

## Historical Essay for the Bonnie Ethel Cone House

In studying the history of Charlotte, North Carolina after the end of World War II, one of the most important developments to occur was the creation of the Charlotte Center of the University of North Carolina (CCUNC) in 1946. Originally opened to serve returning veterans under the GI Bill, the center was significant as it was the first state-supported institution of higher education in the city. Eventually this center would transform into the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. However, one cannot explain how this university came to be without acknowledging the tireless work and dedication of Bonnie Cone (1907-2003). “Miss Bonnie,” as she was affectionately known, served as the director of Charlotte Center of the University of North Carolina (CCUNC) and Charlotte College, shepherding both through their early formative years.

Cone strongly believed that access to higher education in Charlotte was lacking and was an instrumental figure in mobilizing financial and political support from civic and business leaders who shared her view, culminating with the creation of the University of North Carolina at Charlotte in 1965. From its humble beginning in the basement of Central High School, the University of North Carolina at Charlotte today has evolved to serve over thirty-thousand students, with three campuses and nine colleges offering degrees at the bachelor, masters, and doctoral level. Through its curriculum and in collaboration/partnerships with the private sector, the university’s influence stretches far past the city limits of Charlotte, encompassing a geographic region of over two and half million people, with an economic impact of \$2.1 billion. Yet it’s distinctly possible that none of this would be a reality today if not for Cone’s determined

persistence in the school's infancy. "Bonnie Cone" recalled Bill Friday, had a great vision. She could clearly see and had the tenacity to see it through. And if you wonder if she achieved it, take a look around."<sup>1</sup>

Born in Lodge, South Carolina on June 22, 1907, Bonnie Ethel Cone was the fourth child of Addie Lavina Harter and Charles Jefferson Cone. Charles Cone worked in a variety of professions ranging from farming to sales while also serving as mayor of the town of Lodge, situated in the low country of South Carolina.<sup>2</sup> Addie was a homemaker and also the chief tailor of the Cone household who made most of her children's clothes. Education was important to the Cones, a fact they impressed upon their children, and for Bonnie it seemed to catch on early in life. "I knew I wanted to be a teacher before I even started the first grade,"<sup>3</sup> she said, practicing the art of teaching with a flock of chickens she cared for, pretending they were pupils and instructing them in areas such as poetry and history while she fed them.<sup>4</sup> She was also an avid piano player, practicing on the windowsill of her bedroom until the age of twelve when the family purchased a piano. Her skill on the keyboard translated into opportunity when the local music teacher moved away and the parents of the instructor's former pupils convinced her to take over the teaching duties.<sup>5</sup>

As Bonnie matriculated into her senior year of high school her parents were not sure that she was fully ready for college. This resulted in in Cone's father sending her back to high

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<sup>1</sup> Gina Carroll Howard, "UNC Charlotte: Bonnie Cone's Promise Fulfilled," *UNC Charlotte*, Volume 11, No. 1, Summer 2003, p. 14.

<sup>2</sup> Mary Snead Boger, *Charlotte 23*, Bassett, VA: Bassett Printing Corporation, 1972, p. 54.

<sup>3</sup> "The School Miss Bonnie Built," *Time*, Volume 86, No. 3, July 16, 1965, p. 56.

<sup>4</sup> Boger, p. 54.

<sup>5</sup> *A Life Remembered*.

school for an extra year of instruction. This proved a fortuitous decision for Bonnie at the time because she met Edwin Rentz who was the new math teacher in Lodge. Rentz “opened up the world of logic and reasoning which decided young Bonnie on her future” as a mathematician.<sup>6</sup> As someone who wanted to teach, Bonnie preferred Winthrop College (University) in Rock Hill, South Carolina which specialized in training women educators. Once again, Cone’s parents interceded – this time with help. “I wanted to go to Winthrop.” Cone stated, “but my family and our minister concluded this little timid girl would just be lost in that twelve hundred crush of students.”<sup>7</sup> The minister suggested Coker College in Hartsville, South Carolina because it was affiliated with the South Carolina Baptist Convention. The Cones agreed with his recommendation the college was smaller and closer to home. A further positive lay in the fact that Bonnie’s older sister, Louise, was already attending Coker and could keep an eye on her younger sister during her first year away from home.<sup>8</sup>

As a college student Bonnie was very active participating in various team sports such as basketball, swimming, hockey, while also serving as president of the Math Club and the YWCA at the college. More importantly, Cone’s experiences here “whetted her insatiable desire to teach,” providing her with tutoring and substitute teaching opportunities.<sup>9</sup> One famous example occurred in her senior year when a slight academic emergency arose. Mary P. Taylor, the Dean of Women and Instructor of Art History approached Cone for help because Taylor lacked a baccalaureate degree due to the fact that she had never taken plane geometry. Cone

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<sup>6</sup> Boger, p. 54.

