

# Single Sisters House

**It's not unusual for alumnae to pop up from time to time at their alma mater. Usually, however, they are still living.**

With a major renovation underway, The Single Sisters House, located on the grounds of Winston-Salem's historic Salem Academy and College, is reported to have its fair share of both spirited types of alumnae roaming the halls.

In recent years, The Single Sisters House has been full of activity. Its rooms have been used as dorm and lounge rooms. A more fascinating use for this 222-year-old brick structure is, of course, what it was originally designed for: the residence of single women in the Moravian township of Salem.

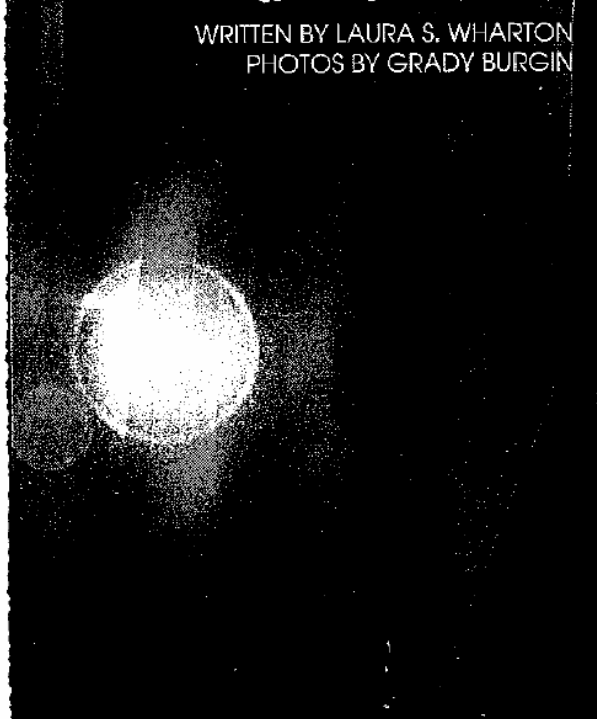
The Single Sisters ran successful enterprises in this "choir house." (While the Sisters may have sung together, in Moravian culture, a choir was a communal group determined by gender, age and marital status.) At a time when few women continued their education beyond primary school, the Sisters began North Carolina's long tradition of women's education in the heart of what is now known as Salem Academy and College.

Through the decades, the Single Sisters of Salem passed away, but their spirits are alive and well in the halls of their home, now being exactly resurrected by renovation specialists, Frank L. Blum Construction Company.

The oldest building on any campus in the state, the Single Sisters House presents a number of challenges to the Triad-based construction company. Besides bringing the centuries-old, three-story structure up to modern-day code, the project team must pay close attention to the requirements of the campus to retain as much historical integrity as possible. This means salvaging and reusing brick, roofing tiles (similar tiles can be found throughout Old Salem), protecting 18th century window

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PHOTOS BY GRADY BURGIN



**While touring the circa-1785 building, Project Manager Tom Brown encountered what he describes as an orange apparition and what he believes was one of the original inhabitants of the Single Sisters House.**

panes, and removing and restoring early door and window hardware ordered from Europe in 1785.

Yet, Project Manager Tom Brown says none of these is more challenging than working with an extra set of eyes drilling through his back. The Sisters, he thinks, are curious about the goings-on in their beloved home.

Before construction work began and while "the eerie quiet of the lonesome hallways" remained undisturbed, Brown took an explor-

atory venture through the building. "I felt as if I had entered sacred grounds," recounts Brown of his first visit to the building. "Being alone in a 'not alone' space gave me an unexplained calmness."

Not usually one to be found walking around dark corners and upon squeaky planks, Brown found himself looking for something, but not knowing what.

"Around each corner was the possibility of a discovery, and once, it happened," he says.

"I got a brief glimpse of the color orange, flowing long to the floor, like a floor-length dress...a Sister," Brown says. "They knew I was there, pondering the job site, looking for potential problems, or maybe looking for previous occupants."

## Who Were the Single Sisters?

Brave, strong, industrious. These are just a few words that could describe the 12 Moravian women and girls who, in 1766, walked all the way from their homes in Bethlehem, Pa., to the settlement of Bethabara, which had been founded in 1753 just northwest of Salem. Being the first Moravian settlement in the Wachovia tract, Bethabara had the distinction of being a model for later settlements, including Salem (1766), Bethania (1759), Friedburg (1773), Hope (1776) and Friedland (1780).

