

If These Walls Could Talk

The Story of the JLC Building as It Celebrates Its 50th Anniversary

BY TRICIA WILSON MAGEE

There is a saying that home is where the heart is. For the past 50 years, the heart of the Junior League of Charlotte, Inc. (JLC) has been the JLC Building, a structure saved from demolition, donated to the JLC and literally moved down the street to a location leased from the City of Charlotte, and renovated over the years to keep up with the evolving needs of the membership. The JLC Building has done more than provide a gathering space for the hard working staff and dedicated volunteers who strive to make Charlotte a better place. As the League celebrates the 50th anniversary of the JLC Building, we take a look back at the storied history of the place that is the nucleus of operations supporting the women and the mission of the JLC.

A Firm Foundation

Since the JLC was founded in 1926, League members have conducted meetings in various locations including Charlotte Country Club, an old Exxon Building on Woodlawn Road and the Mint Museum. During the first 30-plus years, most League business took place in JLC members' homes. In the mid-1950s, Jane Sutton Branson, then chair of the Advisory Planning Committee, recalls other Leagues around the country establishing their own headquarters. The results of a November 1957 questionnaire indicated that JLC members were interested in establishing a base for JLC operations. Branson laughingly adds that League members wanted a central location so that they could "get files out of their closets and out from underneath their beds."

Following the survey results, the Advisory Planning Committee began the arduous task of determining what sort of headquarters the League needed and could afford. The first step involved fundraising and in February 1958, members voted to raise dues for all members with the increased funds to be deposited into a building fund. The JLC also instituted a capital campaign to raise an additional \$35,000 through pledges that could be paid over a five-year period. Sally Van Allen served as JLC president from 1958-59 and recalls how easily membership met the building fundraising goals.

JLC Building Chronology

1926 Junior League of Charlotte, Inc. (JLC) formed

1957 November
JLC member survey confirms interest in a 'home' for the JLC

1958 February
JLC Members vote to raise dues and launch a capital campaign to raise funds

1959 September 18
Kat Belk learns about the availability of the White Cottage

October 6 - 7
Members vote to acquire the White Cottage and lease land near Freedom Park

October 14
Myers Park Presbyterian Church agrees to give the White Cottage to the JLC

October 19
JLC secures a 20-year lease on the land near Freedom Park from the Parks and Recreation Commission for \$1 per year

October 28
The White Cottage is taken to its new home at 1332 Maryland Ave

1960 October 4
Dedication ceremony of the new JLC Building

1979 Land lease renewed for 10 more years at the continued rate of \$1 per year

1983 May
Headquarters Task Force evaluates future facility needs of the JLC

1984 March
Headquarters Task Force recommends renovating JLC Building

1985 April
50-year land lease approved for the 1332 Maryland Avenue location

Fall
"Raise the Roof" fundraising campaign kicks off to cover renovation costs

1986 January
Groundbreaking ceremony coincides with JLC's 60th anniversary

October
JLC moves into its renovated headquarters

2010 October
JLC Building celebrates 50 years!

In the midst of the fundraising campaign, a unique opportunity presented itself, requiring quick action on the part of the JLC. This is noted in archives as follows: "On Friday, September 18, an idea was born. By Wednesday, October 28, the Charlotte Junior League had a building and a wooded lot on which to put it." It all began when Katherine "Kat" Belk became aware that the White Cottage at Myers Park Presbyterian Church, which had been used for years as a Boy Scout hut, was scheduled to be demolished. The Advisory Planning Committee solicited and received reports from three reputable contractors who found the building to be valued at \$10,000 and in good condition. The committee then obtained two bids for the actual moving of the structure. Alice Sebrell, JLC president from 1959-60 recalls, "We had one very low bid to move the building. When the time came, we had to track down the man all over town. He didn't want to do it. But we found him, and he did it."

Belk, Branson and Sebrell also met with representatives from the Charlotte Parks and Recreation Commission to explore a land lease on a wooded area in Freedom Park on Maryland Avenue. Branson recalls, "I had a good time working with Alice and Kat. It was a fun project trying to convince decision makers that providing land to the League would benefit the community as a whole. We were

focused and determined to make it work." Special meetings were held by the JLC Board of Directors and the general membership, which unanimously voted in favor of obtaining both the building and land. Architect Norman Pease, Jr., who had volunteered his services to design the brick front to make the building compatible with its Myers Park neighbors, assured the Charlotte Parks and Recreation Commission that the building would be attractive and enhance the property in Freedom Park. The Commission voted to lease the land to the JLC on a 20-year basis for the rate of \$1 per year. Later that same day, City Council voted unanimously to lease the land, and that night, the Board of Trustees of the nearby Children's Nature Museum also unanimously endorsed the JLC's use of the land. Just nine days later on October 28, the framed cottage was taken to its new home at 1332 Maryland Avenue.