<sup>7</sup> Boger, p. 54.

<sup>8</sup> *A Life Remembered*.

<sup>9</sup> Boger, p. 55.

was able to help her pass the subject, receiving her belated degree in Cone's class. It was clear, even this early in her life, that Cone "had a way with people, an ability to help them help themselves."<sup>10</sup>

After graduating magna cum laude in 1928, Cone began her career at Lake View High School in Dillion, South Carolina. Originally hired to teach math and science, she was concerned when a French class was added to her schedule because that was not her best subject. It was a struggle to teach it during her first "anxiety-filled year in a classroom beside the principal's office where everything she taught could be heard next door."<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless she persisted, rewarded with a renewed contract the next year – sans French class as a bonus. In total, she spent eleven years in South Carolina teaching at Lake View, McColl, and Gaffney. During her summer breaks, she travelled to North Carolina, earning a master's degree in Mathematics at Duke University 1941.

Cone's ability to effectively teach mathematics came to the attention of Dr. Elmer H. Garinger in 1940. Garinger was both the Superintendent of the Charlotte City School System as well as the principal of Central High School and its 1,400-students. Garinger was in need of an instructor of plane geometry and/or algebra when he invited Cone to interview for the job. He was surprised when Cone initially refused on the grounds that having to teach the same course five times a day would not interest her. Garinger then countered with an offer to be the roving math instructor, which she did accept. In her new role, she taught everything from basic math to college algebra while also running the high school's testing program.

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<sup>10</sup> Boger, p. 55.

<sup>11</sup> *A Life Remembered*.

As a high school teacher she was in her element, but as World War II reached America in December 1941, Bonnie found herself teaching in a different setting. Due to the war, there was a shortage of math instructors for the Navy V-12 program at Duke University.<sup>12</sup> John J. Gergen, Chair of the Mathematics Department at Duke needed, “someone qualified who combined sheer love of math with interest in people and a sharp mind.”<sup>13</sup> Naturally he turned to Cone, the former student who had just earned her master’s degree there, to fill the role. With a promise from Garinger that her job in Charlotte would be waiting, Cone embarked on a two-year assignment that saw her as the only female instructor on Duke University’s West Campus.<sup>14</sup> When the V-12 Program ended in early 1945, Cone’s was sent to Washington D.C. to work in the Statistical Division of the Naval Ordnance Laboratory till the end of the year. As an analyst, her position comprised the statistical work involved with the development of underwater mines. “Now that was hard,” she recalled, “as long as we were in the war you didn’t think about anything else.” But with the war concluded, “I wanted to come back to my high school students.”<sup>15</sup>

As Bonnie returned to Central High School in 1946, events were transpiring that would forever alter the trajectory of her career. At the end of World War II, the United States was presented with an educational crisis. Millions of returning servicemen, utilizing the

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<sup>12</sup> The V-12 Navy College Training Program (1943-1946): designed to supplement the force of commissioned officers in the United States Navy and Marine Corps during World War II. During its three years of existence, the program trained over 125,000 participants at 131 colleges and universities across the country. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina School of Medicine, The Bowman-Gray School of Medicine at Wake Forest College (University), Duke University, and the Duke University School of Medicine offered the V-12 program in North Carolina.

<sup>13</sup> Boger, p. 56.

<sup>14</sup> Boger, p. 56.

<sup>15</sup> Lynn Haessly, *Interview with Bonnie E. Cone*, January 7, 1986, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/sohp/C-0048/menu.html>.

Servicemen's Realignment Act of 1944 (G.I. Bill), were taking advantage of the benefits the act provided as they transitioned to a post-military career. One of these benefits provided directed payments for tuition and living expenses to veterans seeking to complete their education – be it high school, vocational training, or college. However, the imperative question became *where* to teach them? North Carolina had over 360,000 returning veterans – a tiny fraction of which could easily overwhelm the state's existing educational infrastructure. In response, a system of twelve extension centers were opened across the state in conjunction with the North Carolina College Conference and the University of North Carolina, including one in Charlotte at Central High School. The "Charlotte Center" or "CCUNC," offered the credit equivalent of one-year of college education. Led by Charles Bernard in its first year of operation, the center enrolled 274 students.<sup>16</sup> Cone was also conscripted into the college operation where she taught engineering math for forty students, seven hours a week.<sup>17</sup>

