

6-1-2011

An Elegant Life

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Recommended Citation

Stewart, Jim (2011) "An Elegant Life," *Furman Magazine*: Vol. 54 : Iss. 2 , Article 7.
Available at: <https://scholarexchange.furman.edu/furman-magazine/vol54/iss2/7>

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An Elegant Life

*Bea Plyler helped set the bar for the high standards
by which the university continues to be measured.*

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DURING A VISIT ABROAD in 1949, Beatrice Dennis Plyler and her husband, Furman president John L. Plyler, stopped at Versailles, the royal palace in France. At the time, Furman was planning to move to a new location because of space limitations and the desire to unite the men's and women's campuses in downtown Greenville on one site.

"That was a big dream, as you can imagine, to be able to build a new campus when Furman did not have money in reserve to do it," Mrs. Plyler said years later. "But John used to say, 'Dream no small dreams.'"

The Plylers felt it was important that the new campus provide not only the finest in facilities and services for faculty, students and staff, but be attractive as well. "I wanted everything [at Furman] to be beautiful," Mrs. Plyler said.

While she and her husband admired the beauty of Versailles — and without yet knowing where the new Furman would be — they talked about the charm and distinctiveness that water features could bring to a college campus. During the same trip they visited England and were impressed by the country's lush, landscaped gardens.

Several years later, during a family trip to New England, the Plylers visited noted private colleges such as Amherst, Williams and others. They returned from all of these trips with ideas that could be incorporated into the new Furman campus. The beauty of today's Furman speaks to the success of their travels.

John Plyler was president of Furman for 25 years, from 1939 to 1964 — longer than any other president in the university's history. Bea Plyler was a full and supportive partner in his work. When she died June 11 at the age of 100, she had lived a life in which many of her own dreams had been realized, and in which her husband's vision for Furman had matched and perhaps even surpassed their high expectations.

As she said in a 2001 speech during Furman's 175th anniversary celebration, "I'm often asked what John Plyler would say if he saw Furman today. I usually answer that he would be very pleased with what has transpired, but I'm always tempted to say that he *had* seen Furman as it is today."



Born in McBeth, S.C., in 1911, Beatrice Dennis married John Plyler in 1932. She was 17 years his junior. Just seven years later, he would become president of Furman.

She took on her new duties with poise and self-assurance. "I wanted John to have all the support he needed, and I wanted to be that support," she said.

One person who knew her as an undergraduate and, later, as part of the sisterhood of presidents' wives was Martha Mauney Johns '47, wife of John Johns, Furman's 10th president.

"I'm sure I was somewhat in awe of her," Mrs. Johns says. "I remember going to her home on University Ridge with a fellow student, Betty Mann, whose father was a law partner of Bea's husband before he became president. I was 19 years old, sitting beside Bea, trying to look sophisticated!"

"I admired her beauty and charm as the president's wife. I wasn't privileged to have much time with her, but she was always friendly even though she was busy raising three young sons. I could never in my wildest dreams have thought of following in her footsteps."

But in 1976 she did — and they immediately embarked on a close friendship. "She took me under her wing," Mrs. Johns says. "We walked the campus, and she pointed out important things to me.

"She showed me where a new president's home had originally been planned on a hill at the north end of the lake, and how a curved rock bridge had been built based on one she and

Dr. Plyler had seen in Scotland. We all know that the rose garden was her idea, and the beauty of the entire campus reflects her inherent good taste."

Indeed, as the 2004 citation for Mrs. Plyler's honorary Doctor of Humanities degree stated, "Her influence is evident throughout the campus landscape and in

the décor and furnishings of the library, Trustees Dining Room and residence hall parlors. She cultivated countless friends for Furman, and by her very nature she taught generations of students the arts of graciousness and hospitality."

Furman also presented Mrs. Plyler the Mary Mildred Sullivan Award in 1977 for nobility of character and commitment to service, and in 1996 the fountain opposite the Charles E. Daniel Chapel was dedicated in her honor.

Following her husband's death in 1966, she remained an elegant presence on campus. She lived a life centered on her faith — she was active in Greenville's First Baptist Church for 79 years — her family, and Furman, and she was instrumental in setting the high standards by which the university continues to be measured.

Furman president Rod Smolla said, "All of us join with the Plyler family in celebrating her remarkable life and all she has meant to the community and those who loved her."

Martha Johns added the appropriate coda: "Bea's love for Furman was unending."

Beatrice Dennis Plyler is survived by sons John, Jr. '56 (Caroline), Jim '58 (Chartee Muckenfuss '59), and Keith '64 (Boots Minton '76); seven grandchildren; four great-grandchildren; and a large extended family. Memorials: Beatrice Dennis Plyler Scholarship, Furman University, 3300 Poinsett Hwy., Greenville 29613; First Baptist Church, 847 Cleveland St., Greenville 29601; or a charity of one's choice. [F]

— JIM STEWART



Little did Bea Plyler (back right) or the student beside her, Martha Mauney, know Martha would be Furman's First Lady in 30 years.

COURTESY MARTHA JOHNS



The portrait of Mrs. Plyler was a gift from the Alumni Association.



Members of the family at the 1966 dedication of Plyler Hall.