JLC members voted overwhelmingly to proceed with needed improvements to the White Cottage. JLC member solicitations sought "100 percent contribution, large or small, so we will have the feeling that this building belongs to each of us." At the Sustainer Luncheon on November 5, 1959, attendees viewed plans by Building Committee Chairman Betty Hayes, received pledge cards, and heard a "rousing pep talk" from Angelia Harris urging participation. Mary Parker, in an article for the December 1959 issue of *The CRIER*, noted, "The general feeling concerning the house by all present seemed to be one of approval and enthusiasm."

Construction did not proceed as quickly as the JLC and its Maryland Avenue neighbors had hoped. An unusually snowy and icy winter prevented the foundation from being



The White Cottage was moved from Myers Park Presbyterian Church and was placed on a platform until the weather improved.
PHOTO FROM JLC ARCHIVES



The JLC Building continues to be a valuable resource to League members and the community.

PHOTO FROM JLC ARCHIVES

poured. The frame building sat on a platform where it had been deposited in October and JLC leaders spent countless hours trying to pacify neighbors' complaints and objections as the harsh winter wore on. Once the weather cleared in the spring, the construction project resumed.

On October 4, 1960, approximately 125 civic leaders attended the dedication ceremony for the new JLC Building. Attendees included representatives from almost every organization and agency with whom the League had worked. In addition, the JLC hosted an open house for friends of the League, which was attended by more than 300 people. Nearly 350 members attended two League meetings at the new building that same month. Branson recalls League members, civic leaders, and even some previously skeptical neighbors were "delighted" with the finished project.

On October 10, 1960, the Building Fund had a remaining balance of \$128.55. The JLC had received \$43,234.99 from pledges, the increased portion of the dues and other sources, and had spent approximately \$43,106.44 to move and improve the White Cottage. Over the next few months, the JLC Building received gifts of plants, office equipment, and other furnishings and quickly became a home to League activities.

Raise the Roof

As the JLC continued to grow, so did the need for more space. By the 1980s, membership had more than doubled, growing to 1500 active and sustaining members. In May 1983 JLC President Corinne Allen appointed a Headquarters Task Force to study whether the current building could meet the League's needs over the next 15 years. Led by Townley Moon, the task force concluded that the building could not meet the future needs of the JLC and recommended renovating the current structure. Belk, who was a sustainer by that time, said, "The decision to stay makes those of us who originally chose the location feel that we made a good choice." The task force formulated a wish list of improvements to be made, and the JLC hired architect Jim Meyer, of Meyer-Greenson and husband of JLC member Sayre Meyer, to develop plans for a building that would meet the organization's needs for the next 25 years. Cynthia Marshall, JLC president from 1984-85, remembers JLC members having mixed emotions about raising money to be used by the League itself when there were so many needs in the community. In an attempt to appease members'

concerns, she wrote in her president's letter in the April 1985 issue of *The CRIER*, "Our revitalized place can increase the opportunities for personal interaction and fellowship, and can be the springboard for a renewed commitment to community involvement." Once put to a vote, JLC members overwhelmingly supported the proposal to hold a capital campaign to raise funds for building improvements.

Before proceeding with renovations, the JLC needed to revisit the lease on the Maryland Avenue property. The original 20-year lease had been extended for 10 years in 1979 at the continued rate of \$1 per year. With only five years left on that lease, then JLC lawyer Zach Smith advised members in a *CRIER* article that, "a minimum 30-year lease is necessary to justify a large expenditure for expansion of the building." The process began in August 1984, and in April 1985, the city approved and executed a 50-year lease with the JLC at the original rate of \$1 per year.

With the lease extension secured, the "Raise the Roof" fundraising campaign began with a goal of \$400,000 and 100 percent member participation. Kathy Southerland, JLC president 1985-86, distinctly remembers that during the campaign, the architectural plans were mounted on the wall in the main room of the JLC Building so that members could see what the new facility would look like. To the surprise of many, pledges and donations surpassed the JLC's goal and, in only four weeks, brought in more than \$550,000 from League members, corporations and private foundations.