Increased demand prompted the addition of sophomore year curriculum in 1947, albeit with one noticeable absence in Charles Bernard, who returned to Chapel Hill to finish his doctorate. Bernard's departure forced Elmer Garinger to get creative in finding a replacement, choosing Cone who had been working at Duke over the summer. She initially turned down the offer, citing her lack of experience in administration, but Garinger's insistence that the job was temporary, coupled with the fact that Garinger was her boss, helped push Cone towards accepting. However, after starting the job in mid-August, Cone discovered that "all I had was one little tiny office – they called it the 'lost and found' area. It had three items of equipment. I

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<sup>16</sup> Boger, p. 57.

<sup>17</sup> Boger, p. 57.

had one homemade desk, probably no more than 24" by 36" that had no drawers, just one shelf. I had one beautiful two-drawer file which had been bought the year before, so it was nearly new, and one discarded Royal typewriter that had been owned by Charlotte Technical High School."<sup>18</sup> Her first tasks as director involved recruiting faculty and students, a herculean task in of itself considering there were none of the former and only thirty-five of the latter when she became director.<sup>19</sup> Yet it should come as no surprise that by the first of September she had staffed the center and enrolled 228 students (92 of which were sophomores). When the first day of class commenced on September 27 enrollment reached 302 students exceeding the first year's total by 28 and capping off what Cone would succinctly describe as "a busy, busy month."<sup>20</sup>

While the administration in Chapel Hill viewed the extension centers as temporary Cone, who had just successfully navigated her first year as director of the Charlotte Center, had other ideas. As the center with the highest enrollment in the entire program, it was clear there was a need for access to higher education in Charlotte. Cone considered CCUNC the harbinger of a permanent solution to that problem. To that end, she operated it as a permanent college, securing approval for a summer session in 1948 while also attempting to get the center admitted as a member of the American Association of Junior Colleges.<sup>21</sup> She also formed an advisory board of influential Charlotteans who shared her views about the lack of access to higher education in the state. When it was announced that the centers would cease

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<sup>18</sup> Ken Sanford, *Charlotte and UNC Charlotte: Growing Up Together*, Charlotte, NC: University of North Carolina at Charlotte, 1996, p. 25.

<sup>19</sup> Boger, p. 58.

<sup>20</sup> Haessly, *Interview with Bonnie E. Cone*.

<sup>21</sup> Sanford, p. 30.

operations after the 1948-1949 academic year, advisory board member J. Murrey Atkins helped draft a bill that allowed the Charlotte school system to take over and operate the school. Legislative approval in April 1949 created the Charlotte Community College System with the city's first publicly supported institution of higher education – Charlotte College – as its centerpiece.<sup>22</sup>

The upside to this arrangement was that the new college came under the city's authority, assuring access to higher education in Charlotte. The downside, however, was that the departure of state control and the loss of funding that came with it caused the college financial hardship in its early years. A citywide referendum in 1949 had provided an initial \$10,000 in operating funds but "from 1949 to the spring of 1954," recalled Cone, "we made it on tuition plus \$2,000 dollars a year."<sup>23</sup> Cone continued making the case for her vision of what Charlotte College could be, in turn attracting more individuals and businesses to her cause – one of whom was influential business executive W.A. Kennedy. Cone found a kindred spirit in Kennedy who shared her vision for the College and, like Cone, was not about to let complacency slow its development. He took umbrage to the mindset of some in Charlotte who were resigned to the fact that the last two years of college would have to be found elsewhere. Arguing that "junior colleges are for junior towns and cities," Kennedy "launched a one-man campaign to gain equity in state funding" in 1950.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Sanford, p. 33.

<sup>23</sup> Joe E. McCorkle, "The Ballad of Bonnie E. Cone," *The Annual Report, Rogues and Rascals 1973*, University of North Carolina at Charlotte, 1973, p. 15.

