

History of the German House at the University of the South

In 1976, Dr. James Davidheiser was hired into the German Department by Dean Stephen Puckette following his interview in which Dr. Davidheiser stated that he would only accept the job if he could establish a German House and an exchange program with the Federation of German-American Clubs. Davidheiser had been instrumental in establishing the Deutsches Haus and exchange program at another university. Dean Puckette, who was familiar with German, readily assented. Dr. Davidheiser and then Vice Chancellor Robert Ayres visited Emory Hall, a residence hall directly across from Phillips and next to the "old hospital," and chose that as the new German House. It opened in 1978 with ten student residents.

Though it had room for ten students, Emory Hall lacked a living room or kitchen suitable for German cultural events. Communal living was just one part of Davidheiser's vision. A language house thrives when it is both a home and cultural center. Events in those years were dependent upon good weather, since they needed to be held outside. Thorolf Karb from the University of Mainz was the first exchange student leader of the house. As recently as 2016, Karb continued to remember his time in Sewanee with fondness and recalled the early years of the Mittagstisch, a weekly event started in 1977-1978 to encourage the use of German beyond the house.

In 1987, the Bruton House on the corner of Louisiana Circle and University Avenue became available following the death of Mrs. Bruton, wife of the former University provost. Mary Sue Cushman, then Dean of Students, told Dr. Davidheiser, "The Bruton House is available. You are at the top of the list for a new site. If you want it, come over quickly and make a decision." Davidheiser jumped at the chance to acquire a family house with a large kitchen, dining room, living room, five rooms upstairs, and backyard. He and Dr. Reinhard Zachau, his colleague in the German department, visited the house that afternoon. After a few renovations and the conversion of a closet into a third full bath, the house was ready for student occupation. To mark the new location, Dr. Davidheiser had a three-word sign made to hang over the front door: "Das Deutsche Haus" and there it continues to hang, proudly greeting occupants and visitors.

Now in its 46th year, Deutsches Haus has flourished as a living quarter for students wishing to practice German and to deepen their knowledge of German culture. Regular annual events are held in the House, ranging from lectures to seasonal celebrations for the community and students. One of these important events is the study abroad report each fall by students who have spent a year, semester, or summer abroad to their classmates and faculty. Another event held at the House is the initiation into Delta Phi Alpha, the National German Honor Society.

In 2027-2028, we will celebrate the 40th anniversary of the house at its current location and the 50th year since its founding. Its remarkable longevity and success are a credit to the many engaged students who have lived there and left their mark on this learning adventure.