

PRESIDENT'S HOUSE ON CARR'S HILL

The description of the house in the 3 October issue of *College Topics* attempts to establish the design's dual place in the landscape as stately yet modest: "in the midst of a grove of mighty oaks...the site commands a view in all directions...with the white dome of the Rotunda towering above all the trees...Doric columns support the roof of a spacious porch.... The interior decorations will be simple and unpretentious, and artistic, giving the impression of sincerity and stateliness and at the same time of simplicity."²⁷ By contrast, a letter to the editor published in the 27 October 1906 issue of *College Topics* moves swiftly from the words "I heartily congratulate the President as well as the faculty for providing a home for the 'Presidents of this old and noble institution'" to saying the decisions were made too hastily and criticizing the house as "the most miserable thing that any human being can imagine". It compares the choice of sites to an outdated practice "to develop hills as castles for feudal lords, and especially when we have no suitable places for coming great buildings of this University." By November 1906, *College Topics* had run so many negative letters about the proposed house that the editors of the paper felt the need to make their own investigation of the reasons the site and design had been chosen, and concluded that most of the criticism was unfounded.

In 1908, many of the interior details were worked out by the Aldermans, Dr. Lambeth, the staff of McKim, Mead & White, and a handful of designers at companies that produced fixtures and furnishings. By 20 March 1909, *College Topics* could announce that the house "has practically been completed and is about ready for occupancy.... It is not definitely known when Dr. and Mrs. Alderman will take possession." The Aldermans "took possession" of the house shortly after that, apparently without ceremony or anything that might generate too much publicity.

The mixed reviews that the President's House drew from the community continued forward, but as a trickle of more-moderately tempered comments. A recent example is the argument made ninety years after the house was finished by Stanford White's great granddaughter, Suzannah Lessard, about White's work at the university in general. In her book on White, *The Architect of Desire: Beauty and Danger in the Stanford White Family* (New York: The Dial Press, 1996), Lessard says: "Both Jefferson and Stanford were attracted to the classical vocabulary but for opposed reasons: Jefferson for the democratic associations of that vocabulary (there is an implicit modesty in his work) and Stanford for the imperial ones."²⁸ In a 1997 review of *The Architect of Desire*, Ruth Coniff summarizes Lessard's criticism of White's work at UVA with the following paraphrase: "a set of big neoclassical buildings that dominate the campus and cut off the view of the Blue Ridge Mountains—once the focal point of the campus."²⁹ Lessard saw White's UVA work as a turning point in American architectural history, illustrating "the difference between imperial and democratic neoclassicism. In the imperial vision there is no preexisting landscape, no outside power, no mystical cosmos. There is no encompassing mystery and there is consequently no humility."³⁰ However, by contrast to