<sup>24</sup> Sanford, p. 35



The year 1957 proved pivotal as several factors converged to accelerate the development of Charlotte College. The first saw the beginning of daytime classes. Invariably, the second became adequate space. Even though it was a two-year school, Charlotte College was growing faster than any other college or university in the state.<sup>25</sup> This prompted talk of securing a new, permanent site for the college and, after exhaustive study, a site of 250 acres in northeast Mecklenburg County was selected because it was accessible, inexpensive, and afforded room for the campus to grow. The final factor related to legislation passed in the General Assembly, providing funding for a community college system in the state. Cone admitted that she was initially skeptical of this legislation because “it was only for programs which transferred to senior colleges.”<sup>26</sup> In other words while it was state funding, it was not funding for a four-year institution. Additionally, the legislation required the existing junior colleges in the state to “relinquish their bonds with the local school boards and to come under the jurisdiction of the State Board of Higher Education.”<sup>27</sup> Cone was not alone in her reservations as leaders of the state’s other junior colleges joined her in their concern. But securing state support ultimately outweighed these considerations. Stated Cone: “I knew we were taking one half a loaf but,” acknowledging that some state support was better than none at all, “we decided to take it.”<sup>28</sup>

The passage of the 1957 act set the stage for several bond referendums over the course of two years to provide capital improvement funds. The first of these occurring in April 1958,

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<sup>25</sup> Howard, p. 13.

<sup>26</sup> McCorkle, p. 15.

<sup>27</sup> Kenyon Bertel Segner III, “A History of the Community College Movement in North Carolina: 1927-1963, Kenansville, NC: James Sprunt Press, 1974, p. 22.

<sup>28</sup> McCorkle, p. 15.

extended a two-cent city tax that funded the college to encompass the whole of Mecklenburg County. A second referendum in November saw Charlotte voters approve a statewide bond by a 3-1 margin, providing \$975,000 in state matching funds beginning in 1959.<sup>29</sup> One year later, the voters of Mecklenburg County also voted to approve a second bond referendum of \$975,000 for the second phase of the campus building program.<sup>30</sup> Through each campaign, Cone was there writing letters, making phone calls, and giving speeches in support of the bonds to a large swath of the county's civic organizations and electorate, never ceasing to push her vision of what Charlotte College could be.

While Cone was working to drum up support for the college, she was gaining recognition in her profession as well. In 1959, noting that she was "one of the few women administrative heads of coeducational colleges, private or community,"<sup>31</sup> the Southern Association of Junior Colleges elected her president of their organization – the first woman to ever hold that title. In 1961 she received two honorary degrees on the same day – a Doctor of Literature degree from her alma mater, Coker College, and an honorary doctorate from Davidson College, again a first for a woman.<sup>32</sup> Later that summer the Charlotte Community College Board, established after passage of the 1957 act, conferred upon Cone the title of "president," whereas she had previously been known as "director" of the college.<sup>33</sup> As Cone began her first year as the

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<sup>29</sup> "How Mecklenburg Voted On Bonds," *Charlotte Observer*, November 5, 1958, p. 3-A.

<sup>30</sup> Jerry Leonard, "Second Phase Bond Issue Approved," *Charlotte Collegian*, Volume 13, No. 3, December 12, 1960, p. 1

<sup>31</sup> Sanford, p. 49.

<sup>32</sup> Boger, p. 62.

<sup>33</sup> Chris Collins, "Miss Cone is Named President," *Charlotte Collegian*, Volume 16, No. 1, September 18, 1961, pp. 1,3.

official president of Charlotte College, events transpiring in Raleigh would soon prove the final catalyst to realizing her vision.

Elected governor in 1960 under a platform promising “quality education” for North Carolina, Terry Sanford was very aware of the fact that the 1957 Community College Act had brought forth “...a number of questions of great importance that need to be studied and resolved in the formulation of a permanent long-range policy governing the creation and operation of community colleges.”<sup>34</sup> In order to answer these questions he appointed a twenty-five member commission (which included Cone) chaired by attorney Irving Carlyle, a former state senator from Winston-Salem. “The Carlyle Commission,” as it came to be known, made sixty-one specific recommendations on how to improve higher education in the state when presenting their findings in December 1962. One of those included converting Charlotte College into a four-year senior institution with the addition of the junior and senior years in 1963 and 1964, respectively. That recommendation, adopted by the General Assembly in May 1963, finally gave Charlotte (and Bonnie Cone) the four-year state supported institution that the region had needed.

However, another recommendation proved even more fortuitous for the school as it authorized the Consolidated Board of Trustees to establish additional campuses of the University under conditions prescribed by the Board” and that new campuses be established “only where there is a clear need for the types of programs that only a university should offer.”<sup>35</sup> To that end, the Board authorized Dr. Arnold K. King to undertake a study on the

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<sup>34</sup> Segner III, p. 86.

