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Built in 1923, the Trogdon House, originally located in the center of the campus, served as the home for the chief educational leader for John Tarleton Agriculture College. First to live in this home was Dean J. Thomas Davis, who is also credited with its design. Today the home has been renovated for the 21st century and will be the residence for Tarleton’s 15th president, Dr. Dominic Dottavio and his wife, Lisette, while also serving as a public place to celebrate, connect and communicate.

While several men occupied the dean’s chair at Tarleton prior to Davis’ tenure, none remained for very long. J. Thomas Davis, the driving force for many improvements to the college, including entrance into the Southern Association of Colleges in 1926, served for 26 years. Born in Georgia, Dean Davis moved with his family to Texas after losing the struggle to save the ancestral farm following the Civil War. Like many emigrants, they arrived in an ox-drawn wagon. Davis was drawn to education when one of his instructors inspired him to want to become a teacher of history and Latin. After attending North Texas Normal College in Denton, he taught near Grapevine, eventually marrying another teacher – Uta Wilson.

Selected as the new dean for Tarleton in 1919, Davis and his family arrived in Stephenville on August 1, moving into the wooden home built for his predecessor. He quickly rolled up his sleeves to get the campus ready for the fall semester when the steam boiler in the girls’ dormitory required his immediate attention.

At this mostly agricultural institution, student enrollment was much smaller in the 1920s with less than 1,000 scholars (today’s enrollment is over 9,000). Many had never been away from home before attending college. J. Thomas Davis took his role as foster dad seriously, instituting A Quick Look Hometown Living At Its Best
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a strict list of rules and regulations, known as the Purple Book, for the young people. The dean could be seen out on campus as much as in his office. If he spied a student sitting on a bench, Davis would often take the opportunity to sit down and get to know the young scholar, and while his 6’2” 200 pound frame could be a bit intimidating, the dean earned the reputation of being someone who truly cared about the young men and women whose lives were being shaped at Tarleton. He attended most college events and coached the debate team. If he learned that a student was dropping out because of finances, Davis quietly went about finding funding for that student’s tuition.

When word arrived that a new home would be built for Tarleton’s dean, Davis went into action, choosing a location in the center of the campus close to the classroom buildings and between the men’s and women’s dormitories. Sensing an opportunity, Davis hired students, as well as local workers, to help complete the project. All involved could take pride as the new two-story residence took shape.

Dean Davis has been given credit for the design used, described as a Mediterranean inspired hipped cottage. The two-story home, built of native stone with 18” thick walls, was covered with stucco at an original cost of approximately $8000.

Although completed in 1923, the home was not quite ready when the fall term rolled around. Not wanting to inconvenience the senior girls to whom the dean had promised his former residence, Davis moved his family into the garage of the new abode until it could be completed.

Two other presidents lived in the campus residence, Lt. Col. Eugene J. Howell (1948-1966) and Dr. W. O. Trogdon (1966-1982). Both men could often be seen walking extensively around the campus.

During Howell’s tenure a new garage, breezeway and screened porch were completed to the dwelling. Finally, in 1960 central air conditioning and heating were added for a more comfortable home. Behind the domicile a two-car garage, with an apartment above, housed a returning soldier and his wife in 1949. This building was later torn down and removed.

Dr. James Howell remembers, as a young boy, hearing loud screams one night coming from the bathroom. Piling out of their bedrooms, the family rushed in to find an irate squirrel swimming in the toilet. The uninvited visitor had fallen through an air vent. A wire screen solved that problem.

When Dr. Trogdon, his wife, Flo, and two children arrived at Tarleton, they found the president’s home almost empty of furniture. Steve Trogdon remembers that he and his sister, Patricia, chose the colors for their own bedrooms located upstairs. While she chose greens, Steve opted for a red shag carpet, white walls completed with red, white and black Roman-style curtains. Steve also recalls the cedar-lined closet located in the attic where his parents stored their formal clothes, along with the college president’s uniforms (he was still in the army reserves).

Mrs. Trogdon noticed immediately that going from the front door to the back of the house required climbing some stairs and going over a landing, then down some more stairs. After many trips back and forth, she decided to have a door constructed, leading from the kitchen for easier access to the front foyer.

