Self-Guided Tour of Wilson Hall

A National Historic Landmark

Monmouth University
Welcome to Monmouth University and its showpiece, Woodrow Wilson Hall. The areas available for you to explore convey the splendor of the golden age of American palaces. From the twilight days of the nineteenth century to the onset of the Great Depression, this was a time when grand living was carried out in grand mansions by the handful of tycoons who built them and then, happily or otherwise, inhabited them.

Many of the photographs in this guide date from the 1930s and show the opulence of Wilson Hall’s rooms during its brief time as a private home. It was then known as Shadow Lawn because of the long shadows cast by the many tall trees on the estate’s park-like grounds.

As you begin the tour, be mindful that Wilson Hall is an active administrative and academic center. Please use common sense and discretion when entering administrative offices. If you are asked not to enter an area anywhere in the building, please follow those instructions. Rooms with a class in session may not be entered but can be revisited when empty.

**HISTORY**

Woodrow Wilson Hall, formerly known as Shadow Lawn, was built in 1929. The mansion stands in the footprint of an earlier mansion, which was destroyed by fire in 1927 shortly after $1 million had been spent on its renovation. That former colonial, wood-frame structure, also known as Shadow Lawn, contained fifty-two rooms and was built in 1903 for John A. McCall, president of the New York Life Insurance Company. The current mansion, which has 130 rooms, cost $10.5 million to build and was the private residence of the F.W. Woolworth Company president, Hubert Templeton Parson, and his wife, Maysie.

Philadelphia architect Horace Trumbauer and his assistant Julian Abele (the first African-American professional architect) designed the current mansion in the American Beaux-Arts style—a popular style derived from the neoclassical tradition of the French Ecole des Beaux-Arts. The mansion features limestone quarried in Belford, Indiana (also used in the Empire State Building), fifty varieties of Italian marble, and steel and concrete framing to ensure the mansion would be fireproof.

Before it was purchased by Hubert Parson in 1918, the original Shadow Lawn was last owned by Joseph B. Greenhut, head of the Siegel-Cooper Company, which ran a New York department store known as “The Big Store”—the largest of its kind at that time. During the presidential campaign of 1916 Greenhut loaned Shadow Lawn to President Woodrow Wilson, who used the mansion as his summer White House that year.

The current mansion fell under municipal ownership in 1929 and later served as the site of a private girls’ school until the University (then known as Monmouth Junior College) acquired the property in 1955 at a cost of $350,000.

In 1985, Woodrow Wilson Hall was designated a National Historic Landmark by the United States Department of the Interior and was recognized as possessing exceptional significance. It had been entered in the National Register of Historic Places in 1978. In 1980, Wilson Hall was the location for scenes in the musical film *Annie*. It served as the Park Avenue mansion of the film’s Daddy Warbucks character.

Wilson Hall includes 130 rooms on its three main floors, along with rooftop and lower-level rooms. In the main portion of the building there are ninety-six rooms, including what once were seventeen master suites and nineteen baths. Each suite was decorated in the style of a different historical period. The baths also vary in style and had gold- or silver-plated fixtures.

Because Wilson Hall is a National Historic Landmark, its original features are maintained in accordance with the strict guidelines established by the Department of the Interior. The mansion underwent restoration in the 1980s as part of Monmouth University’s 50th anniversary celebration.

Monmouth University is the grateful recipient of numerous grants and awards that preserve, restore, and recognize the historic significance of Woodrow Wilson Hall. Recent grants include substantial funding from the New Jersey Historic Trust and Save America’s Treasures. Our five-year roof restoration project received the 2006 Monmouth County Planning Board Planning Merit Award for Historic Preservation.
SELF-GUIDED TOUR

To begin the tour, please take the elevator located in the Great Hall opposite room 108 (the Office of Financial Aid) to the fourth floor. The tour will descend through Wilson Hall via the marble staircase adjacent to the elevator door on the fourth floor and, later, down the grand central staircase.

FOURTH FLOOR

Architectural experts have criticized the placement of this penthouse solarium added after the mansion was complete. Horace Trumbauer himself tried to dissuade the Parsons from adding the room because, when viewed from across the Great Lawn, it ruined the classic symmetry of the building.

Mrs. Parson requested the room and her husband, as ever, acquiesced at a cost of $500,000. Though most of the mansion was decorated in a variety of eighteenth-century French designs, the solarium was among the few rooms that departed from those styles. The interior design firm of William Baumgarten & Company of New York, working with Mrs. Parson, selected the Aztec theme for the solarium.

Note the pyramid-like arch of the ceiling formed by self-supporting interlocking tiles imported from Italy and made of lava, which at the time of construction was some of the finest tiling available. The carved wooden totem poles, colorful glazed wall tiles, and decorative fountain with ceramic crocodile heads at its base are distinctive features.

