

Student Housing in Burlington, Vermont

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Introduction

Burlington, Vermont is nestled between Lake Champlain on the east and the Green Mountain on the west. It is the largest and most populated city in the state with nearly 45,000 residents living within the 10.3 square miles of the city limits. Although small the city is home to two major higher education institutions. Both the University of Vermont and Champlain College now occupy the majority of real estate on the historic Hill Section of the city. With a combined student body totaling nearly 15,000, the students comprise a third of the total population of the city. The University of Vermont can house about 5,800 of its students and the city of Burlington is left to carry the burden of housing the remainder. Given the recent influxes of residents to Burlington and the growing size of both UVM and Champlain College, there is a subsequent and ever-growing disparity between the population numbers and the available housing.¹

If one has spent any time on the University campus, they have no doubt heard an antidote regarding the struggles of finding adequate housing on campus or in the city. This has been the case for decades in Burlington and students are not hesitant to speak out about their struggles. In the 1983 edition of the UVM yearbook Sophie Chafee writes about these issues stating, “John Cuman lives on a friend’s couch. Seven other people live in the house, and one is currently dwelling in a tent in the backyard.” Living conditions such as these make one question if the university has a responsibility to provide access to affordable housing for its students. This tension between students, the colleges, and the town officials has only continued to grow. Just this year the University is making plans to expand onto the Trinity Campus building more housing options for its students.²

¹ "Burlington, Vermont Population 2022." Burlington, Vermont Population 2022 (Demographics, Maps, Graphs). <https://worldpopulationreview.com/us-cities/burlington-vt-population>.

² Lamdin, Courtney. 2022. Gowntown Development: UVM Wants to Build Dorms on Its Trinity Campus. Would That Ease Burlington’s Housing Crisis? May 25. Accessed October 20, 2022. <https://www.sevendaysvt.com/vermont/gowntown-development-uvm-wants-to-build-dorms-on-its-trinity-campus-would-that-ease-burlingtons-housing-crisis/Content?oid=35647640>.

University of Vermont Housing

As it stands today the University houses more than 5,800 students on four different campuses in nine residential complexes.³ The campuses, Athletic, Central, North and Redstone, are dispersed throughout the eastern portion of the city, their locations and architectural styles create a visual timeline of the university's expansion and its need to house the growing student body. Today, freshmen and sophomores must live on campus in one of those dorms and their upperclassmen live off campus unless granted special permission. There was never a time when the majority of students lived on the campus. A glance through the old yearbooks will show the addresses of students, many listed with off campus housing.

Burlington and UVM developed concurrently throughout the years feeding off each other as they grew in both geographic size and population. The students benefit the local economy in their spending habits at local stores and restaurants but also in the real estate market providing local landlords with consistent income. In recent years with the increase in population the housing market has become flooded with buyers. The increase in demand by the students and other residents of the city has only been met with increased rental prices and little in increased available housing. The burden of housing the students has fallen on the city rather than the University.

According to the 1886 edition of the University yearbook the cost of living on campus for the academic year was between \$16.25 to \$35 depending on the housing type. If those numbers are adjusted for inflation, the purchasing power would be equal to about \$520 to \$1,105 today. 136 years later students are paying anywhere from \$5,870 to \$10,942 for on campus housing.

³ "Halls." Residential Life | The University of Vermont. <https://www.uvm.edu/reslife/halls>.

The cheapest option for on campus living is the “quad” style room which is four students to one room with a common bathroom down the hall.⁴

Old Mill

The first building on the University of Vermont to house students was constructed on the site of the current Old Mill building in 1802. The large rectangular building, designed by John Johnson, was four stories tall with a hipped roof and central bell tower. Located on the University Green overlooking Lake Champlain, the building served many functions as a laboratory, library, museum, chapel, and dormitory with 46 rooms. The building served as a symbol for the University until it burned down in 1824.

The University was quick to rebuild after the loss of their central building. By the next year two buildings stood on the site: the aptly named North College and South College. Again, these structures served multiple functions including housing students. By 1829 another larger Federal style building, Middle College, was erected between North and South College designed by the architect of the original building, John Johnson. The central pavilion of Middle College was capped with a gold dome and, like the bell tower of the original college building it had replaced, it served as the symbol for the center of the University.

⁴ University of Vermont. n.d. “Residential Life.” The University of Vermont. Accessed November 5, 2022. https://www.uvm.edu/reslife/costs_and_fees.



