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Hawthorn Hill: The Wright Family Home

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In my position as Curator for the Montgomery County Historical Society, I was fortunate to have had the opportunity to conduct a furnishings inventory of Hawthorn Hill. Following Orville Wright's death in 1948, the National Cash Register Company (now known as NCR) purchased Hawthorn Hill. The Montgomery County Historical Society entered into an agreement with NCR in 1998 to provide professional management for NCR's corporate Archive. As a part of this agreement, MCHS conducted inventories of both Hawthorn Hill and Moraine Farm, the home of Col. Edward Deeds. Along with three hard-working volunteers, I spent one day per week for about nine months cataloging every piece of furniture in every room of Hawthorn Hill. I have always felt that Hawthorn Hill, while presenting a grand façade upon arrival, was so much more than that. Beyond the fact that Orville Wright, one of the most important innovators in modern history, designed the house and some of its amenities, Hawthorn Hill was first and foremost a family home. Family and friends were frequent visitors here, as Bishop Milton Wright indicated in his diary entries. While in many ways the house no longer resembles the Hawthorn Hill of the Wright's era, because it has been updated and modernized, a visitor to Hawthorn Hill still feels a certain 'something' about the house. As Jay R. Petree, a cousin of Wilbur and Orville once wrote in a reminiscence, "even to a young man from a rural Missouri town, this breathtaking home gave no feeling of pretentiousness, but rather a feeling of quiet restfulness." The feeling that Petree felt upon his first visit to Hawthorn Hill in 1916 still lingers today.

The story of the beginnings and early years of Hawthorn Hill can be found in the diary entries made by Bishop Milton Wright, Wilbur, Orville and Katharine's father. Bishop Wright recorded entries in his diary almost every day, detailing both the significant and the mundane facts of everyday life. By 1910, the Wright's had achieved international fame and were frequently visited in Dayton by dignitaries from the fields of aviation,
science and politics. Because of this, the family felt that it was time to build a suitable home in which to receive these visitors. In his diary entry for February 10, 1910, Bishop Wright wrote that there was a "story in the Journal about Wright's having purchased property in Dayton View." This property that the Wright's originally purchased was located at the corner of Salem and Harvard Avenues. The Grace United Methodist Church eventually purchased this property to construct their church.

Soon however, the Wright's were looking for a more suitable property. The Colonial Revival architectural style that they had in mind for their new home needed to be displayed in the proper setting. They began to look for land that had trees and hills, an idea that, according to Tom Crouch in The Bishop's Boys, was Katharine's. From the Bishop's diary: August 15, 1911: "Wilbur and Katharine went to Oakwood to see about the location." By March of 1912, he writes: "The children went out to see their lot in Oakwood." The Wright's had purchased seventeen acres at the corner of Harmon and Park Avenues. The hill upon which Hawthorn Hill was built rises 35 feet above Harmon Avenue.

Even before construction began on Hawthorn Hill, the Wright family was a frequent visitor to their new lot. The Bishop's diary entries list frequent trips to Oakwood, with the children (as he often referred to them) taking their nieces and nephews there for picnics and walks through the woods. Although Wilbur jointly purchased the land in Oakwood with Orville, and was involved with the plans for the house, he died in May of 1912, before construction of Hawthorn Hill began in late summer of that year. The entry for August 5, 1912 in the Bishop's diary is the following: "The men begin to level off Orville's lot for a new building in Oakwood." While construction continued in the summer of 1913, the family was again
frequently visiting their future home. According to the Bishop's diary for June 8, 1913, Orville met with Professor William Werthner, an assistant principal at Dayton's Steele High School. Prof. Werthner identified 35 different types of trees on the property for Orville, who had been very interested in botany as a young student. The Bishop noted that the Wright family celebrated the July 4th holiday in Oakwood that year, writing ". . . and [we] went to the top of Orville's new house, and saw the fireworks at the fair grounds till 9 o'clock."

By January of 1914, Orville and Katharine were planning the furnishings for their new home. The Bishop wrote on January 4, 1914: "Orville and Katharine, at 8:00 evening, took traction cars to Eaton, for locomotive . . . to Grand Rapids, Michigan. They go to select and buy furniture for their new house, in Oakwood." On the 8th he wrote: "Orville and Katharine came home on 8:00 morning train. They purchased at Grand Rapids several thousand dollars of furniture, to be delivered the middle of March. By this point in the early twentieth century, Grand Rapids, Michigan had become the furniture capitol of America. The Wright's furnished their home with such quality brands as Berkey & Gay and Century.

This is possibly one of the last photographs taken of the family home at 7 Hawthorn Street. In his diary for Thursday, September 4, 1913, the Bishop wrote: "Mr. Hardesty, of N.C.R . . . comes in an automobile, with a photographer, and has him take pictures of Bigger's house and of ours including me. . . Hardesty acts in behalf of Welfare Department, N.C.R." The Wright family moved into Hawthorn Hill on Tuesday, April 28, 1914. In his usual style, the Bishop wrote: "We moved from 7 Hawthorn Street, Dayton, Ohio to Hawthorn Hill, Harmon Avenue, Oakwood, Ohio. . . We arrived in a auto-taxicab at 3:45 afternoon."