Look outside and notice the cupid sculptures on the roof. They were carved on-site from blocks of limestone.

When you exit the solarium, use the stairway adjacent to the elevator entrance to descend to the third floor. As you enter the stairwell, look above to see the floral-motif, stained glass panel in the ceiling. On the first landing, observe the small round port on the wall at floor level. Central vacuuming was an ultra-modern feature at the time, but it is not currently used.

WOODROW WILSON’S LEGACY AT MONMOUTH

Woodrow Wilson’s association with Monmouth University is geographical rather than personal. In 1916, the 28th President of the U.S. spent about six weeks on the Shadow Lawn estate that previously occupied this site, but that was long before Monmouth acquired the property.

In 1965, this building, then also known as Shadow Lawn, was renamed Wilson Hall as an homage to Woodrow Wilson. Though Wilson had used an earlier building on the site to run his 1916 presidential reelection campaign, he never visited today’s Wilson Hall, which was built after his death.

In the midst of a national conversation about the complicated legacies of individuals from our nation’s past, in 2016 Monmouth’s Board of Trustees voted to retain “Woodrow Wilson Hall” as the name of the central administrative building on campus. The decision followed months of public discussions during which the university sought to balance Wilson’s record of service as governor of New Jersey, president of the United States, Nobel Peace Prize recipient, and principal architect of the League of Nations, with his white supremacist views on race, anti-immigrant policies, and re-segregation of the federal government.

Honoring Wilson’s record of service, while simultaneously educating the community on his controversial positions, embodies one of the most basic tenets of a liberal arts education: deriving knowledge from complex issues that cannot be reduced to simple binary terms.

Wilson Hall, the centerpiece of the former Shadow Lawn estate, is one of New Jersey’s finest beaux arts buildings. Like other buildings in this style, it drew inspiration from classical and Renaissance antecedents. Julian Abele [pronounced Able], famed Gilded Age architect Horace Trumbauer’s chief designer, is responsible for much of the design work seen in this structure. Abele studied at the École des Beaux Arts in Paris and was one of the first black architects to practice professionally in the United States. The building, an American palace, is notable both for the eclectic design of the interior, which mimics various historical periods, and for the high levels of craftsmanship and materials employed in its design.
THIRD FLOOR

As you enter the third level of the building, walk to the balcony’s hand railing and note the stained glass skylight overhead that bathes the Great Hall in amber light. Remember to view the skylight again from the main floor for its full effect, but now you can appreciate its ornate beauty and craftsmanship up close.

At night, the 100-foot-long skylight can be illuminated from behind by 165 incandescent lights. The griffin-like creatures, male cherubs, grape leaves, trailing vines, and ripe berries seem gathered from the icons of ancient cultures.

At opposite ends of the balcony, carved wooden grilles gilded with gold paint conceal the pipe lofts of the mansion’s magnificent organ—another popular feature of American palaces. The positions of the pipes amplified the sound of the organ, transforming the Great Hall into a vast resonating chamber. Organ music filled the mansion daily as part of the Parsons’ breakfast ritual.

The walls and columns of the central hall are of plaster, though designed to simulate cut limestone. The violet marble pilasters, capped by cast bronze cornices, reinforce the grandeur of the building.

Nine guest suites, each with bath, bedroom, and dressing room, were located on this floor. Many pieces of imported French furniture of the Louis XIV and Empire periods (later discovered to be almost-worthless imitations) were used in the suites, which were labeled according to their decorative motif.

The decorative wall paintings in this room are in the eighteenth-century French chinoiserie style. As with many of the mansion’s ornamental paintings, these were first painted on silk and later applied to the wall using a transfer technique that has given the works a permanent sheen. Wall sconces and chandeliers of unusual design can be found throughout the building, and in this room the lamps are of a leaf and fish design. After the bronze gilt light fixtures were cast, Mrs. Parson ordered the molds destroyed so they could not be duplicated.

Marble fireplaces are also common in Wilson Hall, and the hearth in the Chinese living room is a good example of the skill of the artisans who hand carved the mansion’s extensive marble work. Other fireplaces feature carved fish, Roman and Greek busts, and other intricate designs.

Continue around the balcony to your starting point. Now, take the east staircase to the second floor and turn right. Proceed to the Aeolian organ console located at the top of the central staircase.

SECOND FLOOR

The four-manual Aeolian-Skinner organ (meaning it has four keyboards) was purchased at a cost of $100,000. It was usually played through the automatic concertola located on the lower mezzanine. The organ could be controlled by switches located throughout the mansion. An electronic switch remains connected to the player with push buttons for ten selections, including Lohengrin by Wagner, Liebestraum by Liszt, Shon Ros Marin by Kreisler, and Tales from the Vienna Woods by Strauss.

