



Childhood home  
of Nobel laureate  
undergoes  
restoration





# THE OTHER

## HUNT MORGAN HOUSE

By Maryjean Wall / Photos by Jonathan Palmer



Between 1868 and 1870 John McMurtry, architect and builder of wide renown, finished a house for the Charlton Morgan family on North Broadway in Lexington. The house came to hold a secret fascination for the oldest child to grow up there.



The Italianate-style house retains much of its original appearance, though the Blue Grass Trust has spent some \$200,000 on interior renovations including removing wallpaper, painting the walls, and restoring the floors.

He was Thomas Hunt Morgan, born in 1866 and a nephew of the notorious Confederate raider Gen. John Hunt Morgan. The general's mother, Henrietta Morgan, lived on the other side of the family lot in Hopemont, an 1814 residence facing Gratz Park. Young Thomas frequently was sent to the attic of the Broadway house while his mother, Ellen Key Howard Morgan, entertained. High in the attic, he fashioned a boy's retreat.

He pinned an extensive insect collection to the walls. He also gazed out the attic window upon a rooftop view of

a vastly different city than Lexington is now. His insect collection undoubtedly determined the path of his life into biological sciences, culminating with the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine in 1933 for his discoveries in the role of chromosomes in heredity. He was Kentucky's first winner of the Nobel Prize.

The cityscape of Morgan's youth was spare, for it did not include iconic landmarks such as the Carnegie Center (1902), the dome of Fayette County's fifth of six courthouses (1898), or the numerous buildings that would stand taller than the dormers and church steeples he saw along the rooftops. The view is greatly enhanced now with modern structures, yet the window that

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### THOMAS HUNT MORGAN: FATHER OF MODERN GENETICS

From his insect collection at 210 North Broadway in Lexington to his famed laboratory known at Columbia University as the “fly room,” Thomas Hunt Morgan pursued his genetics research to wide acclaim.

International recognition culminated in the 1933 Nobel Prize for Physiology or Medicine, awarded for his research confirming that chromosomes bear strings of genes that in turn are the basis for heredity. At Columbia, Morgan popularized the use of the fruit fly as a lab subject.

According to Columbia University, Morgan’s discoveries and those of his students “set the agenda for biology in the twentieth century.”

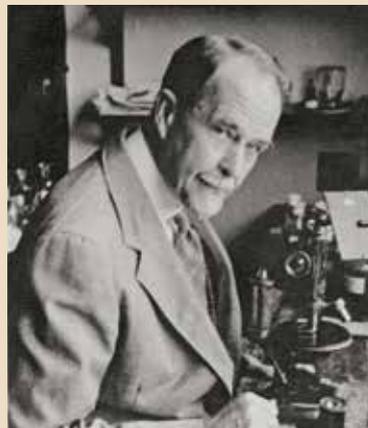
Sept. 25 will mark the 150th anniversary of Morgan’s birth in Lexington. He was the oldest of three children born to Ellen Key Howard Morgan and Charlton Hunt Morgan, a well-known Lexington family.

Young Morgan took his undergraduate education at the State College of Kentucky (later the University of Kentucky), receiving a Bachelor of Science degree with a major in zoology in 1886 and a Master of Science in 1888. He received a Ph.D. in biology in 1890 from Johns Hopkins University. Following another year at Johns Hopkins, Morgan spent 13 years teaching at Bryn Mawr College.

In 1904 he took a professorship in experimental zoology at Columbia University, where over the next 24 years Morgan conducted his research in heredity. Columbia University notes that five future Nobel laureates worked with Morgan or with one of his students. In 1924 Morgan received the Darwin Medal. From 1927 to 1931 he served as president of the National Academy of Sciences, as well as president of a variety of scientific organizations through the years.

California Institute of Technology invited Morgan to organize the school’s division of biology in 1928, and Morgan, as the new division’s chairman, remained there until his death Dec. 4, 1945.

