

THE GEORGIA GOVERNOR'S MANSION: A BUCKHEAD LANDMARK

By W. Wright Mitchell

If you have ever given directions to a location on West Paces Ferry Road, chances are it went something like this, “Well, you pass the Governor’s Mansion and . . .” The Governor’s Mansion is a Buckhead landmark, but few people seem to know that it also houses one of the nation’s finest collections of Federalist Period Antiques. Or that the library contains numerous first edition books written by Georgia authors, including a signed copy of *Gone with the Wind*.

Since the Georgia capital moved to Atlanta from Milledgeville in 1868, Georgia’s governors have resided in three “official” residences. The first residence was located downtown at the corner of present day Peachtree and Cain streets. Over time, however, the building deteriorated and was eventually demolished in 1923 to make room for the Henry Grady Hotel. The Westin Peachtree Plaza now stands on the former location of this residence.

In 1925, the state purchased the home of Edwin P. Ansley on The Prado in Ansley Park to be used as a Governor’s residence. The Prado Mansion was never particularly popular, however, and was described by two different legislatures as a “cold, gray, austere, medieval structure.” Therefore, in 1961 the state established an eleven member committee, led by Secretary of State Ben Fortson, Jr., to examine the need for a new mansion.

In 1962, the General Assembly extended the life of Fortson’s committee and created the State Office Building Authority, which was vested with authority to build the

new mansion. The General Assembly also granted the State Office Building Authority bonding authority of \$1 million.

The State Building Authority opened the project up for construction bids in 1964 and it quickly became clear that the plans could not be carried out for \$1 million. The lowest bid was \$1,139,269 and was summarily rejected by the State Auditor. The Auditor believed that lower bids would be received after the inflated labor costs caused by the rush to build Fulton County Stadium at a price of \$18 million had subsided. The Auditor was only partially correct, as the new lowest bid was only \$89,000 less than the rejected bid.

The bid was subsequently approved and the state purchased Woodhaven, an English Tudor style-home, located on 18 acres on West Paces Ferry Road. Woodhaven was built in 1912 as the private residence of former Atlanta Mayor, Robert F. Maddox. Although Woodhaven was torn down to make way for the new Governor's Mansion, much of its beautiful terraced gardens were retained, including various fountains and statues. Noted landscape architect, Edward Daugherty, was retained to prepare the master landscaping plan for the new mansion.

Construction of the new mansion, also known as the Executive Center, was completed in December of 1967 by P.D. Christian Company. It is a stunning brick Greek revival structure consisting of 25,000 square feet and thirty rooms spread out over three levels. Thirty white Doric columns that reach from the veranda to the roof surround the exterior. The first floor of the mansion is used for entertaining and the second floor contains the governor's living quarters. The bottom floor includes a huge hall that accommodates 350 people for luncheons, dinners and other official affairs. A library on

the first floor houses an impressive collection of first edition books relating to the history of Georgia.

A seventy-five member Fine Arts Committee, created by Governor Carl Sanders in 1966, oversaw the interior decoration and landscaping. The Committee, headed by Henry Green, amassed one of the finest collections of Federalist Period antiques in the United States. Among the Committee's more important acquisitions was a rare New England mahogany dining table that dominates the state dining room. The table, which was built in Philadelphia in approximately 1810, extends to a length of more than fourteen feet. The Mansion's collection of antiques also includes a tea set made by silversmith Garrett Eoff in New York City in 1815 and several pieces of silver used aboard the U.S.S. Georgia. The silver pieces are decorated with the seals of the U.S. Navy, the State of Georgia and various Georgia Cities. The art collection includes the works of such noted American painters as Benjamin West, Ralph E.W. Earl, Thomas Doughty, John Neagle, Severin Roesen, Samuel King and Alvin Fisher.

The Fine Arts Committee was disbanded by the mansion's first resident, Governor Lester Maddox. According to newspaper accounts, Governor Maddox was upset about a couple of incidents in which one female committee member accidentally caught the governor clad only in his undergarments and another was discovered rummaging through Mrs. Maddox's bureau drawers in search of a serial number for inventory. Governor Maddox, whose many talents included riding bicycles backwards, also took umbrage at the suggestion of committee members that a duck given to him by some students should not reside in the Mansion's fountain.

Seven governors have resided in the current Governor's Mansion since 1967 including Lester Maddox, Jimmy Carter, George Busbee, Joe Frank Harris, Zell Miller, Roy Barnes and current governor, Sonny Perdue. Significantly, Governor Purdue is the first Republican governor to reside in the Executive Mansion since Reconstruction.

All of the lavish entertaining and countless visitors have taken a toll on the mansion's furnishings. As such, many of the pieces are in need of refurbishment or replacement. Since no public funds are allotted to maintain the interior furnishings, First Lady Mary Perdue, created a non-profit foundation in 2004 called Friends of the Mansion, Inc., to raise private funds for the task. Governor Perdue also appointed a statutorily created nine member bipartisan Executive Center Fine Arts Committee to oversee the restoration process. Since that time, the Fine Arts Committee has been hard at work identifying pieces in need of refurbishment or replacement.

The Governor's Mansion is located at 391 West Paces Ferry Rd. and public tours are conducted throughout the year on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays between 10:00 a.m. and 11:30 a.m. Reservations are needed for groups of 10 or more. More information about the Mansion and its furnishings can be found at www.friendsofthemansion.com.

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