasn't out of the woods. Maintenance and operating costs loomed.

"A house this big has to have an endowment," Patterson says.

And in 2000, it got one. Duke Energy made a \$4.5 million commitment to the Duke Mansion, ensuring the economic good health of the house. It would seem, after a long and tumultuous history, the Duke Mansion is home for good. 

Lynn Jessup lives in Greensboro.

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