

Thomas Wolfe and His Family

I. Look Homeward, Angel

Thomas Wolfe is probably best known as the author of the novel *Look Homeward, Angel* published in 1929. *Look Homeward, Angel* is the story of a young man named Eugene Gant growing up during the early twentieth century. The book, both a critical and commercial success, launched Wolfe's literary career. *Look Homeward, Angel* is very autobiographical. In it Wolfe wrote about himself, his family, the boardinghouse where he grew up, and the citizens of Asheville. The town of Asheville was called "Altamont" in the book, and the Old Kentucky Home boardinghouse was called "Dixieland".

Look Homeward, Angel was extremely controversial. There were almost two hundred characters in the book, and many of them were based on real-life people whom Wolfe did not thoroughly disguise. The book, eventually banned from the Asheville public library, even prompted some people to write Wolfe a letter threatening to tar and feather him if he ever returned to Asheville. As a result of the hard feelings between Wolfe and his hometown audience, Wolfe did not return to Asheville until 1937, almost eight years after *Look Homeward, Angel* was published. But by 1937 much had changed. The Great Depression had given people more important issues to consider than what Wolfe had written about them in *Look Homeward, Angel*, and Wolfe's reputation also changed. By 1937, he was a well known and popular author in both the United States and Europe, and he was given a warm welcome by most of the people of Asheville.

II. Thomas Wolfe's Life

Thomas Wolfe was born about two blocks from the Old Kentucky Home at 92 Woodfin Street, where his entire family lived until he was six years old. Wolfe's parents were Julia and W. O. Wolfe. The Wolfes had eight children: Leslie, Frank, Effie, Mable, twins Ben and Grover, Fred, and Tom. Wolfe called his family the Gant family in *Look Homeward, Angel*. As an adult, Tom was a very large man; he stood at 6'6" tall, weighed over 250 pounds, and wore size 13 shoes.

Julia Elizabeth Westall was born and raised in Swannanoa, North Carolina. She taught school in Mitchell County for about three years before her marriage. William Oliver Wolfe moved south after the Civil War from York Springs, Pennsylvania. He was a stonecutter by trade and set up his first shop in Raleigh, North Carolina. W. O. eventually moved to Asheville, where he married Julia Westall in 1885. His monument shop stood on a corner lot facing the town square—the Jackson Building, Asheville's oldest skyscraper, is located on that lot today. The angel statues that Tom's father sold from his shop were the models for Wolfe's famous figure in *Look Homeward, Angel*. W. O. carved some of the bases of the many angels he sold but the statues themselves were imported from Italy. The title "Look Homeward, Angel" was not inspired by the statue of the angel. Rather, it comes from the poem "Lycidas" (pronounced "Liss – a – diss")

by John Milton –“Look homeward, angel, now, and melt with ruth, and oh, you dolphins, waft the helpless youth.”

Just before his 16th birthday, Thomas Wolfe left home to attend college at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He originally wanted to attend the University of Virginia, but his father hoped that he would become a lawyer, and since he was paying for Tom’s education he insisted that Tom go to Chapel Hill. While at UNC, Wolfe became interested in drama and decided to pursue a career in playwriting. After his graduation in 1920, Tom announced that he would attend Harvard in the fall. He earned his Master’s degree in Theater Arts and Literature from Harvard in 1922, and continued graduate work at the university until the end of 1923.

Wolfe began his writing career as a playwright, but with little success. His plays usually required huge numbers of actors – sometimes over a hundred – and were often more than four hours long. Because of the size of the plays, no one was willing to put them on stage. During a trip to Europe, Tom finally decided to try his hand at writing a novel – eventually leading to the publication of *Look Homeward, Angel*. Although Tom owned two typewriters, he preferred to write his manuscripts by hand or dictate to a typist.

Tom’s brother Fred was the only other member of the family to earn a college degree. He studied electrical engineering at Georgia Tech, completing his degree after ten years at the university.

Of his seven brothers and sister, Tom felt closest to Ben, who was eight years older. Ben became an ad salesman for *the Winton-Salem Journal* and *The Asheville Citizen*. During the summer of 1918, Ben developed pneumonia during a flu pandemic and died in an upstairs bedroom at the Old Kentucky Home. Tom was devastated by his brother’s death, and later said that it was the most traumatic thing that ever happened to him. Some of Wolfe’s most beautiful writing is found in the section of *Look Homeward, Angel* dealing with the death of Ben Gant (based on Tom’s brother Ben Wolfe).