<sup>35</sup> Sanford, pp. 62-63.

expansion of the University with an eye towards Charlotte College as a possible candidate. Completed in October 1964, King's study recommended that "...the Board of Trustees of the University, subject to the provisions of General Statute 116-2.1, take appropriate action to make Charlotte College the fourth campus of the University of North Carolina."<sup>36</sup> The report's conclusions helped swiftly secure approval from the Consolidated University Board of Trustees and the State Board of Higher Education and by January 1965, the final approval was in the hands of the General Assembly.<sup>37</sup>

Back at Charlotte College, Cone was working with her colleagues to build up the faculty as it transitioned into a four-year school. With the youth of the school and its lack of facilities serving as roadblocks to successfully recruit prospective faculty, Cone consistently pushed a vision of "the college as it would be rather than as it was – a handful of buildings alongside a barn and silo in a former cow pasture."<sup>38</sup> In using that approach, she would find success – one example being Sherman Burson. Recruited to develop the chemistry program by Cone, he turned down the job offer due to the lack of facilities on campus. But Cone was determined to change his mind, persisting until he finally accepted. "It was a hard sell," recalled Burson, "but clothed in such a disarming and friendly approach, it didn't seem that way at all."<sup>39</sup> That initially hesitant chemistry professor ultimately spent his entire career at the school, retiring in 1985 as the dean of the College of Arts and Sciences. Other early faculty recruited by this method included Robert Wallace (English), James Wahab (Mathematics), Howard Harlan

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<sup>36</sup> Sanford, p. 76.

<sup>37</sup> Sanford, p. 76.

<sup>38</sup> Howard, p. 13.

<sup>39</sup> Howard, p. 14.

(Sociology), Dan Morrill (History), and Loy Witherspoon (Religious Studies). In every instance, it was Cone's vision for the college that won them over. In retrospect, none of faculty recruited by Cone were caught unawares when Charlotte College developed into UNC Charlotte – "all had seen the picture of the future as painted by Bonnie Cone in 1963-64."<sup>40</sup>

In February 1965, the legislation to make Charlotte College the fourth campus of the University of North Carolina was introduced in the General Assembly. Everything was going well; the legislation passed the Senate without issue, but "on the eve of the key vote in the House, the effort somehow hit a snag."<sup>41</sup> Cone, who was in Raleigh to support the bill, was approached by a representative of Governor Dan K. Moore who told her that Moore wanted the legislation withdrawn because he heard there were not enough votes to pass it. As he had just assumed office in January, he was not keen to lose his first legislative battle after only two months in office. "This was pretty much of a shock to me," said Cone. "Representative Jim Vogler was sure and the other legislators from our delegation were sure they had the support needed to pass it in the House."<sup>42</sup> Vogler was able to convince Moore to postpone the vote until the following Tuesday so he could check his vote count. This precipitated a flurry of weekend telephone calls from Cone to everyone she knew with legislative connections because "after it was determined that we did have the votes to pass it in the House, we had to be sure that the governor was persuaded to let the bill be taken to the House."<sup>43</sup> The problem, she quipped, was that "every single soul seemed to be in Florida fishing."<sup>44</sup> Not giving up, she kept

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<sup>40</sup> Sanford, p. 66.

<sup>41</sup> Sanford, p. 78.

<sup>42</sup> Sanford, p. 78.

<sup>43</sup> Sanford, p. 78.

<sup>44</sup> Sanford, p. 79.

dialing until she reached banking executive George Broadrick, who agreed to meet her in Raleigh the next day and speak with Moore. After meeting with the governor, Broadrick met Cone at the Sir Walter Raleigh Hotel where he told her that Moore was with them and the legislation would be voted on the next day.

According to Cone, Tuesday March 2, 1965 “was the longest day I ever lived.”<sup>45</sup> As the culmination of an almost nineteen-year mission, every second leading up to the final vote count must have stretched to forever and back again in her mind. But any worry she had was quashed when the bill finally passed on its third reading. As the old bell rang on the Charlotte College campus to celebrate the news, Cone and her staff began the trek back to Charlotte. As they approached the campus, they noticed it darker than usual, and drove onto campus to investigate. As Ken Sanford recounts, “suddenly lights came on everywhere and a shout went up. A student stepped forward and placed a bouquet of red roses in Cone’s arms. Her eyes glistened with tears. Then she was instructed to follow the crowd to the student center, where music was playing and students were dancing, and a gala impromptu celebration ensued.”<sup>46</sup>

When Charlotte College became the University of North Carolina at Charlotte on July 1, 1965, Cone was named acting chancellor. Two weeks later, she was profiled in a *Time* magazine article where the question was posed as to whether or not her appointment would be permanent.<sup>47</sup> Community support for Cone was strong, and while she was considered for the position, it ultimately went to Dean Wallace Colvard. Bill Friday, wanting to do right by

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<sup>45</sup> Sanford, p. 80.

