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Blandwood's Old New Neighbor



Blandwood Mansion, located on West Washington Street in downtown Greensboro, will soon get an old house as a new neighbor.

The old house (image, above) is owned by the Zenke family, long-time supporters of the restoration of Blandwood Mansion as a period museum and civic landmark. Henry and Virginia Zenke were pivotal in the 1960s in researching the history of the mansion, securing furnishings, and overseeing the restoration campaign.

With the pending expansion of the Guilford County jail adjacent to the Zenke's property along Blandwood Avenue, the family decided to reorient their downtown holdings to West Washington Street through a land-swap with the county. This requires that the family relocate their historic home from 224 Blandwood Avenue where it has been situated for since the 1920s.

The history of the Zenke home is complex. The rear wing is thought to be the oldest portion of the house, built as a residence for minister Eli Carruthers at the corner of Eugene and Market streets. By 1845 the house was the residence of merchant Washington Jefferson McConnell, who transformed the earlier residence to grander size with symmetrical wing today recognized as the home's front facade. Later, the house was owned by Julius and Emma Morehead Gray, later residents of Blandwood.

With the transformation of Greensboro from a village to a small city, the house was relocated to a new site a block south on Eugene Street around 1905. In the 1920s, the home was again relocated, this time to Blandwood Avenue to make way for the local headquarters for Southern Bell.

Henry and Virginia Zenke acquired the home in 1951. The historic building had suffered from years of neglect and use as a boarding house. Under the design prowess of the Zenke duo, the home took on its present Regency Revival appearance; including a new front door, modified eaves, and decorative metalwork. The renovations earned the house a national spotlight on the cover of *House Beautiful* magazine in 1964.

Once again, the house is scheduled for relocation in the name of progress. Workers are currently clearing land on West Washington Street across from Blandwood Mansion for the structure's new foundation, and steel beams will soon be inserted through the basement on which to carry the building to the new site. The move will carry the home only a few hundred feet south of its current location.

In the end, Washington Street's reputation as an avenue of history will be solidified. Already, the Southern Railway Depot, the Biltmore Hotel, and Blandwood Mansion line the street. The Zenke house will add another landmark address. In a time when property owners often aspire to turn a fast buck through a quick sale of land, the Zenke family is refreshingly dedicated to the preservation of their historic home. In addition to relocating the structure in order to preserve it, the family seeks designation through listing on the National Register of Historic Places, as well as the Guilford County Landmark Program. Restoration of the home on its new foundation will likely continue through 2009.

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