

# From Steam Lines to Snowplows

## David Poinsett Retires as Princeton's Steward of Structures and Spaces

by Barbara A. Chaapel

If David Poinsett, Princeton's newly retired director of facilities, were ever to write a book, he would title it *Twenty-Two Years in the Wilderness: My Life among the Calvinists!* "The book would contain a million stories," he says, "including when I met Dr. McCord on my first day of work in 1981 and told him I was a United Methodist. His immediate retort: 'Well, David, we'll just have to work on your faith!'"

Although this Methodist has spent the longest, and he says the best, part of his career at the Seminary, it has been far from wilderness for him or for the institution. During his tenure, first as director of housing (1981–1991) and then as director of facilities (1991–2004), he has overseen and lovingly cared for the campus's one million square feet of property (all the campus buildings and 44 faculty houses) and 177 acres of land. During Dr. Gillespie's presidency, that has included the addition of Luce Library, the Witherspoon Apartments, Scheide Hall, Templeton Hall, the Dupree Center for Children, and the renovation of Erdman Hall, or 260,000 square feet of space.

"For a seminary of 850 students, that's a lot of real estate," Poinsett points out.

Even more than the pride he takes in the campus, though, is his satisfaction in putting together an outstanding staff team. "I couldn't have accomplished anything without the 60 people I work with—the staff in maintenance, the technicians, the security force, the grounds crew, and the custodial staff," he says. "They are all committed to the well-being of the school; the grounds guys are here early with every winter storm, shoveling snow even before faculty and students begin calling in to see if classes will be held."

The challenges in managing such a staff and campus are many, and have increased and changed in Poinsett's two decades-plus. Having historic buildings is a major challenge; though beautiful, they take extra care, from choosing historically accurate paint colors for faculty houses to repairing woodwork and bricks to match the originals. Luckily, Poinsett's previous job as supervisor of historic sites for the New Jersey Division of Parks and Forestry gave him experience in renovating old buildings.

"We worked closely with Princeton's Historic District Commission when we repaired the front porch of 58 Mercer Street [the house Dr. Pat Miller and his wife live in]," Poinsett explains by example. "[Seminary archivist] Bill Harris found old photos of the original house with its porch, and we designed the balustrades and handrails to match it."

Such attention to detail has paid off. Renovations to several campus buildings, including Alexander and Brown Halls, have garnered historic preservation awards from the Princeton Historical Society and the State of New Jersey.

Another challenge has been the increased level of expectations of students and faculty. Second-career students are more numerous and they expect better housing. "You can't expect people who have been out of college for years to go back to living in dormitories with gang showers and no kitchen facilities," Poinsett says. Witherspoon Apartments have helped address this problem, but Poinsett thinks the Seminary will have to do more.

And then there is security. Like the nation, after 9/11 the Seminary has had to address what people need to feel secure, 24 hours a day. For Princeton, that means more campus lighting, locked doors to dormitories and office buildings, more security personnel, and student and employee ID cards to enter the childcare center, the library, and the parking garage.

Legal requirements and regulations have changed, too. "We're in an increasingly regulatory environment," explains Poinsett. "There are new laws about fire suppression systems, workers' safety, environmentally sound storage tanks, and of course the ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act). We're proud of what we've been able to do, like providing accessible building and restrooms, and phones for the hearing-impaired. And by the end of the summer we will have fire sprinklers in all of our residence halls, mandated by the State of New Jersey by the end of 2004 in response to the fire at Seton Hall University several years ago that killed several students."

Poinsett has also worked through a few crises, from Hurricane Floyd's visit to central Jersey in September 1999, which closed the Seminary for two days, to a fire in the basement of the Mackay Campus Center during his first month as facilities director in 1991. Floyd brought flooding in basements, downed tree limbs, and an absence of potable water, which Poinsett's staff solved by providing cases of bottled water to students. "The basement fire was probably set as a cover-up for a burglary," Poinsett says. "There wasn't much damage, but it was a bit unnerving to be called in in the early morning not knowing what I would find."

Then there were the 17-year cicada visits, which Poinsett lived through twice in his Princeton years. Millions of them, the living and the dead, beset the campus in May and June. "This year was the second time around for me," he says. "They were here in 1987, too, all over the campus. Not a crisis, really, but an amazing phenomenon."



Poinsett at the entrance to his beloved corporation yard

Photo: Joshua Sutherland

Given all this, the life of a facilities director can be pretty hectic. Perhaps no one knows that better than Susan Molloy, facilities office coordinator. “A week’s work could include a faculty member’s request for roof repairs, a Princeton Borough meeting about building permits, a meeting with student government to discuss fire suppression in the dorms, a walk-around to check the condition of stair treads, a meeting with a vendor on gas prices, and a meeting with staff to review repair schedules for the swimming pool,” says Molloy. “I guess there really isn’t a typical week!”