<sup>46</sup> Sanford, p. 81.

<sup>47</sup> “The School Miss Bonnie Built,” *Time*, Volume 86, No. 3, July 16, 1965, p. 56.

Cone while also wanting to ensure the new campus began with a fast start, would later admit that the decision not to select Cone “was one of the most distressing in his career.”<sup>48</sup> Multiple reasons have been given why Cone was passed over, ranging from gender to her lack of an earned doctorate. When Colvard was selected in January 1966, he offered Cone a vice chancellorship position but she declined. Several of Cone’s closest friends believed she was crushed by the decision but, as one who always put the University above her personal feelings, she never evinced any public show of disappointment. The love she carried for the school ultimately superseded personal vanity as she eventually accepted Colvard’s offer, becoming the Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs and Community Relations, holding that post until her official retirement in 1973.

By the time she retired, Cone was already living across the street from the University in the College Downs neighborhood. Previously she lived in an apartment in Charlotte’s Myers Park neighborhood. When Charlotte College was located at Central High School, this seemed a prudent location. However, the move to the permanent campus in 1961 substantially increased her commute. Coupled with characteristically long work-days, it soon became clear that she needed to find a better living arrangement. Dr. Loy Witherspoon and Librarian James D. Ramer proposed a solution to her dilemma by encouraging “Miss Cone to buy a piece of property out where ours is to build her home.”<sup>49</sup> Witherspoon and Ramer lived in College Downs, a suburban post-World War II neighborhood designed by the John Crosland Company. Witherspoon noted that the neighborhood became a community of faculty, pointing out that

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<sup>48</sup> Sanford, p. 89.

<sup>49</sup> Christina Wright, *Interview with Loy Witherspoon*, June 3, 2010.

“at one time, there were eight or ten (faculty members) on my street (Sandburg Avenue).<sup>50</sup>

Taking Witherspoon and Ramer’s advice, Cone purchased a lot on the corner of Sandburg and Millay Avenues from Johnie H. and Jane C. Jones in September of 1966.<sup>51</sup> Crosland’s residential neighborhoods featured typical standardized design styles based on ranch or split-level homes, situated on large lots. The company, however, deviated slightly from that pattern when designing College Downs. According to Witherspoon both he and Ramer were not sold on the standardized designs Crosland offered. They preferred to design their own homes instead. While this was not something Crosland had done before, the company acquiesced to Witherspoon and Ramer’s request, allowing them to draw up architectural plans -- with the caveat that Crosland develop the working plans.<sup>52</sup> With that precedent established the next question became who would design Cone’s. Prominent Charlotte architect A.G. O’Dell (1913 - 1988) offered his services but as he was already working multiple projects, including the design of Charlotte College/UNC Charlotte, it seemed prudent to not add to his workload. With that in mind, Cone chose William M. (Murray) Whisnant (1932 - ) of the architectural firm Wheatley Whisnant to design her home.

Murray Whisnant was born and raised in Charlotte, graduating from Central High School in 1950. He attended North Carolina State University’s School of Design, led by Henry L. Kamphoefner, a champion of the Modernist design. Modernism as a design concept was introduced to North Carolina in the 1930’s through the experimental Black Mountain College located near Asheville. Kamphoefner’s appointment as dean of the School of Design in 1948

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<sup>50</sup> Christina Wright, *Interview with Loy Witherspoon*, June 3, 2010.

<sup>51</sup> Mecklenburg County Real Estate Conveyances, Book 2783, Page 441, September 1, 1966.

<sup>52</sup> Christina Wright, *Interview with Loy Witherspoon*, June 3, 2010.



further heralded a transformation of the architecture school at North Carolina State University – from one of relative obscurity – to one of the leading proponents of Modernism in the rapidly changing postwar south. Whisnant studied under Kamphoefner and noted residential architect George Matsumoto, but credits faculty member Eduardo Fernando Catalano as his primary influence. In addition to the regular faculty, Kamphoefner also hosted visiting architects such as Frank Lloyd Wright, Mies Van der Rohe, Richard Neutra, and Buckminster Fuller. Whisnant was one of ten students chosen to study with Fuller, recalling how he “was inspired by the famous designer.”<sup>53</sup> Known colloquially by the expression “form follows function” Modernism held several principles with “an emphasis on function and utility, a concern with structure, the use of modern materials and technology, and interests in abstract beauty, sculptural form, and symbolism.”<sup>54</sup> As a form of architectural design, Modernism rejected the concepts of wealth, status, and elitism that had driven designs of the past. Modernist architects, ergo, strove to “convey the notion that the hope of mankind lay in the reconsideration of traditional values and the incorporation of innovative concepts of thought and action.”