The JLC awarded the renovation contract to Strickland, Inc., General Contractors in 1986. The groundbreaking

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ceremony coincided with the celebration of the 60th anniversary of the JLC and attendees still remember the bitter cold temperatures at the January ceremony. While the building was under construction, the Bissell Companies provided space for JLC administrative offices and LeaguePrint, which was a critical JLC fundraiser at the time. Wardie Martin, a sustainer who also worked in the League office for more than 27 years, remembers the day the JLC moved out of the building to make way for the renovation. "Nobody wanted to touch the attic," Martin jokes. "For years, records piled up in the attic and when it came time to move its contents, it was a major project. I still remember the day we brought everything down." Jane Harrell led the Headquarters Committee that made decisions concerning furnishings for the renovated building. Martin recalls, "Jane and her committee worked like dogs to carefully choose furniture and decor that would provide a soothing and functional interior." When the JLC moved back into its newly renovated and expanded building in October 1986, members immediately started putting the rooms to use. "Everyone was so mindful to take care of our new space. There was a concerted effort to not 'junk up' the building," recalls Martin. The League was proud to show off the new facility to neighbors when the JLC Building operated as a voting precinct while Myers Park Traditional School underwent renovations. Surplus funds from the building renovation

were deposited into an operations fund. "We felt as though we were stewards of the building and needed to keep up the interior and keep it nice. When it came time for new carpets or for a new furnace, the money raised during the renovation campaign paid these costs," says Martin.

Moving Forward

The JLC Building continues to be a valuable resource to League members and the community. President Elizabeth Kovacs notes, "The Charlotte community and our membership have changed so much in 50 years, and our beautiful JLC Building has kept up just like our organization has. The women who chose the Freedom Park site could not have picked a better location. Today, the JLC Building serves as a central location for members who live as far north as Mooresville and as far south as Rock Hill."

At the original JLC Building dedication ceremony in October 1960, Arthur Jones, civil rights leader and friend of the League, congratulated the JLC and noted, "In an age of tension, fear and destruction, this new home of the League is no monument to past success. It is a symbol of future success in the constructive area of human life" Fifty years later, the JLC Building continues to serve as a symbol of this organization's dedication to bettering life in the Charlotte community today and into the future. 

JLC to Participate in Strategic Planning



The Junior League of Charlotte, Inc. (JLC) was recently selected by the Association of Junior Leagues International, Inc. (AJLI) to participate on an AJLI Active Learning Team (ALT) as a part of the AJLI's strategic planning process. Alicia Morris and Whitney Wilson-Wertz led the task force which submitted the application for ALT consideration. In the JLC application request Morris and Wilson-Wertz described participating in the ALTs as "an opportunity for members to think globally and act locally."

Charged with exploring issues in one of three distinct focus areas - Membership, Governance and Management and Community Impact - the ALTs will tackle a variety of issues and develop innovative solutions within their area of study. The JLC is assigned to the Membership ALT and will work closely with Leagues from Chattanooga, Orlando, Sacramento, Knoxville, Little Rock and Seattle. This is both an honor and an opportunity for the JLC. Look for more details and ALT progress notes in coming issues. 

The Women Behind the Building

Sally Van Allen and Alice Sebrell BY TRICIA WILSON MAGEE



Sally Van Allen
PHOTO BY ANGELA SMITH

When Sally Van Allen and Alice Sebrell first joined the Junior League of Charlotte, Inc. (JLC), or the Charlotte Junior League as it was then called, board meetings took place in members' homes. By the time their years of service as president were over, board meetings and more were taking place in the new JLC Building on Maryland Avenue. Both women, who continue to serve as sustaining members of the JLC, played integral roles in securing the funding, the building and the site for the place the JLC still calls home today.