"American Magazine," vol. 3, no. 7 (1835), 273. (UVM Archives)

The three buildings stood independently until 1846 when they were joined into one large building and were given the moniker “The Mill” for its industrial size. The Mill complex remained unchanged until a massive renovation in 1882. With funding from John Purple Howard and the enlistment of architect Jean Jacques Rouseau Randall, the building was modernized and enlarged. The facades were completely altered from their original Federal style to the more popular Gothic style. The ceilings of the buildings were raised, and dormers were added to top floors allowing for the addition of dormitories for the increasing population of students. The golden dome that served to represent the University and had become a staple to the Burlington landscape was removed and replaced with a gothic style steeple tower. The removal of the dome caused much controversy in the community. A writer in the May 18, 1882 edition of the *Burlington Free Press* wrote, “The old College dome is no more. This morning the last vestige of the ancient landmark and surveyor's beacon disappeared. Verily, the glory of the hill has departed.”

In 1918 the building was struck by lightning and damaged once again by fire. Given the increased student housing options on the campus, the University opted to remove the dormitories

from the damaged fourth floor. Thus, ending the building's history as student housing and serving solely academic purposes up to the present.⁵

Converse Hall

The University of Vermont constructed its first solely residential building in 1895: Converse Hall. The dormitory is a rare example of the Chateausque architectural style in the state of Vermont. It was designed by a Philadelphia architectural firm known as the Wilson Brothers.⁶ At the point of construction, the monumental stone building stood isolated atop a hill just east of the Mill building complex. Today, Converse Hall is surrounded by the UVM Medical Center to the north and academic and residential buildings on the remaining sides.

Converse Hall was built in response to the rapid growth in the University in the late 19th century and the resulting boom in construction. Built with funding from John Heman Converse, an alumnus of the University, Converse Hall was one of seventeen buildings constructed on the campus during the expansion phase that began in 1881.⁷ The dormitory features multiple different room arrangements including singles and two-room suites, kitchens, study rooms, common living spaces, and a large gymnasium in the north block. Although the building has since been updated with many modern features the original floor plan remains almost completely unaltered.⁸ This makes the building the oldest continually used dormitory present on the University of Vermont Campus.

⁵ Old Mill UVM History. <https://www.uvm.edu/~campus/oldmill/oldmillhistory.html>.

⁶ United States Department of the Interior, National Register of Historic Places. *Converse Hall at the University of Vermont*. NPS Form 10900, 4.

⁷ Burlington Weekly Free Press. *University of Vermont: A Glance at the Institution's Improvements and Prosperity*, 1895, 5.

⁸ United States Department of the Interior, National Register of Historic Places. *Converse Hall at the University of Vermont*. NPS Form 10900, 7.

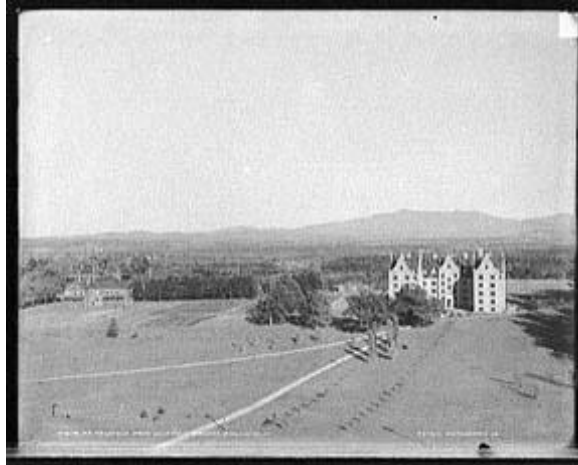


Image of Converse Hall from 1906

Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Detroit Publishing Company Collection.

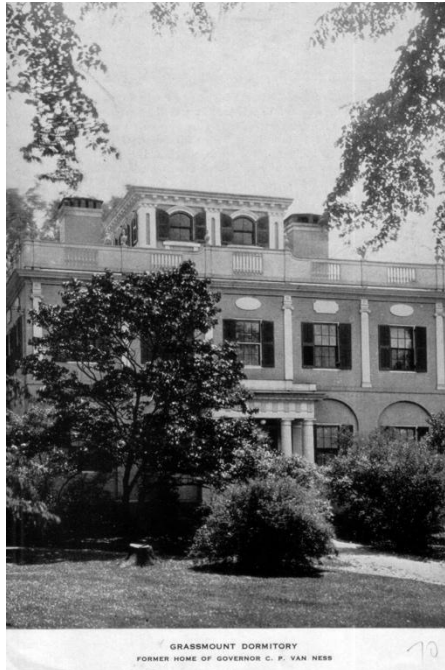
Converted Old Houses

The number of students at the University of Vermont continued to grow faster than the campus could expand to meet the housing needs. A common practice by the university in the early 20th century was to acquire large houses from the surrounding Hill Section and utilize them for student or faculty houses. This practice of adaptive reuse allowed for the quick addition of housing units without construction of high cost and time-consuming new dormitories. Today almost all of these houses no longer serve as dorms but rather as classrooms or office space for various departments of the university.