A colleague, George Beadle,



UNIVERSITY OF KENTUCKY, HUNT-MORGAN HOUSE DEPOSIT PHOTOGRAPHS

Thomas Hunt Morgan’s early fascination with insects, which he collected at his childhood home, inspired his later research into genetics. He is pictured below, left, with his sister, Ellen Key Howard Morgan, and brother, Charlton Morgan.

president of the University of Chicago in 1966, recalled at the time that Morgan would become so focused on his research that occasionally he forgot to show up for class. His students would trundle off to his lab to find him. His response would be to gather up his papers in a flurry and enthrall them with an unprepared, but doubtlessly inspired, lecture.

In 1972 the Woman’s Club of Central Kentucky dedicated a plaque to Morgan’s memory at the group’s clubrooms at the former Morgan residence. The question arose even then why community memory of this Morgan paled next to memory of his uncle, the Confederate Gen. John Hunt Morgan.

“Much of this stems from community attitude,” The Lexington *Herald* observed in 1972 when the plaque was installed. “John Hunt Morgan (1825-1864) lived in a period and in a community which has greatly romanticized the Civil War and the southern attitude.

“On the other hand, Dr. Thomas Hunt Morgan (1866-1945) lived in an era and in a community which was reluctant to accept heredity with respect and tolerance. Much ado was made over the warrior, but the scientist and his important discoveries were basically overlooked by those outside of medical circles in Central Kentucky.”

— Maryjean Wall





The Blue Grass Trust's Jason Sloan, left, and Sheila Omer Ferrell are excited about the organization's acquisition of the house.

gave Morgan a keen view on his boyhood world is the same.

The Morgan connection was one reason the Blue Grass Trust for Historic Preservation was pleased to acquire ownership in 2014 of this residence and two connected buildings. The trust came into existence in 1955 largely to save the other Morgan house, Hopemont.

The acquisition also is historically significant for its connections to McMurtry. Some of the original woodwork inside the house includes the curved staircase he designed and built. Other Lexington projects in which he had a hand include Christ Church Episcopal; Botherum (a private residence); and Loudoun House, built in 1850 for Francis Key Hunt, cousin of Francis Scott Key, who wrote the U. S. national anthem. Francis Key Hunt was the 10th child of John Wesley Hunt, one of the earliest millionaires in the newly opened West that became Kentucky. The millionaire was a businessman and a horse breeder. Thomas Hunt Morgan was his great-grandson.

All branches of the Hunt Morgan family claim some relevance in Kentucky's early history. Thomas Hunt Morgan's father was a U. S. consul. His great-uncle Charlton Hunt was Lexington's first mayor. The fact that Thomas Hunt Morgan remains the family member people rarely hear about is somewhat ironic, considering his achievements. The Thomas Hunt Morgan Biological Sciences Building at the Univer-

*The Thomas Hunt Morgan House serves as an example of the Blue Grass Trust's advocacy for saving historic buildings. And the growing popularity of the house as a venue will help make the advocacy self-supporting.*

sity of Kentucky is named for him, but memory of this particular Hunt Morgan was not mounted on a horse and cast in bronze as happened to his notorious uncle, the general.

"We're working on that," said Jason Sloan, director of preservation for the Blue Grass Trust. Sloan and Sheila Omer Ferrell, executive director of the trust, intend that Thomas Hunt Morgan's story will assume a greater profile with the trust's new stewardship of the house. They are excited about this latest acquisition.

The house at 210 North Broadway is one of three connected buildings, all painted white, which served from 1965 until 2014 as the clubrooms for the Woman's Club of Central Kentucky. Tracing ownership prior to 1965 is fairly simple because owners of the property have been few.

Thomas' sister, Ellen Key Hunt Morgan, remained in the residence until 1956 when the Kentucky-Tennessee Conference of Seventh Day Adventists acquired the property. That same year the church also acquired an adjacent building, constructed in 1911 at 214 North Broadway for the Second Church of Christ, Scientist. Eventually the two buildings were connected by construction of the middle section of the complex, resulting in the structure as it appears today.

The "chapel" or northernmost section of the complex also had a life as an Odd Fellows Lodge from 1930 to 1956. The building's colored-glass



Thomas Hunt Morgan would not recognize the downtown Lexington skyline today from his childhood attic perch.