After graduating in 1956, Whisnant worked for several architectural firms before partnering with Charles Wheatley in 1960. Under the Wheatley Whisnant letterhead, some of the firm’s notable designs included Mann and Scott Halls on the campus of North Carolina State University, and the Van Hecke-Wettach Building at the University of North Carolina School of

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<sup>53</sup> Stewart Gray, “Survey and Research Report on the Cohen-Fumero House,” *Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission*, <http://landmarkscommission.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Survey-and-Research-on-the-Cohen-Fumero-House.pdf>.

<sup>54</sup> Sherry Joines Wyatt & Sarah Woodard, “Post World War Two Survey of Charlotte-Mecklenburg,” *Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission*, <http://www.cmhpf.org/Surveys/postww2survey.htm>.

Law. Closer to home, the Rowe Arts Building at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte<sup>55</sup> and Carmel Presbyterian Church were also Whisnant Wheatley designs. After starting his own firm in 1978, Whisnant continued bringing innovative designs to Charlotte through projects such as the Mecklenburg County Office Building, Providence Medical Center, the American Red Cross Building and Blood Center, the offices of Pfister Chemicals, and the McDonald's Restaurant in the Overstreet Mall complex.<sup>56</sup> In addition to architecture, Whisnant also designed "signage, logos, T-shirts, client birthday cards, furniture and bumper stickers," noting tongue-in-cheek that "some of our best work" was done "on restaurant napkins."<sup>57</sup>

That Whisnant's architectural work was confined primarily to institutional and commercial design is due to the fact that Modernism was never able to gain a secure foothold in Charlotte's residential housing market. He attributed this to a desire for homes built in a "reminiscent architecture," incorporating designs that are "nostalgic, and going back to what they (the homebuyer) imagined things used to be."<sup>58</sup> He estimated that, over the course of his career he designed between "forty or fifty" houses but noted that "not all of those are worth getting excited about" because most of those clients were not seeking him out for modernist design.<sup>59</sup> However there were exceptions, notably Herb Cohen and Jose Fumero. Close friends of Whisnant, they retained his services in 1960 for the design of their home. Giving few

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<sup>55</sup> "Rowe Gallery Opens Big," *Carolina Journal*, Volume 7, No. 3, September 20, 1971, p. 1.

<sup>56</sup> "The Kamphoefner Prize," Murray Whisnant Papers, MC 00564, Special Collections Research Center, North Carolina State University Libraries, Raleigh, NC.

<sup>57</sup> "The Kamphoefner Prize," Murray Whisnant Papers, MC 00564, Special Collections Research Center, North Carolina State University Libraries, Raleigh, NC.

<sup>58</sup> William Jeffers, *Interview with Murray Whisnant*, April 19, 2018.

<sup>59</sup> Stewart Gray, "Survey and Research Report on the Cohen-Fumero House," *Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission*, <http://landmarkscommission.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Survey-and-Research-on-the-Cohen-Fumero-House.pdf>.

restrictions in how it was designed, other than wanting it “as far out as possible,” Cohen and Fumero did have specific needs in what they needed in a house: space for entertaining guests and displaying art and a private, yet connected space for Fumero’s parents to reside.”<sup>60</sup>

Whisnant was able to meet these needs by designing the home around the concept of “rationality and logic,” utilizing a central core containing the kitchen, bathrooms, and air conditioning unit, which afforded ample space for entertaining guests and displaying art.<sup>61</sup>

When completed in 1961, the Cohen-Fumero House became one of the focal points of Charlotte’s emerging artistic community and, as one of the city’s earliest surviving examples of Modernism in residential architecture, it was designated a local historic landmark in 2013.<sup>62</sup>

Seven years later, Whisnant was working on the design of Cone’s home in College Downs. The property itself presented no particular challenge to Whisnant, recalling that “it had a little bit of a slope and I don’t think there were too many trees we had to deal with or design around.”<sup>63</sup> A *Charlotte Observer* article showcasing her home in 1969 pointed out that most of the property’s natural wilderness was preserved by Cone who had “the trees hand cut before building began.”<sup>64</sup> Cognizant of the fact that her home needed to be both economical as well as welcoming, Whisnant utilized a basic toadstool design with the main floor extending over a

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<sup>60</sup> Stewart Gray, “Survey and Research Report on the Cohen-Fumero House,” *Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission*, <http://landmarkscommission.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Survey-and-Research-on-the-Cohen-Fumero-House.pdf>.