W. O. Wolfe spent little time in the Old Kentucky Home for almost twelve years. Instead he stayed in his home at 92 Woodfin Street. When W. O.’s health began to fail, he moved into the back bedroom at the Old Kentucky Home. He lived there until his death from cancer in 1922, at the age of 71.

On September 15, 1938, Thomas Wolfe died of tuberculosis of the brain at Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, Maryland. He was not quite thirty-eight years old.

III. The Old Kentucky Home

In 1906, Tom’s mother bought the boarding house the “Old Kentucky Home” at 48 Spruce Street, and moved into the house on a permanent basis. Tom’s father hated boarding houses, and thought renting rooms to strangers was degrading. During those

years the Wolfes maintained two residences. W. O. remained on Woodfin Street, while Julia lived at the Old Kentucky Home. Some of the children divided their time between the two houses, but Julia took Tom to live with her permanently at the boardinghouse. As the youngest of the eight children, she insisted that he stay with her. Tom and his brothers and sisters did not like the Old Kentucky Home for several reasons.

Julia Wolfe regarded the house as a place of business rather than a home and her children were often embarrassed by her enthusiasm in recruiting boarders. None of the Wolfe children had a regular bedroom in the house; they stayed wherever there was space. Often during the busy summer season, they did not know from one night to the next whether they were going to stay at the boarding house or on Woodfin Street. When they stayed at the boarding house, there was no division between family and the boarders; the children ate and slept with strangers.

When Thomas Wolfe was growing up, Asheville was already a resort area. During the crowded summer months, Julia could accommodate as many as thirty people at one time in the Old Kentucky Home, but during the winter she usually had fewer than ten boarders at a time. Julia served meals to her boarders and charged around \$1 for a night's stay and meals. She also allowed people coming in off the street to eat in her dining room. She charged \$.25 for breakfast, and her most expensive meal was Sunday dinner at \$.50. Tom's mother spent much of her time in the kitchen preparing meals for the boarders. During the busy season, she had some hired helpers. Tom's sister Mabel also helped her mother cook and clean while Tom advertised the Old Kentucky Home by passing out business cards at the train station.

In 1916, ten years after she moved into the boarding house, Julia decided to expand her operation. She added eleven rooms, bringing the grand total to twenty-nine rooms. The house was considered very modern at the time, as it had all indoor facilities and central heating (from a coal burning furnace in the basement). Because the plumbing was poorly designed, chamber pots and washstands were left in the bedrooms. In order to save money on the construction, Julia designed all the additions to the house herself. She also did not install any heat in the added rooms, but would just close the rooms off during the winter when she had fewer boarders.

Of the twenty-nine rooms in the Old Kentucky Home, seventeen are bedrooms. Some are very large, but having a large bedroom was not necessarily an advantage. Julia Wolfe rented bed space rather than rooms, which meant boarders would sometimes share rooms with one another. This was a common practice among boarding houses of the day. Julia apparently rented space to all kinds of visitors. Tom described salesmen, school teachers, circus performers, sailors, and tourists coming to the mountains in the summer to escape the heat. Some visitors to Asheville were seeking the area for health reasons because the cool mountain air was believed to help those with respiratory ailments.

The formal parlor of the boarding house was a popular gathering place for family members and boarders. In the parlor, the boarders could mingle and swap stories or listen to Tom's sister, Mabel, play music the piano. Apparently a talented musician,

Mabel was at one time on the Vaudeville circuit, touring the south with a friend named Pearl Shope. An enclosed sun parlor off the front porch gave boarders an additional place to gather, often to listen and dance to music played on the phonograph.

Julia Wolfe operated the Old Kentucky Home for 39 years and she was still renting rooms when she died in 1945 at the age of 85.

Today the house contains over 6,000 square feet of floor space and twenty-nine rooms. All the furnishings in the house—now open as a museum and a historic site—belonged to the Wolfes, except for those in the dining room. The furniture in the dining room was lost in a fire in July of 1998. The Thomas Wolfe Memorial is operated by the Historic Sites Division of the North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources.