

61 Summit Street: The History of a Home

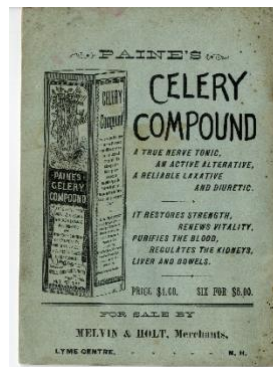
By Jesse Keel and Evan Haley

The Hill Section of Burlington is crowded with beautiful homes built at the turn of the 19th century by Burlington's most prominent citizens. 61 Summit Street is the crown jewel of this eclectic collection. Built in 1892 by a wealthy Burlington business man, Edward Wells, it stands today as a portal to over 126 years of local history.

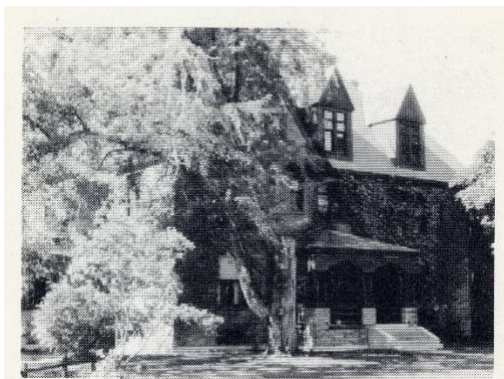


As interns shifting through this history, we were faced with a unique set of challenges that were completely unexpected. Uncovering the lives of the people who built the house was our first goal and, as it turned out, our hardest. It took almost a month to even find a picture of Edward Wells, which we finally discovered in a book of prominent Vermont men from the era. We never found pictures of Edgar Allen Poe Newcomb, the architect of the house, or Alfred Fisher, the contractor. In the search for information about their lives, we discovered that Alfred Fisher served in the Civil War and that Newcomb died in Hawaii and enjoyed writing operas.

What was not a struggle was uncovering information about Wells, Richardson and Company, the patent medicine business through which Mr. Wells made his fortune. The company not only produced patent medicine like Paine's Celery Compound, an internationally dispersed cure-all, but also butter color, diamond dyes, and lactated food. Part of their business model involved diverse and aggressive advertisements. UVM's Special Collections served as our primary resource for the information and visuals we were searching for and that was doubly true for their collection of Wells, Richardson and Co. adverts.



After the Wells family left the house, it was purchased by a local fraternity, Delta Psi. The Fraternity was founded in 1850 by J.E. Goodrich and in 1924, when they purchase the house, they dedicated it to him. In this case, we were interested to learn that they hired James Sykes, the son-in-law of Edward Wells, to do the redecoration of the house. While Special Collections holds a great number of files pertaining to Delta Psi from photos to rush pamphlets and a few money ledgers, we spent a



lot of time tracking the brothers and the house through their yearbook pages in *Ariel*. The pictures they often included of their house reflected the physical changes the house went through and the events the brothers hosted around and inside the house. At the same time, the photos truly demonstrated the everlasting nature of the property that stood true through the ages, through war, through hard use by college men, through everything.

However, without a national organization to fall back on, Delta Psi's numbers slowly declined from once being the largest UVM fraternity to a defunct one. Of course, 61 Summit remained a beautiful house ready for a new chapter and thankfully the UVM Alumni Association saw that possibility, as well. Not only were able to raise the money needed for the enormous restoration all through private donation, but they then took that money began a careful and conscious restoration of the historic home. In this way, they were able to restore 61 Summit Street to preserve its historical features such as the wood carved fireplaces and original light fixtures as well as seamlessly update the house to have offices and high-end event spaces.



With much wrangling, we managed to find the direction and scope of this exhibit within the research we spent months on. Eventually the story we wanted to tell became clear. 61 Summit Street is a fixed address with a one-of-a-kind house that, through three transformations, tells a story about what it means to be a home. As it turned out, designing the exhibit was only half the battle. For two history majors, the physical (and mathematical) hanging of the exhibit was a newfound challenge. With the assistance and patience of the staff at both The Fleming Museum and UVM Print and Mail, we were able to slowly but surely, piece by piece, hang the images.



It was satisfying to see the sketches and ideas we held in our mind take shape on the wall. Of course, it didn't look exactly how we pictured it. For example, The Vermont State Almanac published by Wells, Richardson and Company was originally supposed to be hung on the first wall as part our explanation of Victorian Vermont. However, it fit the spacing and color themes of the wall about Wells, Richardson and Company.

The text was a whole other story. It is hard to condense over 100 years of history into a dozen short paragraphs that are both self-explanatory, interesting, and educational. Next to hanging the exhibit crafting the text to fully express our ideas without covering the walls in text, was our biggest challenge. Perhaps especially because it can feel like a task that never fully seems completed. In the end, we reduced our words to the most critical and interesting facts and hoped that the exhibit might find a way to fill in the gaps and speak for itself. Though the wall text still is about 3000 words all together.

In a space that was used over 100 years ago as a parlor to entertain guests, we successfully captured a series of snapshots that give insight into the diverse history of this house, a house that went from a home for a family, to a home for a fraternity, to finally a home for alumni and perhaps even a home for us.