



Ellis-Shackelford House

1917



*“We had a good life. This house was way ahead of its time
and a monument to the area.” Ellis Shackelford, 2010*





The Ellis Family Arrives in Phoenix

Phoenix physician and developer William Clyde (W.C.) Ellis constructed this extended four-square home with Prairie and Mediterranean detailing for his second wife Reba and daughter Helen in 1917. R.A. Gray designed and general contractor Tom Weatherford built the Ellis family's four-level, six-bedroom, 6,600-square-foot home on a nearly one-acre lot on Center Street (Central Avenue) one mile north of Dr. Ellis' downtown Phoenix medical office.



(L-R): Bernie, Helen and W.C. Ellis, Phoenix, Arizona, 1912.

in Chicago in 1893. This movement advocated for broad sidewalks, shade trees and blooming vegetation as a remedy to overcrowded cities in the eastern United States. The two-mile section of Center Street, stretching from Fillmore Street to Osborn Road, modeled these ideals, and later became known as Millionaire's Row.

Many Midwestern families were attracted to the second-largest town in Arizona for opportunity and health during the early 20th century. The Ellis family, W.C., his first wife Bernie and their five-year-old daughter Helen moved from Portsmouth, Ohio, to Phoenix in 1907. Ellis devoted himself to the medical and civic development of the small community of 11,000 residents. He helped organize Deaconess Hospital (now Good Samaritan) in 1913, and constructed the Ellis Building and its annex, the Physicians Building, at Second Avenue and Monroe Street. Bernie died of tuberculosis in 1915. When Dr. Ellis married Reba Blount in 1917, he constructed this home just south of her parents' Frank and Ida Blounts' house.

Cover: W.C., Reba and 18-year-old Helen Ellis (seated) in front of their house at the southwest corner of North Central Avenue and West Culver Street, c. 1920. Photo courtesy Arizona Historical Society Museum at Papago Park (Call No. 1989.113.01).

From the 1890s to the 1940s, wealthy residents began moving northward from the original Phoenix townsite, building grand and spacious homes on large, grassy, shaded lots. To attract new residents, Phoenix developers boosted the image of the town through the City Beautiful movement, introduced



Helen Ellis, age 16, with American Beauty roses along the house's driveway, 1918.



Looking north along Center Street (left) at McKinley Street, c. 1915. The Ellis-Shackelford home is nearly one-half mile to the north. Photo courtesy Arizona Historical Foundation.

A Monumental House

Dr. Ellis constructed this home in the middle of World War I and five years after Arizona statehood. Phoenix was isolated from international events during the 1910s, but residents still introduced fashions and ideas from across the



The deep overhangs and wide porch shade east-facing rooms from the morning sun. The Blount home and Model-T are visible in the background, c. 1920's.

United States. The architecture of the home mixes Prairie style, popular in the early 20th century Midwest, with Mediterranean influences, more common in the Southwest. The broad roof eaves and low-sloped porch roof are influenced by Prairie School architecture, with the deep, east-facing porch providing

shade from the summer sun. The red roof tiles and the double wooden brackets visible below the roof are Mediterranean in style. This four-square plan connects four main-floor square rooms without a hallway. Helen and her husband Gordon Shackelford removed the partition walls that once separated the entryway and living room, although the library and dining room pocket doors were left intact.

Hand-pressed red bricks from Colorado comprise the exterior walls; they are known as “tapestry” or “wire-cut” brick because of their rough appearance. On the interior, the mahogany wood staircase, built-in bookcases, wainscoting and tiled earthenware fireplace symbolize early 20th century interior design and craftsmanship. Dr. Ellis imported mahogany trees from the Philippines and milled them onsite. Decorative, leaded glass graces the front door and side lights.

Discover State-of-the-Art Features at the Ellis-Shackelford House

The Ellis home possessed amenities and technology that were unusual in 1917. These features made the home a state-of-the-art showcase of early 20th century technology.

The 1890s and early 1900s experienced technological inventions, such as running water and electrical lighting that altered daily life in wealthy and middle-class homes. Only 20 percent of residences across the United States, including the Ellis-Shackelford House, contained electricity and indoor plumbing in 1917. Wealthy residents took advantage of labor-saving "mechanical servants" and filled their homes with such conveniences as vacuum cleaners, irons, automatic flush toilets and hot water heaters.