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windows evoke its original purpose as a worship space as does the full immersion baptismal font, now hidden behind a wall.

The Woman's Club of Central Kentucky met in the former chapel, which the club repurposed as an auditorium. The club utilized the complex's connecting section for its dining room. At one time the club numbered from 800 to 900 members. But times changed culturally, with women generally going to work in more modern times. Membership declined, although the club still thrives.

"We go back to 1894, and we're the oldest woman's club in the nation," said Janice Austin, club president at the time the property deed changed hands on Sept. 29, 2014. As the complex of buildings aged, "It had gotten to the point where we were no longer a philanthropic group because all our money was going to keeping the house up," Austin said.

The property and three buildings were appraised at close to \$1 million, Austin said. The Blue Grass Trust seemed like the perfect entity to assume ownership of the property because "they're able to do things we could no longer do," she explained. Since transferring the deed, the woman's club has reverted to its original cultural and philanthropic purposes. It continues to hold its regular meetings in the buildings and will continue to offer its primary fundraiser, the April fashion show.

"We practically [deeded the property] as a gift," Austin said, adding, "It's the best thing we could have done."

In a throwback to former days, church services once more are taking place in the chapel: Tates Creek Presbyterian Church (Rev. Robert Cunningham is senior minister) uses the three buildings for 5 p.m. Sunday services. The church wanted to add a downtown presence to its primary location on Rapid Run Drive near Man o' War Boulevard. It wanted an historic building with a restored feel and so found the Thomas Hunt Morgan property a perfect fit. A downtown congregation of university students, young professionals, and families with children averages about 200 each Sunday, and the Morgan property "has delivered on all fronts," said assistant minister Marshall Wilmhoff.

At other times the Blue Grass Trust makes the property available for community functions and considers its new buildings ideal for downtown conferences and other events. The house has a full commercial kitchen with a rear entrance directly into the kitchen for use of caterers. There is on-site parking, although the location is within a short walk of Main Street.



Janice Austin of the Woman's Club of Central Kentucky and Sheila Ferrell

Remodeling brought bright updates to the buildings. Interior remodeling is ongoing, with work on the roof and exterior to begin this spring. The trust has spent about \$200,000 so far, much of that amount collected through challenge grants. Tearing out wallpaper, painting the walls and trim in gray on gray in all three buildings, refinishing the hardwood floors of pumpkin pine in the house, updating electrical wiring, spraying insulation into the auditorium, and reverting the auditorium to its original high ceiling have been among the projects that began as soon as the trust assumed ownership.

The house retains most of its original appearance. The two-story brick residence is of Italianate. The two front parlors have tall bay windows with panes believed to be original to

the house. The windows have elaborate cast iron hood molds with acanthus leaf patterns in the bows of the hood. The roofline cornice has paired, scrolled brackets. The original entrance consists of double doors. Not original to the house is the present-day, two-story Colonial Revival portico consisting of four columns, which in 1965 replaced a one-story wooden porch.

Some of the mantels and doors in the house are originals. A portrait of Thomas Hunt Morgan hangs in the residence.

The trust plans to remove a chain link fence separating 210 North Broadway from Hopemont, connecting the two properties in the way they formerly existed when Hunt Morgans inhabited both residences.

One new twist was the naming of the chapel/auditorium. A year to the day after taking over the property, the Blue Grass Trust held a ceremony naming the chapel the H. Foster Pettit Auditorium, in memory of the former Lexington mayor and former president of the trust, who died in 2014.

The trust has moved its offices from Gratz Park to the second floor of the Thomas Hunt Morgan house, where a resource library will be open to the public.

"In every way, this helps us fulfill our mission," said Ferrell, the trust's executive director. As she explained, the complex will stand as an example of the trust's advocacy for saving historic buildings. And its growing popularity as a venue will help make the advocacy self-supporting financially.

Perhaps, too, Thomas Hunt Morgan will begin to receive a little more of the recognition he knew among the scientific community during his time, now that his house will be open to a wider audience. **KM**