An example of this temporary repurposing is that of the Grasse Mount House located at 411 Main Street. The brick federal style building was constructed in 1804 by the architect John Johnson. It was originally the home of a local merchant Thaddeus Tuttle. In the 1820s it even housed Cornelius Van Ness, the governor of Vermont. The house was purchased by the University of Vermont in 1895 and served as a women's dormitory for some time.⁹ The Hill

⁹ Peter Carlough, *Bygone Burlington: A Bicentennial Barrage of Battles, Boats, Buildings & Beings* (Burlington, VT, 1976), 140.

Section mansion was able to house about 30 residents at once. Today the building houses the UVM Development and Alumni Relations department.



View of Grasse Mount as a dormitory for students.

Grasse Mount, c. 1910. UVM Special Collections.

Down the street at 461 Main Street is the Allen House. This Greek revival style house was built in 1838 by Henry Boardman. The Allen family were the last private owners of the house. They sold it to the University in 1936. After some modifications, the house was used as a women's dormitory until 1967. For the next six years the building served as a men's dormitory. 1973 marked the last year of the Allen House serving to house students and since has housed various departments and divisions of the University.¹⁰

¹⁰ David J. Blow, *Historic Guide to Burlington Neighborhoods* (Burlington: Chittenden County Historical Society, 1991).

The Wheeler House, located at the corner of South Prospect Street and Main Street on the southeast corner of the University Green, was designed and built in the 1840s as a residence for Reverend John Wheeler, the president of the University of Vermont. Wheeler, for whom the house is still named, hired Ammi Burnham Young, a prominent architect whose designs can be found throughout the University's campus.¹¹ Wheeler House is a Greek revival style building with Corinthian details on the columns that support the roofs of the small porches at the entrances. The western façade features a large porch with views toward Lake Champlain that has been a gathering place for the residents of the building throughout all use periods.



Details of the eastern entrance of Wheeler House.

Photo by Mary Cate Mosher 2022

President Wheeler resided in this house until his death in 1862, but the house remained in the possession of the Wheeler family for nearly eighty more years. Although still under the private ownership of the Wheeler family, in 1920 the house was listed as a dormitory for women

¹¹ United States Department of the Interior, National Register of Historic Places. *University Green Historic District*. NPS Form 10900a (886), 13.

students at the University of Vermont.¹² This is a rare example of university provided housing that was in a privately owned building. Today this practice is utilized in the Redstone Commons Apartments on the Redstone Campus.

The building was only used as a dormitory for two academic years before it became a single-family home, such as President Guy W. Bailey for a period. The house was listed on the real estate market in 1943. After fundraising from alumni and other interested groups the house was eventually able to be acquired by the University of Vermont in 1944. The university used the building for the Wasson Memorial Infirmary.¹³ Since the 1970s the building has served as the home of the History and Historic Preservation Departments of the University.

The Englesby House located at 112 South Williams Street shares a similar story with regards to its brief stint as a woman's dormitory. The red-brick, colonial revival style house was built for the Englesby family in 1914 by architects William Robb Wilder and Henry Keith White.¹⁴ Dr. Englesby died in 1932 and his widow, Maude Englesby, continued to reside in the large house alone until her death in 1956. Having no heirs, the Englesby house was willed to the University of Vermont.¹⁵ The newly acquired building was utilized by the University immediately to house the growing population of women students in attendance. This use period came quickly to an end when the building underwent renovations in 1959 and became the new housing for the University presidents.¹⁶

¹² *The University of Vermont, Catalogue Number 1919-1920* (Burlington, VT: The University of Vermont and State Agricultural College, 1920), 45.

¹³ *A Proposal to Acquire a Site for the Wasson Memorial Infirmary at the University of Vermont*, 1944, Special Collections, University of Vermont Library.

¹⁴ Clark Schoettle, *Deceased Architects and Builders Who Have Worked in Burlington, VT*. Special Collections, University of Vermont Library, 19.

¹⁵ David J. Blow, *Historic Guide to Burlington Neighborhoods*, ed. Lilian Baker Carlisle (Burlington, VT: Chittenden County Historical Society, 1991), 115.