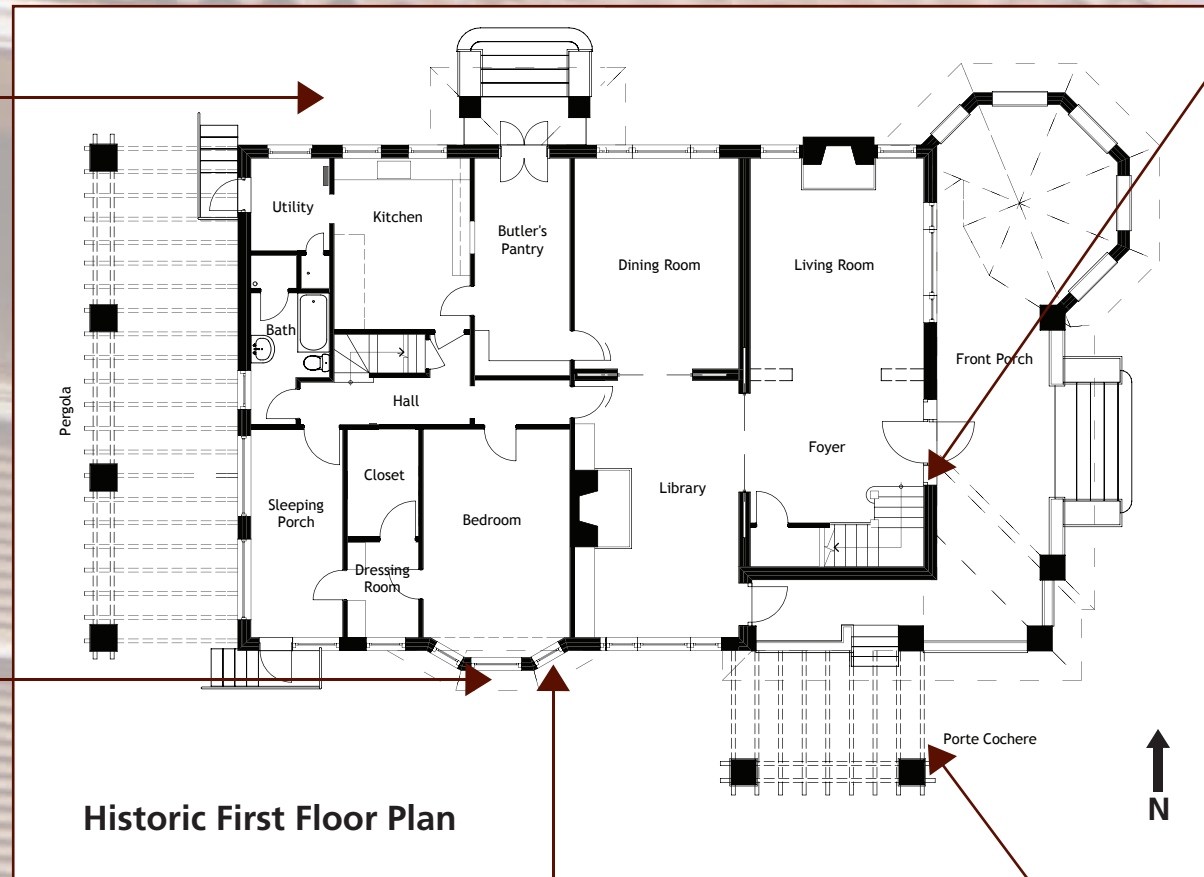
The **Underground Rainwater Cistern**, located near the northwest corner of the house, provided an alternative to harder city water. Roof gutters funneled rainwater through a charcoal filter into the cistern. A pump drew water up from the cistern to the solar heater. The Ellises used rainwater for laundry and bathing, although the Shackelfords discontinued its use due to lack of rain.

Look for small, round openings of the **central vacuum system** along the baseboards in the first level hallway.

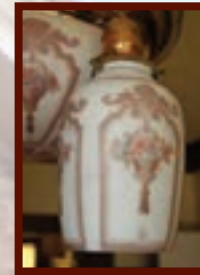


A coal-fired furnace in the basement provided back-up heat. Coal was poured through the **Scuttle** on the south side of the house.

The Southwestern Solar Water Heater Company installed a **Night and Day Solar Water Heater** on the southwest corner of the roof in 1917. William J. Bailey patented this system in 1909 and sold 4,000 units across the Southwest United States. The black glass absorber plate collected the sun's rays, which heated water in copper pipes below the glass to 110 degrees. Water then flowed to an insulated, steel tank in the attic. The tank held heat overnight, providing warm water for morning use.



Historic First Floor Plan



Mr. Thoma, a Swiss artist, designed, hand painted and installed the electric **Chandeliers** in the living room, dining room and library.



Notice the wall-mounted **Push-Button Switches** to turn electric lights on and off.