Turn back now toward the staircase to begin your tour of this floor, which includes the offices of senior University administrators. On your immediate left, after the staircase, is room 201, originally part of Mrs. Parson’s bedroom suite, decorated in a Spanish Renaissance style.

Proceed clockwise around the balcony and enter the hallway on your left marked “Old Board Room.” From here, the master baths that adjoined the Parsons’ respective bedroom suites can be viewed. Mrs. Parson’s is light and airy, while Mr. Parson’s had a masculine, black and bronze decor with polished petrified wood walls and tub surround. Note in his bath, to the left of the tub, there is a shower with multiple shower heads that would not be out of place today in a modern home.

THIRD FLOOR

SOME OFFICES AND CLASSROOMS IN WILSON HALL ARE NOT OPEN TO TOUR. BUT FEEL FREE TO ENTER ANY EMPTY CLASSROOM. ALSO, IF YOU ARE ASKED NOT TO ENTER AN OFFICE, PLEASE COMPLY.
On your left, room 218 served as a boudoir to the adjoining suite and is also in the Directoire style. The painted mirrors feature classical elements typical of the Parsons’ love of decoration. Descend to the mezzanine and note the dramatic ornamental plastering overhead—a feature used throughout the first floor. The mansion’s decorator employed an international force of skilled craftsmen, including Scottish plasterers, Swedish carpenters, and Italian decorative painters and gilders.

Proceed down the central staircase into the Great Hall and continue right, through the Rotunda and Versailles Room to the Pompeii Room, which overlooks the Erlanger Memorial Gardens.

The Parsons, who also had homes on the Avenue Foch in Paris as well as Fifth Avenue in New York City, were especially influenced by the architecture and gardens of Versailles and, in particular, the Petit Trianon, which was built by Louis XV as the home of his mistress, Madame de Pompadour. This “small” chateau also served as a retreat for Marie Antoinette during the reign of Louis XVI.

The design on the exterior balustrades at Shadow Lawn replicates the design of those at the Petit Trianon. Additionally, the verdigris sunburst medallions on the window railings at Shadow Lawn mirror Versailles’ sunburst masks of Apollo that celebrated Louis XIV, the Sun King.

At the western end of the floor is Monmouth University’s Presidential suite. This collection of rooms is decorated in a Japanese motif and was originally used by Mrs. Parson’s sister, Bertha Gasque, who served as stewardess of Shadow Lawn. After exiting this suite, continue around the balcony toward the central staircase.

W

hat is known as the Pompeii Room was originally the Parsons’ conservatory breakfast room, giving them easy access to the formal gardens, which can be fully explored when you finish the interior tour.

The wing of the building extending to the right, known as Wilson Annex, contained the servants’ quarters. Household servants numbered twenty-five, while forty men maintained the estate grounds.

Heading back to the central hall, note the doors between the Versailles and Pompeii rooms. They are considered outstanding examples of Swedish wrought ironwork. The Versailles Room, which was the Parsons’ formal dining room, is of late-seventeenth-century design, with a hexagonal, Byzantine-style coffered ceiling layered with gold leaf.

The double, sliding pocket doors leading from the Versailles Room to the Rotunda are hand-carved and took three years to complete. The doors may be pulled from their open position within the wall to expose the detailed design.

From the Rotunda, enter room 104 to the right. Originally known as the Morning Room, this room is prettily decorated in the Louis XV style. Move through room 104 and re-enter the Great Hall. Room 106 is to the left across the hall. This former billiard room is a modified octagon in shape and features a groined ceiling and colorful painted friezes of medieval battle scenes.

Exiting room 106, re-enter the Great Hall and visit the sunroom directly across from the Great Staircase. The sunroom, which features ornately carved stonework and gray marble pilasters with Ionic capitals, commands a full view of the sphinx statues (another homage to Versailles), the fountain, and the Great Lawn.
Enter the Office of Admission at the eastern end of the Great Hall. To the right is room 102, formerly the Parsons’ library. The books in the Parsons’ library were enclosed behind doors made to appear like book-lined shelves. These false book fronts, intended to protect the books within, were fabricated from the bindings of duplicate volumes in the library’s collection.

Exit the Admission Office and turn right to room 108, the Office of Financial Aid. Formerly the mansion’s music room, its colorful design evokes the era of Marie Antoinette.

Proceed again through the Great Hall to the central staircase. The hall itself measures 110 feet long by 25 feet wide and rises nearly 70 feet to the skylight.

