

Purchasing the Davenport Estate

An excerpt from former Head of School George Edwards' unpublished history of Saint George's

Perhaps no decision was more far-reaching in the first few months of planning for the creation of Saint George's School than the decision to buy the Davenport Estate. This purchase, bold and serendipitous, would provide the school not just with a location, but with an ethos that would brand its existence from that day forward.

The Davenport Estate, named Flowerfield by the Davenports, was a 459-acre compound created by Louis Davenport in the late 1920's. Davenport had made his fortune in the hotel business in Spokane, and his Davenport Hotel was a landmark well known by travelers for its opulence and luxury. Davenport decided that his family needed a "summer cottage" away from the fumes and noise of downtown Spokane and purchased property from the Semple family. The Semple's had purchased the property as part of a huge section of land bought originally from the Northern Pacific Railroad in 1887. The property had its own unique link to the

history of the region and had been hunting and fishing grounds for several Native American tribes for centuries.

In 1926, Davenport began the construction of the 19-room home, a four-story "summer cottage" on the property. He surrounded that house with terraced gardens, a large stable down the hill, and several outbuildings, including a gazebo where his gentlemen friends could enjoy their cigars after dinner. Like his hotel, Flowerfield was an elegant expression of Davenport's style and interests. The estate was so magnificent, it was featured in a National Geographic study of the Northwest. Following World War II, the Davenports decided to move to California and sold Flowerfield to a local doctor who, five years later sold it to a dairy farmer. It didn't take long for the dairy farmer to realize the property was not suitable for dairy operations, and within a few years the property was put back onto the market. The asking price was \$125,000.



Davenport House and lawn as it looked in the 1950s

Reverend Canon Harvey Douglas Smith, the school's strongest advocate and first Headmaster, found one of his earliest converts to the cause of establishing an independent day school in Spokane was Ellen Bungay. Ellen had been active in the Cathedral of St. John, leading a girls' choir and teaching at Lewis and Clark High School. She was single, came from an old-time Spokane family, and her family had provided her with a sizeable inheritance. Though Ellen did not attend the first meeting of the school founders in January, within a month of that date she was deeply involved in the planning for the school. She was selected as a member of the first "temporary" Board of Trustees and was one of two women on the Board.

Canon Smith and other trustees visited Flowerfield and quickly saw the potential for the property. There was a large, roomy house, numerous outbuildings, large pastures for playgrounds and a spacious stable. The price for the property was daunting for this small group of founders. However, Smith quickly convinced Ellen Bungay that the purchase of the Davenport Estate was critical to establishing the school. Ellen began a secret series of discussions with the leadership of the Board about her willingness to buy the estate for the school. Bungay contracted to purchase the property for Saint George's, with her gift to remain anonymous, in exchange for her being appointed as the Resident Matron at the School and being allowed to live at Flowerfield. The school had a home.

By the end of May, Canon Smith announced the purchase of the property to the public in an article in the Spokesman Review. He stated "we are tremendously pleased to have acquired this exceptional property. It will make St. George's one of the outstanding schools of the nation for plant facilities from the first year of its operation."

The purchase of the Davenport Estate gave the school a home and an identity linked to Spokane's "pleasant" past. Suddenly the school had some of the stability



Graduation Bridge and the Little Spokane River

and substance it so desperately needed. This purchase also created a series of new pressing problems involving converting farm and residency space to classrooms, transporting students to the remote location, and combining an operating farm and an operating school successfully. The publicity from this purchase, and the favorable press from the creation of the school, put increasing pressure on the founders to open the school in September 1955, just four short months away.

Unfortunately, there was very little time to effectively plan how to convert the Davenport Estate into a functioning school. There were zoning, fire and safety regulations to grapple with. Canon Smith and Ellen Bungay had very strong opinions about how to use Davenport House, and other Board members had equally strong views on converting that space into classrooms. There were simply too many pressing needs and too little time to adequately address and resolve all the contingencies.

— George Edwards,
SGS Head of School from 1985-91

“The purchase of the Davenport Estate gave the school a home and an identity linked to Spokane’s ‘pleasant’ past.”



**George Edwards
Former Head of School**

**Next Issue:
The First Day of School**