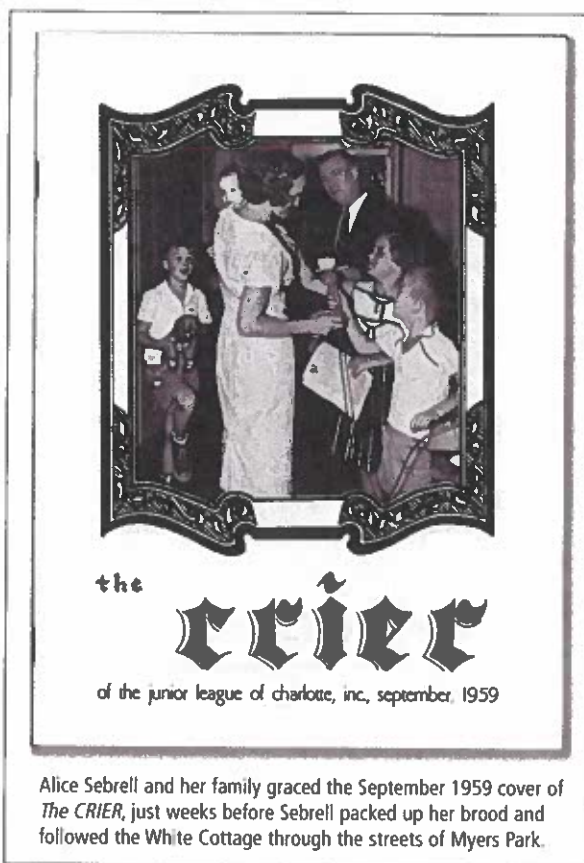
Van Allen served as president of the JLC from 1958-59. Originally from Charleston, South Carolina, she joined the Junior League of Charleston following graduation from Sweetbrier College. After marrying her husband Bill, an attorney, Van Allen moved from Charleston to Washington, D.C., where she was also involved in the Junior League. In 1950 the Van Allens moved to Charlotte where Bill Van Allen started the law firm of Lassiter, Moore and Van Allen. Sallie Van Allen continued her League service and quickly became an active member of the local community. When she accepted the gavel in 1958, Van Allen was also handed the task of raising money and developing a plan to secure a headquarters building. She admits that at the time, two things were nonexistent in Charlotte – a headquarters building for the JLC and an interest in the arts. "Raising the money for a building was easy," says Van Allen. "It was no burden to raise the money thanks to the hard work of the committee members. The biggest challenge was trying to move forward with a focus on the arts." Although Van Allen is proud the JLC succeeded in its fundraising efforts to establish a League home, the vibrant arts scene in Charlotte today is also a tribute to her and the JLC's efforts in the late 1950s and early 1960s. When she has some rare free time, Van Allen continues to support the arts by visiting local museums and attending symphony performances.

After kicking off the building fund campaign to a strong start, Van Allen passed the gavel to Sebrell, who served as JLC president from 1959-60. Like her predecessor, Sebrell had years of experience with the JLC, including serving as editor of *The CRIER*, before taking the reigns as president. She moved to Charlotte and joined the League after graduating from Saint Mary's Junior College and the University of North Carolina. Her husband, Emmett, worked for the construction firm of McDewitt and Street and also played a role in procuring the new JLC Building. While Van Allen laid the groundwork with fundraising, the

unusual circumstances that led to the acquisition of the building and the lease of the land occurred during Sebrell's tenure. Ann S. Ehringhaus, Sebrell's daughter, remembers her mother's excitement when the JLC acquired the White Cottage. On the day the building was to be moved, Sebrell packed up her four children, including her six-month-old daughter, also named Alice, in the family's station wagon and headed over to the church. Ehringhaus vividly recalls, "My mom followed the moving truck from Myers Park Presbyterian to the Maryland Avenue site by the park. I still remember sitting in the station wagon with my brothers and sisters as we drove right behind the building the entire way." Reflecting back on her year as president in a prior interview with *The CRIER*, Sebrell summarized her service as being a year of "hard work, pacifying

neighbors, decorating and landscaping." The end result, of course, was the beautiful new JLC Building.

Both Sebrell and Van Allen enthusiastically overcame significant challenges during their respective service as president. Their hard work was manifest the day the JLC Building opened. The fact these two ladies continue as sustaining members today further demonstrates their commitment to the Junior League of Charlotte and its continued goal to improve the Charlotte community. 🌸



Alice Sebrell and her family graced the September 1959 cover of *The CRIER*, just weeks before Sebrell packed up her brood and followed the White Cottage through the streets of Myers Park.

From The *CRIER* Archives

JLC Building Wish List

BY KIM F. GRANT

Digging through old editions of *The CRIER* has been an informative and entertaining task. Editions published during the time that the Junior League of Charlotte, Inc. (JLC) established the JLC Building are particularly interesting as they include floorplans, building rules and even "wish lists" of items desired for the building. On one such list, a particular item reappears as needed in various rooms of the building: ashtrays - specified in sizes large and extra large. Well, JLC women are known to be on the leading edge of trends; smoking was very popular and stylish in the 1950s and 1960s. It was not until the mid 1960s that the Surgeon General publicly came out with a statement linking smoking to cancer. Wonder what became of all those ashtrays...