Around the opposite side of the staircase, near the building’s entrance, you will find a staircase leading to the mansion’s lower level. Take the stairs, and at the bottom proceed directly across the hall to the auditorium.

The auditorium was originally equipped with a large movie screen and, in a fireproof projection room, two Paramount projectors mounted in tandem would run continuous film shows. The stage, designed for live theater, is equipped with floodlights and footlights. Notice the trompe l’œil murals that give the room depth.

Proceed from the auditorium and turn right to room W-2, which was part of the former two-lane Brunswick bowling alley. Look down at the floor in the hallway and you can still see the narrow floor boards of the lanes. Inside W-2, the stained glass windows in the rear depict the life of prehistoric man.

Workmen struck underground water while excavating for the lanes and, as a result, costs for the bowling alley mounted to $600,000. Supposedly, the lanes were never used by the Parsons.

Across the hall from the auditorium is the original elevator that served as the Parsons’ primary means of access to the five floors of their estate. This elevator, unlike the service elevator, was constructed of stained wood and lavishly adorned with mirrored panels and painted swags, floral patterns, vines, ribbons, and cameos. The elevator has remained relatively unaltered since its construction.

At the end of the hallway near the bowling alley was a swimming pool, which is now covered to provide more office space (rooms W-3 and W-4). Designed in a Pompeian motif, the pool walls, shower stalls, and dressing rooms are marble. The gold-tinted, mirrored ceiling simulated sunlight.

Across the hall from room W-2 is room W-6. Through a door on the far side of W-6 (if unlocked) is the former English Lounge, now known as the Withey Chapel in honor of a former vice president of the University. The lounge was positioned at the head of the bowling lanes. The woodwork, pegged floor, and leaded glass windows were once part of a sixteenth-century Tudor abbey that Mr. Parson imported from England. Some of the windows show the dates 1518, 1519, 1525, and 1549.

At the opposite end of the lower level is the Digital Print Center, formerly a cypress-paneled gymnasium complete with electric horse, rowing machine, pulley weights, reducing vibrator, dumbbells, and rings. Adjoining the gym is the former locker room, which now serves as an ornately decorated women’s room. This exited onto the first tee of a nine-hole golf course.

With the exception of the solarium, construction on Shadow Lawn was completed in early September 1929. The great stock market crash of October 1929 was only weeks away. Hubert Parson was a heavy holder of Woolworth stocks, the value of which was reduced by eighty percent in a matter of days. Before the end of 1938 the Parsons left Shadow Lawn. To settle the $700,000 mortgage and tax liens of over $100,000, the estate was placed on the auction block. The only bidder was the borough of West Long Branch; the bid was $100.

Renowned French landscape architect Achille Duchene designed the formal gardens to the west of Wilson Hall. These are now known as the Erlanger Memorial Gardens, in memory of Milton S. Erlanger, a member of the college’s board of trustees from 1956 to 1969. A peristyle, or covered colonnade, encloses one side of the gardens. A “water organ” fountain, which is modeled on la Colonnade at Versailles, forms the boundary on the west side. In 1997, the University restored the Erlanger Gardens, conforming as closely as possible to the original plantings.
**MONMOUTH UNIVERSITY**

Monmouth University offers its students a dynamic academic environment with abundant opportunities to learn, adapt, and grow both personally and professionally. Small classes, which allow for individual attention and student-faculty dialogue, together with purposeful academic advising and intensive career counseling, are hallmarks of the Monmouth experience.

The University is listed in the Princeton Review’s *Best Colleges* and *U.S. News & World Report’s* “America’s Best Colleges.”

Monmouth’s student body is diverse, with a combined population of approximately 4,500 undergraduate students and 1,700 graduate students.

**SHADOW LAWN ESTATE**

The largest building on the Shadow Lawn estate, the mansion is 300 feet by 150 feet. The mansion’s present entrance, originally the rear entrance, introduces visitors to the grand scale of the building with its majestic columns. Note the ornate lamp fixtures and National Historic Landmark plaque near the east door (to your left when facing the building). The southern facade alone has fifty-seven windows.

In its prime, the estate included a twenty-two-room guest lodge; a ten-room house for the superintendent; a two-story garage; eight greenhouses; barns for six horses and twelve cows; a poultry house; pens for a bull, sheep, and pheasants; an icehouse (now an art gallery); and cottages for the dairy, greenhouse, and poultry supervisors.

For more information on the history of the Shadow Lawn estate, visit www.monmouth.edu/wilson_hall.

The summer “cottage” of Murry and Leonie Guggenheim (now part of the Monmouth University Library) has been restored to its past grandeur following a $14.5 million renovation and expansion. The cottage is on the New Jersey and National Registers of Historic Places and is open to the public during the library’s regular operating hours.