Poinsett leaves the Facilities Office in what he considers the “very capable hands” of German Martinez Jr., his associate director, promoted to director in July. Poinsett says Martinez and his staff will have major projects on their plate. The first is a master plan for the campus, now in its initial stages, outlining what new and upgraded facilities will be needed in the next 10-to-20 years. The plan came out of a facilities condition assessment that the Board of Trustees commissioned to project what major repairs need to be done and what new buildings need to be built as the institution approaches its bicentennial in 2012. The assessment also discovered what most Princetonians already know—that there is very little deferred maintenance on the Seminary campus, a fact that gratifies Poinsett and his staff.

Martinez will also need to address the condition of married student apartments (CRW) on the West Windsor Campus. “When the Seminary acquired them in 1965, we proudly advertised them as luxury garden apartments,” Poinsett says. “They had air conditioning and hardwood floors, which was a luxury at the time! Now they’re 45 years old and need serious attention.”

Renovations to Speer Library will also be on Martinez’s list.

Given his 22-year stay, one might expect that Poinsett will leave a bit of his heart at Princeton Seminary. “I will miss the collegiality and friendship of the two presidents and three vice presidents for whom I have worked,” he says. “They have been very different, but all became good friends.” He has also valued the support of the trustees, and their care for the campus. “Our trustees have a real love for this place, and a strong sense of stewardship,” he asserts.

John Gilmore, the current vice president, feels privileged to have worked with Poinsett. “David has been tremendously effective in being able to carry out the enormous and varied demands of his position,” Gilmore says. “He cares deeply about the mission of the Seminary, and we will miss his collegial style, his positive attitude, and his dry wit.”

Gilmore may rival Poinsett in the dry wit category. At the Seminary’s retirement dinner, Gilmore with straight face presented Poinsett with a memento of his beloved Yankee Stadium—a toilet seat with a Yankees decal on the lid, purportedly from the actual home of the Bronx Bombers (wink wink).

The toilet seat was joined by more serious retirement gifts: a rocking chair, a gift certificate for power tools at Home Depot (Poinsett, who built a hope chest for his wife before they were married, looks forward to doing woodworking in his home woodshop), and two books (the official centennial edition of the history of the Yankees and the 50th anniversary edition of the history of the Corvette).

Obviously retirement years will include following the Yanks. Poinsett also looks forward to restoring his ’78 Corvette, and to traveling. This fall he will go with his brother, stepbrother, and stepfather to Washington, D.C., to visit the World War Two Memorial and the new National Air and Space Museum annex. “And my wife and I want to travel out west after she retires, to the deserts and the national parks and Canada,” he says.

It goes without saying that Poinsett will often find his way to Harrisburg, Penn-sylvania, to visit his daughter and son-in-law and granddaughter Georgianna Ruth.

He may even return to the Seminary, arriving in his Corvette to be a waiter at the annual senior class banquet. “As long as I fit into my white summer tux—the one I got married in—I’ll be there to bid farewell to the seniors,” he promises.

Then there’s that book. He’s got the perfect final chapter.

“It was a dark and stormy night,” it might begin. Poinsett would go on to tell about the February evening in 1983 when then-president McCord asked him to drive a couple who had been visiting the Seminary to LaGuardia Airport. They started off in the snow, and by the time they reached the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway they were in a blizzard.

“We got to the airport to find that all flights had been cancelled,” Poinsett recounts. “I soon realized that I didn’t have my wallet—I must have dropped it on the road when I got out to clean off the windshield. So my guests bought me dinner, and we got to know each other as we spent the night on the floor of the Air Canada Terminal surrounded by skis. They were wonderful, and of course I agreed to send them the money they loaned me.”

He had to send it to Scotland. The couple was Dr. and Mrs. Thomas F. Torrance, the parents of Princeton’s new president, Dr. Iain Torrance.

When David Poinsett reached the new president in the receiving line of a campus reception for him in April when the Seminary’s sixth president was introduced, Poinsett says that Iain Torrance grinned broadly and said, “*I know you*; my parents have told me all about you!”

A fitting coda to the career of a man who came to Princeton never dreaming that he would meet and befriend some of those he calls “the greatest theological minds in the church.”

“I didn’t think this would be a calling,” he says. “But, in retrospect, it has been.” ■

**He has overseen and lovingly cared for the campus’s one million square feet of property.**



Some of the buildings that have been constructed or renovated during Poinsett’s tenure include (from top to bottom) Scheide Hall, Luce Library, Witherspoon Apartments, the Carol Gray Dupree Center for Children, Templeton Hall, and Erdman Hall.