The women and young girls subsequently relocated to the growing settlement of Salem in 1772, where they set up temporary quarters in the Gemeinhaus (congregation house). One of their members, Sister Elisabeth Oesterlein, was selected as the first teacher of young Moravian girls from the settlement and from the surrounding area. Classes included reading, writing, sewing and knitting. Math lessons were added when another teacher, Sister Catharine Sehner, moved to Salem in 1780. As the curriculum and reputation for their teaching ability grew, the Single Sisters noticed their temporary quarters were cramped. Soon, the Sisters asked for a building of their own.

## A Room of One's Own.

Like the Single Brothers who had a "house" of their own from which to operate businesses, the Single Sisters argued that they, too, operated successful enterprises for the community by making and selling gloves, spinning, weav-

ing and working for families within the Moravian community. It was the fall of 1783 when the church elders agreed the Sisters should have their own choir house.

Plans began in earnest to construct a building with materials being purchased and put aside for its construction. Certainly, the Sisters were devastated to learn those very same materials were needed to reconstruct the community's tavern that furiously burned just a few months later. As a money-making enterprise, this tavern was an important structure to the Moravians.

It took in excess of another year before the Single Sisters, and the rest of the settlement, could celebrate the laying of the cornerstone of the Single Sisters house on March 31, 1785. After a little more than a year on April 5, 1786, they once again celebrated as the 32 women moved into their new home.

## School Continues to Grow.

In response to repeated requests from throughout the region, the Moravians decided to open their school doors to girls outside their own community. Boarders were plentiful by the early 1800s, their room and board provided by the Single Sisters. Their success was evident through their community support—they more than once provided financial assistance to bail the Brothers out of debt.

Soon, the Sisters were supporting causes beyond the confines of the Moravian community, including funding the fledgling University of North Carolina. Eventually, the Moravian Church deeded the building to Salem Academy and College in 1910, and it was used as a dormitory until 1991.

Because of its history, the building was the address to have on campus well into the 20th century, according to Gwynne Taylor, historic



preservationist and alumna of Salem College. "The Sisters House was a unique place to live with a beautiful view of Salem Square," Taylor says. "But, dormitory use with its requisite plumbing almost ruined the building."

Today, the building is surrounded, not by students, but by scaffolding. The renovations are well underway, and the deadline to open the project to the public is late-April 2007, close to the April 5th anniversary of its first dedication in 1786.

Next year, the building will house an interpretive museum about the Sisters and their legacy of present-day Salem Academy and College, plus information about the many secrets this renovation has uncovered.

## Secrets & History Resurrected.

"It's exciting to see what we're pulling out of the dirt," explains Superintendent Mark Gill, whose fascination for and vision of the project equals Brown's. "We don't have a full-blown excavation of the site, but when we find things, we celebrate."

So far in the renovation, the following has been uncovered:

The circular, limestone datestone, which once graced the outside gable of the building, can now only be seen if one is to peek into the attic. Smaller replicas of this datestone can

be seen hanging around the necks of alumnae and students, and there is talk about allowing present-day students to make and sell them for profit, just as their predecessors did;

Nails made of iron forged in the village still hold vast parts of the building together; many will be on display in the museum;

Shards of pottery were discovered under the walkway's foundation;

No hints, though, have revealed where the original cornerstone was laid;

The renovation is revealing a wealth of examples in construction techniques from more than 200 years ago. Moravians used the materials they had at hand. What's most surprising, says Brown, is that the building is still standing. The attic timbers were so rotten they no longer met the joists and bore little resemblance to their former selves.

Brown surmises that the building wouldn't last another generation, given its current condition. Shockingly, much of the foundation was discovered to be held together only by what is believed to be mud and horse hair. These crumbling foundations still support the massive weight of the structure, but must be stabilized before any more damage occurs, Brown says. But, most immediate is to get the roof back in place and stop water from seeping into every crevice of the building.

Talking through the project's complexity, Brown notes more areas that need to be addressed in specific step-by-step fashion. Yet, he and his team are determined to meet the April 2007 deadline, regardless of the challenges they face. Neither rain, nor snow, nor ghosts shall deter them.

Brown is convinced the Sisters House is a spirited building. On one visit he heard loud noises, which he describes as a chain being dragged across the second floor planks. "I was near the south stairway and briefly thought, 'this is not the place to be.'"

But, Brown ventured up the stairs in search of the origin of the sound, thinking to himself "there's no way that was a chain. No one was in the building but me."

To Brown's disappointment (or relief), he found no one. "No chain. Not even markings on the dusty floor," he says.

"After having a moment to think about my predicament, I thought it wise to cut short my visit to the Sisters House and exited out the rear door, to the familiar view of the surrounding campus." ☺

**To learn more about Salem Academy and College, visit [www.Salem.edu](http://www.Salem.edu). To tour Old Salem, call Jane Carmichael at 336-917-5552.**

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