JLC Building "Dreams for the Future" *The CRIER*, March 1960

Office

- A modern typewriter
- A modern mimeographing machine
- An adding machine
- Large lamp
- Large ashtray

Entry Hall

- Harvest table
- 2 ladder back chairs (\$21 each)
- Tea caddy lamp
- Small bachelor chest
- Floor planter
- 2 extra large handsome ashtrays

Lounge

- Love seat
- Lounge chair

Porch

- 2 footscrapers
- 3' X 6' cocoa straw mat
- 2 Windsor benches
- 2 Carriage lamps

Board Room

- Very large Windsor arm chair
- Rug
- Mirror
- Frame for oil painting
- Bowl for mantel
- 2 urns for mantel
- Lamp shades
- 5 large ashtrays

Green Room

- Large table
- Chairs
- Floor lamp
- Ashtrays

Kitchen

- Glass plates for swinging doors
- Serving trays
- Nice stainless steel flatware
- Tea kettle
- Coffee urn
- Cooking utensils (from spoons to pots & pans)
- Melamac dinnerware
- Punch bowl and cups
- Large mixing vessel
- Measuring cups
- Tea towels
- Dish towels
- Tea towel rack

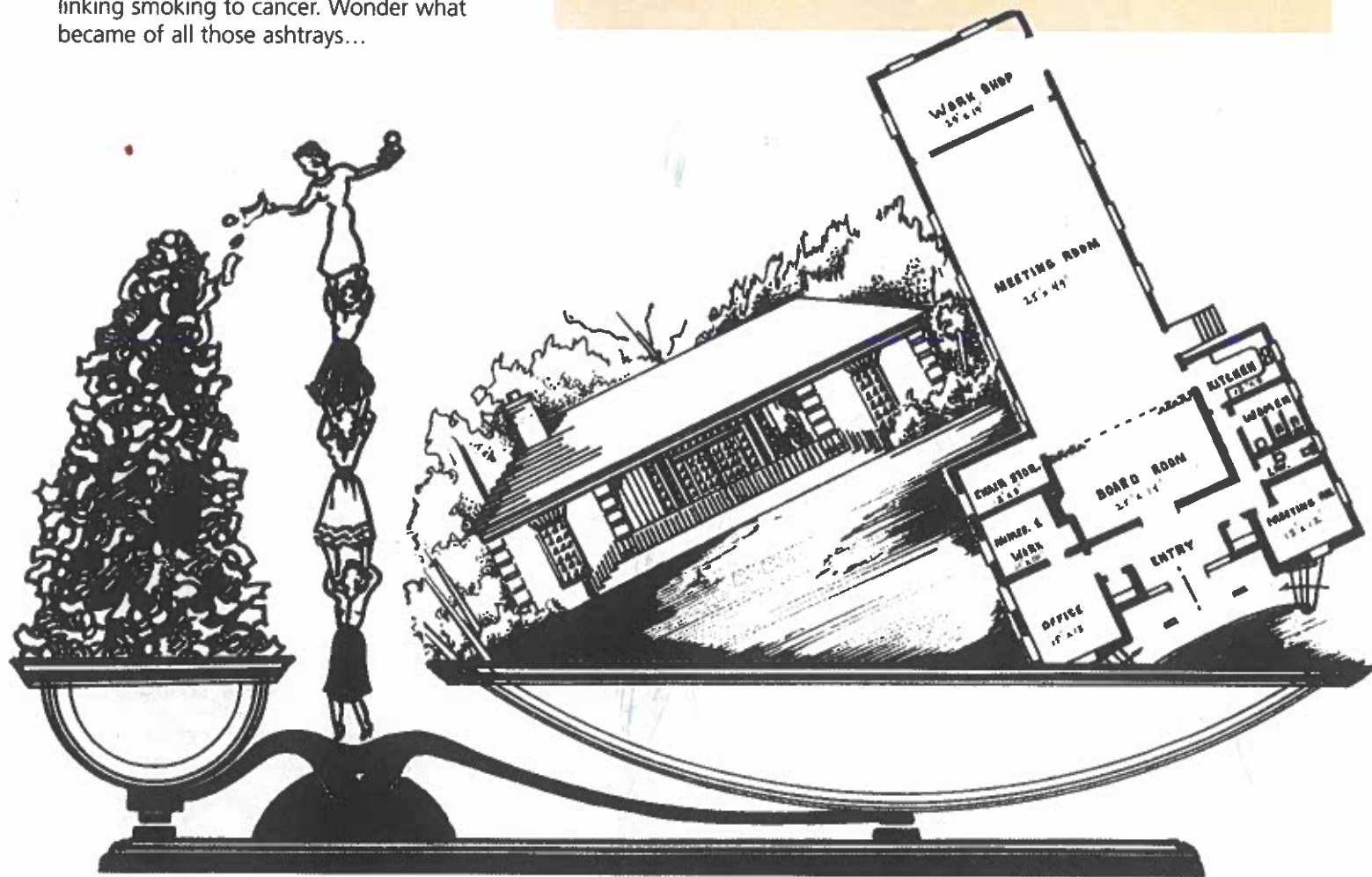


Illustration and original JLC Building floor plan from *The CRIER*, 1960 titled "It's Up to You".