Dr. Trogdon, like Dean Davis, cared deeply for his students. Perhaps no story illustrates this better than the protest rally that took place on the steps of the administration building in 1971 on the anniversary of the tragedy at Kent State. The university president watched from his home, initially deciding not to interfere, but when some locals arrived in their pickup truck, with Band.
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trucks to taunt and threaten the students, Trogdon left his house and walked over to stand by the campus cannon. Sensing impending violence when the hecklers moved closer, the educational leader left his protected spot and moved behind the protestors so that he would be visible to everyone. He informed the crowd that while he did not agree with the students' protest, he had fought in World War II so that they could exercise their freedom of speech. His brave act averted what could have been a disastrous scene.

Dr. Barry Thompson, Tarleton's newly appointed educational leader in 1982, decided not to live on campus. The president's traditional home started its tenure as office space, housing over time student services, university news outlet, the alumni association, as well as other entities. In 1989 Todd Searcy led a group of students who worked to preserve the landmark, including the renaming of the building—Hall of Presidents. A historical marker was awarded by the Texas Historical Commission.

Renovated in 1995, using $40,000 from the permanent university fund, the facility was, once again, renamed the Trogdon House to honor the last president whose family lived there. The building continued to be used for offices and storage until Dr. Dominic Dottavio was selected to become the university's new president in 2009.

While demonstrating his dedication to the goals of strengthening student retention and graduation, the new president agreed to live in the center of the university in the house originally built for the campus leader. To bring this decision to fruition, Dr. Dottavio donated his housing allowance toward the renovations needed to convert the building once again into a family residence. Fundraising and private donations from the community have allowed for the repairs needed to the aging infrastructure of the home, along with sprucing it up—both inside and out.

Besides his very visible commitment to the success of the students attending Tarleton by living on campus, President Dottavio and his wife have set up a scholarship program for first generation college students. They were both the first in their respective families to earn a college degree. With these scholarships the Dottavios hope to encourage students to stay in school to complete their education. Both know how an education can change a young person's life and also impact families and communities.

Dr. Dottavio admits that he was drawn to Tarleton State University because of an educational background in agricultural areas. Dottavio's résumé shows him in natural resource management, eventually becoming the chief scientist and associate regional director of the southwest region of the National Park Service. Working closely with universities in an effort to find problematic solutions eventually lured him into higher education for a career continuance.

Dr. Lisette Dottavio has also worked in education, developing a science program for secondary schools in Georgia.

Prior to arriving at Tarleton, Dr. Dottavio served as president at Heidelberg College in Ohio. He and Lisette moved into the official residence located close to the campus. They enjoyed interacting with the students and often had at-home gatherings. While living in the center of Tarleton will be different, both look forward to being very active participants in various aspects of campus life.

The couple wishes also to give more opportunities for the community to visit through gatherings and activities at the Trogdon House. While the family quarters will comprise the second...
trucks to taunt and threaten the students, Trogdon left his house and walked over to stand by the campus cannon. Sensing impending violence when the hecklers moved closer, the educational leader left his protected spot and moved behind the protestors so that he would be visible to everyone. He informed the crowd that while he did not agree with the students’ protest, he had fought in World War II so that they could exercise their freedom of speech. His brave act averted what could have been a disastrous scene.

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**Remodeling Phases**

Photos by Aaron Ward
floor, events and meetings will take place on the first floor of the home.

Aaron J. Wand, Director of Planning, Design and Construction for Tarleton, led the team of professionals dedicated to the renovation of the Trogdon House. Fred Parker of Parker & Associates was tapped for duty as onsite architect because of his internationally renowned work with dormer-style Southern architecture. The outside of the home was kept as close to the original design as possible, a requirement to keep the historical marker, while the inside was designed to double as a residence and place for public events. The third floor attic space was completed as a guest bedroom.

As Dean Davis once did, the university used a combination of Tarleton students and local workers to complete this monumental task.

Darren Carpenter, owner of Scott’s Flowers on the Square, agreed to be the interior decorator, choosing a traditional style to augment the already gracious and beautiful structure. Original molding was accented with earth tone colors. A blending of antiques, already owned by the university, and additional comfortable furniture allowed for a perfect setting while avoiding ostentation.

Long ago, Dean Davis sat on the sun porch of his college residence in an effort to watch over his students. After almost a century, President Dottavio is doing much the same from the newly renovated Trogdon House — reframed after all these years.

**LEFT** During the recent renovations of the Trogdon House, this Purple Poo costume was found stored behind the wall on the third floor of the house. No one seems to know how it got there or how long it had been tucked away behind that wall.