

The Martha Washington (building)

By Dana Plautz

In 1911, the Portland Women's Union, a group of volunteers who created one of the first organizations in Oregon to provide safe housing for young women, acquired the quarter block at the corner of Southwest Tenth Avenue and Montgomery Street for the Martha Washington Hotel for Self-Supporting Women. The four-story, Georgian style, brick-and-timber boardinghouse was designed by architect A.E. Doyle, who was considered one of the most important architects in Portland. The building is recorded on the National Register as the Montgomery Building, since the Union took the name of the building to its next location.

A member of the Union, Anna Lewis Mann provided from \$14,000 to \$15,000 toward the purchase price, but \$75,000 was still needed to complete the project. The Union's first president, Mrs. Burrell, gave \$10,000 toward the new building, and Union president Mrs. Corbett and the organization's finance committee raised \$35,000 through a plea to the public. The final \$30,000 was borrowed from Penn Mutual to complete the project.

The cornerstone of the building was laid on January 29, 1917, and the Martha Washington opened on October 21, 1917, as home to ninety female residents. The residence hotel also had classrooms where residents could learn skills such as bookkeeping, common areas for social events, and a gymnasium. The women who lived there were teachers, nurses, seamstresses, clerical employees, and students, eighteen to twenty-six years old, from Oregon, Washington, and Idaho and from as far away as England, Illinois, Kansas, California, Nebraska, and Ohio. By 1920, the hotel housed ninety-five women, and more than two hundred names were on the waiting list. An annex was opened on October 23, 1925, expanding the number of boarders to 170.

The Martha Washington's tenancy increased or dwindled depending largely on political and world events. During the Great Depression, for example, rents were lowered and rules were loosened in order to accommodate older women. During World War II, the hotel was home to war workers, and women over thirty were asked to leave. After the war, the Martha stressed that its tenants could stay until they were married. Meals, laundry, and a receptionist were always part of the amenities the boardinghouse offered.

In 1969, the Portland Development Commission purchased the Martha Washington for Portland State University to use for student housing. They renamed the building Montgomery Court. The Portland Women's Union purchased the Campbell Court at 1115 Southwest Eleventh Avenue and opened the new Martha Washington Hotel in early 1970.

During the 1970s, the new Martha Washington lost money, as women wanted more freedom than the hotel's rules (such as a curfew and no overnight male guests) allowed. By the early 1980s, the Union had hired real estate firm Bullier & Bullier to find prospective buyers.

In January 1983, the Union accepted an offer from the Rajneesh Investment Corporation for \$1.4 million, with three Rolls Royces as collateral. The Union carried the loan and retained rights to the name, the Martha Washington. In 1986, the Rajneesh Investment Corporation sold the building to Multnomah County, which used it as a work-release center for county offenders until 2003. On June 16, 2010, the Martha Washington reopened as low-income housing run by Home Forward (originally the Housing Authority of Portland).

Central City Concern and Home Forward renamed the building The Katherine Gray in March 2021. Katherine Gray and her younger daughter played a significant role in Portland's women's suffrage movement beginning in 1912. In considering a new name, the institution felt it important to honor the central role women played in the history of the building, while simultaneously honoring a lesser-known Black female civic leader who worked to improve her community.

Sources

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