¹⁶ *The University of Vermont and State Agricultural College: Details Supporting Financial Report for the Year Ended June 30, 1959* (Burlington, VT: University of Vermont, 1959), 115.

Greek Life Houses

Along with the large dormitory halls and the converted Hill Section mansions, another type of student housing emerged on the University of Vermont campus in the 1840s: Greek life houses. Fraternity and sorority life has a long-standing history with the University with the founding of the Lambda Iota fraternity in 1836. Greek life has remained an integral part of the campus environment and today eight percent of the student body is involved in the six sororities and nine fraternities present at the University. Many have houses that provide living accommodations for some of their student members.¹⁷ The editors of the 1892 edition of the *Ariel*, the University of Vermont's yearbook write:

Since the days of Abbey and Stewart the University has ranked high in athletics, and on each pleasant day the green and gold may be seen gliding upon 'Lake Champlain's broad expanse.' Where once few buildings now are many: halls, spacious and well equipped, for the different departments; extensive libraries, museums, and laboratories; dormitories for the students and residences for the faculty; and last, but by no means least in significance, are the attractive little buildings that the fraternities call 'our houses.'

Over the years many different Greek life societies have come and gone from the University's student life. Many of them acquired houses throughout the campus and surrounding city land to provide a home-base for its members. These buildings can house about twenty residents and thus provides easy access to housing for students and lessens the strain on housing to the University.

¹⁷ Department of Student Life. n.d. *Fraternity and Sorority Life*. Accessed September 15, 2022. <https://www.uvm.edu/studentlife/fsl>.

Fraternities		Sororities
Phi Sigma Delta	Lambda Iota	Kappa Alpha Theta*
Phi Gamma Delta*	Sigma Phi*	Delta Delta Delta*
Alpha Gamma Rho*	Delta Psi	Pi Beta Phi*
Delta Tau Delta*	Delta Mu	Sigma Gamma
Delta Upsilon*	Phi Delta Theta	Alpha Chi Omega
Phi Mu Delta*	Alpha Tau Omega	Alpha Delta Pi*
Pi Kappa Alpha*	Kappa Sigma*	Kappa Delta
Pi Kappa Phi*	Sigma Nu	Alpha Xi Delta
	Tau Epsilon Phi	Delta Phi Epsilon
	Sigma Alpha Epsilon	Tau Lambda Mu

*active on campus in 2022

List of Fraternity and Sorority Organizations over the years at UVM.

The first Greek life organization to establish a house on campus was Lambda Iota. The society was formed in protest to the smoking ban on the university campus in 1836. The organization was aptly named Phyllos Kapnon meaning “lovers of smoke” and it was the nation’s first local student society. The name was changed to “Lambda Iota” in 1844 when the use of Greek letters became popular.¹⁸

After nearly seventy years, the fraternity constructed a building to serve as the home of the society and its members. The house, built in 1913, is located at 440 Pearl Street on the northeast corner of the University Green where it still stands today. The Owl House, as it is referred to by the brothers, is a two-and-a-half story colonial revival brick building. The front façade is dominated by a Doric style colonnaded portico spanning the whole width of the

¹⁸ Lambda Iota. n.d. *About the Lambda Iota Society*. Accessed October 16, 2022. <https://www.lambdaiota.org/about.asp>.

building. The portico served excellently as a common meeting place and group photo site for the generations of brothers.¹⁹

Different generations of brothers cycled through the house from year to year with varying levels of care its upkeep, the periods of financial stress of the organization, and the building's age led to several renovations over the last one hundred years. The largest of the five major renovations was in 1954. The building was used heavily during the second world war. Years later in the 1980s a fire in the house caused its closure for several months as more renovations and reconstruction took place. At the one-hundred-year anniversary of the construction of the house, the society opted to create a renovation plan for the building's continued use. This plan included adding a sprinkler system, alarm system, and replacing rotted wood pillars with fiberglass. They also expanded the third floor to have five double-bedrooms and added bathrooms to house more brothers.²⁰ In 2018, Lambda Iota merged with Pi Kappa Phi and the organization continues to occupy the building.



Renovations to the building in 2011.

Lambda Iota Online Photo Archives

¹⁹ United States Department of the Interior, National Register of Historic Places. *University Green Historic District*. NPS Form 10900a (886), 16.

²⁰ Lambda Iota. n.d. *Renovations to 440 Pearl St: 2012 Renovations*. Accessed October 16, 2022. https://www.lambdaiota.org/331-2012_Renovations.asp.