Although Orville had hired the Dayton architectural firm of Schenck and Williams to design his home, he and Katharine both contributed many ideas for the home's design. Orville was an confirmed tinkerer, who designed some of the more memorable aspects of Hawthorn Hill, including a system to adjust the heat of the furnace by pulling a chord in the living room, a whole house vacuum system designed to make work easier for his housekeeper, the circular shower system in his bathroom and delivery doors into the icebox from the outside so that the delivery man would not track water on the kitchen floor. These doors were bricked in following NCR's purchase of the house.

The years between 1914 and 1948 are not as thoroughly documented. The Bishop continued to record in his diary most visitors to the home. Unfortunately, Milton Wright died in 1917, thereby silencing these almost daily rosters of visitors. Hawthorn Hill continued to be central to the extended Wright family and their numerous friends. The house was the site of two funerals and two weddings during the family's occupancy. Bishop Milton Wright's funeral in 1917 and Katharine Wright Haskell's funeral in 1929 were both held in the home. The weddings of two of Orville's nieces, Ivonnette and Leontine were held at Hawthorn Hill in 1919 and 1923.

Only a few short weeks after Orville's death in January of 1948, NCR sent a photographer to Hawthorn Hill to document the home for the Wright family. The Entry Hall shows the simple style of Victorian decorating preferred by the family. The Reception Hall, showing the niche that Orville had designed especially for the bronze that was presented to the Wright brothers by the Aero Club of Sarthe, France in 1908. This bronze shows the Muse of Aviation inspiring the Wright Brothers. When the carpet for the living room, which was crafted in Ireland arrived, Orville was not happy with the design around the fireplace. He drew a diagram of what he wanted; sent it to Ireland and that design became the carpet installed in the house. The alcove off of the dining room features built-in cabinets. In her reminiscence, Marianne Hudec, Orville's grandniece, remembers visiting Hawthorn Hill as a child. Because she "found the grownup conversation terribly dull" she would go to the alcove, where she says Orville "kept a drawer full of toys that no doubt had been played with by a whole
The kitchen shows the Reliable gas range that Carrie Grumbach, longtime cook and housekeeper for the Wright's, used to cook the family's meals. Notice the stained woodwork and doors. Orville was unhappy with the color originally used for the woodwork, so he created a color that he was satisfied with and he and Charley Grumbach stained the wood themselves. Orville's study as it appeared at the time of his death. Here Orville was surrounded by his collection of books on a wide variety of topics, including World and American History, Aviation, Children's Literature and copies of the Journal of the Ohio Historical and Archaeological Quarterly. The chair has a specially designed foot rest that Orville used to elevate his legs to relieve pain from injuries caused by a plane crash in Virginia in 1908. The book-rest was also designed by Orville, and could be switched between either arm of the chair. The center bedroom, on the second floor, shows the Berkey & Gay furniture and the Irish carpet that is so predominant throughout the home. The Palladian window opens onto the balcony from which Charles Lindberg greeted Daytonians while visiting Orville in 1927. Numerous visitors of both local and national importance were guests at Hawthorn Hill while the Wright's lived there. John H. Patterson and Col. Edward Deeds, both officers with the National Cash Register Company, and their families were frequent guests of Orville and Katharine. Other visitors included: General William Mitchell, Admiral Richard Byrd, Franklin Roosevelt, Alexander Graham Bell, Thomas A. Edison, and Henry and Edsel Ford with James Cox to name just a few.

Following Orville Wright's death in January of 1948, the National Cash Register Company purchased Hawthorn Hill in November of that year for a cost of $75,000.00. Edward A. Deeds, then Chairman of the Board, and S.C. Allyn, then President of NCR, saw the "for sale" sign on the lawn of Hawthorn Hill, and they had NCR purchase the home for use as a corporate guest house. In a 1948 newspaper article, NCR stated that "while the company's action was prompted primarily by the fact that the property will serve a useful purpose within our organization, the preservation of the Wright home in the community to which the Wright Brothers contributed so much was also an important factor in our decision." In 1949, NCR hired W and J Sloane, Inc., of New York City to fully redecorate the house. While the rest of the house was fully updated at this time, it was decided that the library should remain exactly as at the time of Orville Wright's death. It was chosen as the room most reflective of the personality of the inventor. During this renovation, Sheraton and Chippendale antique reproductions were brought in, and most of the original items that Orville and Katharine had purchased in 1914 were moved into the homes attic. The woodwork that Orville and Charley Grumbach stained were painted white and new carpet and wallpaper were added at this time. Hawthorn Hill made the transition from a family home into a corporate guesthouse.

Hawthorn Hill has once again been updated to reflect a more modern approach, with an emphasis on entertaining. The carpeting first placed in the 1949 renovation has been removed from the Entry, allowing visitors to once again see the original hard-wood floors. The 1908 bronze still graces the niche in the reception room, and the living room has been designed for quiet entertaining. As it has appeared throughout Hawthorn Hill's history, Orville's study has changed very little. It still gives us a glimpse into the life of its famous occupant. Many original pieces of furniture are once again gracing the rooms of Hawthorn Hill, including in the dining room, the alcove and an upstairs hall and bedroom. Orville, Katharine and the Bishop's bedrooms now welcome guests from all over the globe. In a tribute to Hawthorn Hill's original owners, all of the guest rooms bear the names of members of the Wright family, including Wilbur and Ivonette, a favorite niece of the Wright brothers.

Although Hawthorn Hill has been changed in appearance over the past 87 years, the spirit of the home remains the same: welcoming and gracious. In this appeared on a beautiful summer day in 2001. I think that the Wright family would still recognize and be comfortable in the home that they designed so long ago.
Bibliography


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