<sup>61</sup> Stewart Gray, “Survey and Research Report on the Cohen-Fumero House,” *Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission*, <http://landmarkscommission.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Survey-and-Research-on-the-Cohen-Fumero-House.pdf>.

<sup>62</sup> Stewart Gray, “Survey and Research Report on the Cohen-Fumero House,” *Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission*, <http://landmarkscommission.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Survey-and-Research-on-the-Cohen-Fumero-House.pdf>.

<sup>63</sup> Whisnant Interview.

<sup>64</sup> Barbara Ingold, “Bonnie Cone Built House In The Woods,” *Charlotte Observer*, June 22, 1969, p. 1E.

brick base. Said Whisnant, “I remember that I was very interested in creating a courtyard. That was my main focus.”<sup>65</sup> The courtyard, adjacent to Cone’s bedroom, was accessible via sliding glass doors and enclosed with flowers and shrubs. Whisnant also added a second entrance via the breakfast room, feeling that it was important the kitchen open up into the courtyard as well.<sup>66</sup> However, one of the features that made it special for Cone was that the courtyard offered privacy that a backyard could not always guarantee. But she also wanted “the feeling of being out-of-doors.”<sup>67</sup> Whisnant responded accordingly with full-length windows in the living room and an open back wall with a sliding glass door to a patio deck off the dining room, providing her complete views of her backyard.<sup>68</sup> In his original design the roofline was to extend over the patio deck but, due to budgetary concerns Whisnant shortened it to save money – an end result that pleased Cone immensely. “I’m so glad we did that,” she recalled, “because I love to look at the moon and stars at night, and it would have been hard to crane your neck to see them if the deck had been covered.”<sup>69</sup> Contrary to rumor, Whisnant did not incorporate mathematical motifs into the design as an homage to Cone’s educational background. “Were I doing that house today,” stated Whisnant, “I’d probably focus more on the Fibonacci Numbers and the golden section,” but back then, “I can’t claim that.”<sup>70</sup> He did, however, make one change to his original plan. “At some point,” he notes, “it was decided

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<sup>65</sup> Whisnant Interview.

<sup>66</sup> Whisnant Interview.

<sup>67</sup> Ingold, p. 1E.

<sup>68</sup> Ingold, p. 1E.

<sup>69</sup> Ingold, p. 1E.

<sup>70</sup> Whisnant Interview.

there was enough slope to add a lower level.” Cone used the lower level as an apartment, leasing it out to students as needed.<sup>71</sup>

When accepting the directorship of CCUNC in August 1947, Elmer Garinger made the following statement: “we are fortunate in getting Miss Cone for this position, she is popular among both parents and students and is a thoroughly qualified teacher. In fact one of the professors at Duke University says that she is the best woman teacher in North Carolina.”<sup>72</sup> In this instance it is safe to argue that Dr. Garinger severely understated how fortunate Charlotte, and this region of North Carolina were, to have her take the job. There is no doubt Cone was an excellent teacher; countless stories can attest to that. What made her even more unique was how she transcended teaching to become an inspiring educational leader -- one whose energy, tenacity, resourcefulness, and vision ultimately led to the establishment of the first publicly supported institution of higher education in Charlotte. “She excelled at seeing things others could not see. She saw a magnificent campus rising from these hills,” said alumnus and James Babb, one of the many students – often referred to as “Bonnie’s Boys – who were mentored by Cone over the years.<sup>73</sup> Even after retiring in 1973, Cone was still an active presence when it came to promoting UNC Charlotte – whether working behind the scenes on behalf of the university, or by being a constant presence at university gatherings, sporting events, and commencements. Upon her death in March 2003, she was interred on campus in

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<sup>71</sup> Whisnant Interview.

<sup>72</sup> J.G.B. (Jimmy Bolton), “Miss Cone Heads College Center – Succeeds Bernard at CCUNC,” *The C.C.U.N.C. News*, Volume 1, No. 1, October 1, 1947, p.1

<sup>73</sup> Gina Carroll Howard, “UNC Charlotte: Bonnie Cone’s Promise Fulfilled,” *UNC Charlotte*, Volume 11, No. 1, Summer 2003, p. 14.

Van Landingham Glen – a singular honor accorded only to her by the General Assembly. There amongst the rhododendrons, she spends eternity keeping watch over the campus she loved, as her spirit continues to drive its growth.