Historic buildings add character to University

By Robert Weisler

Historic buildings are enduring objects, and the stories they tell, the architectural designs and historic elements they contain, link our world with an era since gone by.

The Syracuse University campus is blessed with many such buildings that enhance the character of the University by blending amidst the newer buildings while retaining their own distinction.

Some of these buildings are now owned by the Greek societies, and many are listed in the National Register of Historic Places. A petition is pending in Washington to have the campus recognized as a national historic landmark.

The Delta Delta Delta house, on the corner of Walnut Place and Marshall Street, is a prominent structure of the park area. Probably the first thing one notices about this house is its 18-foot classical columns on the front porch.

The house was built in 1903 as a fraternity house, and a local attorney but was purchased by the sisters in 1922. In 1940, the columns were added and the woodwork around the front windows and doorway were redone to make it look more like a Greek house, said Toddie Harrison, a sister who lived in the house from 1952-54.

"The porch with the classical columns is a very good addition," said Mary Ann Smith, an SU architecture professor. "Because they give the house its classical feeling."

A hitching post remains in front of the house, reminiscent of the days of the stagecoach.

During the late 1960s, the house received a special visitor when General John "Black Jack" Pershing, American war hero and commander in chief of American troops in Europe during World War I, dropped in to visit his daughter, said Gloria Koth, who lived in the house during the early 1960s.

Wilkinson mansion

Across the park and down the street, at 703 Walnut Ave., is a mansion built in 1906 by steel entrepreneur Horace Wilkinson. This house, now home to 28 Phi Delta Theta brothers, was designed to resemble a French Chateau.

It features a steeply-pitched tile roof with gables and dormers, in addition to walls of thick-inch stone sandstone underneath a limestone exterior.

The tile roof is an unusual feature of homes in the Syracuse area, Smith said, because it is unusual up until the 1890s of roofing and framing. "It is a beautiful material," she said, "but it is usually not used where a slate is as cold as here."

The interior features extensive woodwork. The dining room is panelled in solid mahogany, the library in cherry and cherry, and the living room, hallway and elaborately carved staircase in walnut. In addition, there are nine fireplaces.

Wilkinson sent his builders to Scotland, in May 1896, so that they could exactly reproduce the "moot hall," which features carved columns, curved facades, a fireplace and walls of intricately-designed gold, blue and red woodwork, according to the Onondaga Historical Society.

The ornate room is designed in the Arabic tradition, and Wilkinson supposedly used it as a music room, and to entertain guests, said Steve Porcei, president of the fraternity.

One of Wilkinson's guests in 1915 was Theodore Roosevelt, who stayed in the house for a month while he successfully defended himself in a libel suit with an Albany publisher, according to the Historical Society.

Alpha Chi Omega

Next door to this house, on the corner of Walnut Avenue and East Adams Street, is a massive tan Roman brick house built in 1906.

Purchased in 1940 by the Alpha Chi Omega sorority, this house is described by its large semi-circular front porch, topped with a balcony and bracketed over the side by two-story bay windows, each with an enclosed stained glass window in its upper half. These windows offer sweeping views of the park from many locations throughout the house.

The spacious main hallway includes a marble fireplace with a intricately carved mantel and fireplace, as well as a case flanked on either side by a large case flanked on either side by Greek columns. The 19th century inlaid case includes spindles carved in four different designs.

Another marble fireplace, with a solid mahogany mantel, wall paneling and breakpoints and a bay window adorn the dining room.

In the living room, the frames of the bay windows, high ceiling beams, parts of the walls and the carved fireplace - one of six in the house - are also solid mahogany.

The locations of both these houses, atop the hill overlooking the park, influenced their design, Smith said. The uniqueness of their size is increased by their elevation, and the large area surrounding them allowed them to be built asymmetrically and with numerous projections, she said.

The Walnut Park area also includes two English Tudor Revival homes, characterized by their prominent gables and half-timbering, or exterior woodwork which gives these homes their gingerbread house appearance.

Delta Gamma

The Delta Gamma sorority house, on the corner of Walnut Avenue and Marshall Street, was built in 1907 and acquired by the sorority in 1922. The house has an asymmetrical facade and a two-story bay window, with a balcony on top.

The southern wing was added in 1941. However, it was almost not constructed because of World War II.

Racetrack betting was restricted during the war years as the nation's economy focused on wartime production, said Marion Brenneman, a sister in the house from 1924-28. A limit was imposed by the government on the amount that could be spent on horse construction, she said, and banks were reluctant to lend money.

The architect was able to arrange a loan from a Cortland bank after being refused in Syracuse, and the wing was constructed.

The sisters almost blocked the project because of their sentimental attachment to a magnolia tree that needed to be removed during construction, she said.

The anchor on the lawn in front of the house is the symbol of the sorority and was adopted by the three original Delta Gamma sisters in Mississippi in 1873, she said.

Unlike many of the Greek houses, the Kappa Alpha Theta sorority house at 306 Walnut Place was built as a sorority house, not a personal residence. It was designed by J. Marjorie Wright, an alumna of the University, which is unusual since there was so few women architects during the 1960s, said Lil O'Rourke, who lived in the house from 1973 to 1977.

This perfectly symmetrical Tudor house was built in 1928 and features a slated gable roof and bay windows on either side of the double French glass doors.

The windows are composed of many small panes of glass, which tend to make the window blend into the wall better, Smith said.

The double gable points in the front of the house are incorporated into the structure of the house so that the ceilings slant in the upstairs rooms. This contrasts with some houses of this style, which have gable points in the exterior design, Smith said.

The entire Walnut Park area was originally owned by George Comstock, a local banker. In 1872, he deeded the park to the city with an agreement that it be "maintained as a public park," according to the Student Government proposal submitted to Albany in 1983.

Comstock retained ownership of the surrounding property and subsequently sold it in individual parcels. According to the proposal, Comstock set a minimum on the amount that landowners could spend on the construction of a house.

An influx into the area of skilled craftspeople from Europe around the turn of the century may have contributed significantly to the intricate and remarkable design work incorporated into these buildings, Harrison said.

According to the Historical Society, the building of these homes in the early years of this century may be viewed as an indication of the wealth and optimism prevalent in our nation during the early 20th century.

Over the years, thousands of students have lived, partied and studied in these houses. The faces change, but the houses remain, undisturbed by the surrounding hustle and bustle.