This house features two fireplaces in the living areas. While wealthy residents purchased dozens of new electrical gadgets, they also included traditional architectural elements in their homes such as this mahogany wood and earthenware fireplace. While the Ellises kept warm through a coal-fired boiler, fireplaces provided a sense of tradition and ambience.

Only one in five Americans owned cars in 1920, but Model-T's were a popular sight at Central Avenue homes. The **Porte-Cochere** was built as a covered entrance for carriages and Model-T's on the southeast side of the house, but was too small for later model vehicles.





Prosperity with the Shackelfords on North Central Avenue



(L-R) Reba Blount Ellis, William Clyde Ellis, James Gordon Shackelford, Jr., Helen Ellis Shackelford and James Gordon Shackelford, 1925.

Dr. Ellis' only child, Helen, married her childhood sweetheart, James Gordon Shackelford, at her home in September 1923, uniting two prominent Phoenix families. Gordon carved a beautiful wood rose arbor for the wedding, which stood between the library and dining room. When they returned from their honeymoon to Globe, Arizona, they moved into a new house (now demolished) Dr. Ellis built for them on the western lot adjacent to his 1917 home.

Gordon graduated from Northwestern University in 1923, and joined his father's dental practice in the Ellis Building, and later, the Professional Building downtown. During the 1920s, Phoenix commercial life flourished as the warm climate and healthy environment attracted newcomers. Between 1920 and 1930, Phoenix grew from 29,053 to 48,118 residents.



Helen and Gordon's oldest son, James Gordon Shackelford, Jr. (Jim), born in 1925, in the front yard of his parents' home. West Culver Street and the Ellis home are visible in the background, 1925.



Helen and Ellis Shackelford in the south yard, with the porte cochere, grape arbor and second story screened porch in the background, 1931.

After Dr. Ellis died of cancer in 1931, Helen, Gordon and their children Jim, age 6, and Ellis, 4 months, moved into Helen's childhood home. The Shackelfords retained the same elegance W.C. and Reba created. With two young boys, the home's basement and large yard soon became known as a neighborhood headquarters for local children to gather.

Jim once described their home as "a beautiful, wonderful party house." The open acreage and quiet streets surrounding North Central Avenue allowed the boys and their friends to build forts and tree-houses, and to try out their homemade, motorized toy cars. Helen and Gordon held parties for their friends and neighbors on the third floor, and allowed Jim and Ellis to host teenage parties.

During Jim and Ellis' childhood in the 1930s and 1940s, the downtown commercial district began to move northward along North Central Avenue. To attract business from the new suburbs outside the city center, Gordon built his dentist office at the southeast corner of the property in 1947, where he practiced and the Shackelfords lived until 1964.



The Rest of the Story

In the decades following World War II, the city emerged as a “Sunbelt Center” and drew national attention because of its long summers, mild winters and abundance of low-cost, suburban living. The increasing affordability of the automobile increased the attractiveness of living outside the original city core. Upper- and middle-class Phoenicians abandoned their homes in and around downtown for suburban dwellings elsewhere. One by one, the luxurious homes that lined Central Avenue were demolished with the sites there redeveloped for new office buildings, stores and public institutions. The once exclusive residential corridor transformed into a highly trafficked commercial artery.



Homebuilders Development Company purchased the Chelsea Place plat, one block north of the Ellis-Shackelford House in 1912, (Photo date unknown). The grand homes that occupied prominent lots on North Central Avenue are now gone, replaced by government and commercial structures. Photo courtesy Ron Heberlee.

The Shackelfords moved out of their North Central Avenue home in 1964. The house hosted San Pablo Home for Boys from 1966 to 1971, and the Phoenix Chapter of the Arizona Historical Society from 1972 to 1992. The Arizona Humanities Council began leasing the building in 1988, and the City of Phoenix Historic Preservation Office began using it as a field office in 1992.

The Arizona Department of Transportation acquired the home to complete the last section of Interstate 10, known as Papago Freeway, in 1971. Many community members worked together to save the house from demolition. Because this home is the only unaltered survivor of early North Central Avenue mansions in Phoenix, it was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1983 and in the Phoenix Historic Property Register in 1986.



Jim Shackelford in the south yard of the Ellis-Shackelford House, c. early 1930s.

The City of Phoenix purchased the Ellis-Shackelford Home in 2007 in an effort to make the house available to the public. Today, the home gives a visual reminder of the grand and spacious homes that once lined North Central Avenue’s “Millionaire’s Row.”





Ellis-Shackelford House
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All photos courtesy of the Shackelford Family, unless indicated.

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This house is open for limited public events throughout the year. The Arizona Humanities Council (AHC) manages the property through a partnership with the City of Phoenix. Please contact AHC for further information:
602-257-0335
azhumanities.org