The gardens to the east of the House have gone through periods of splendor and of relative neglect. Little was done in the early years, but White’s second wife was an enthusiastic gardener and employed a full-time gardener for many years. The gardens were further developed during the presidency of Livingston Farrand and his popular wife, Daisy. The Cornell Archives have photographs of the White House and gardens during this time made by Margaret Bourke-White 1927, early in her career. The white or secret garden, in honor of Mrs. Farrand, has recently been replanted and partially restored in memory of Professor Morris Bishop, through the generosity of Mrs. Alison Kingsbury Bishop, her sister, Mrs. W. Rowell Chase, and Mrs. Virginia Schuetz.

The north wing of the mansion was originally the servants’ quarters. On the first floor, beyond the kitchen, were a servants’ hall and two small bedrooms. This area has been converted into a guest suite, with a private entrance, for use by visiting scholars.

Besides White and Farrand, only one other Cornell president lived in the house, Edmund Ezra Day, who headed the University from 1938 until 1949. When Charles Kendall Adams became president, after White’s sudden resignation in June of 1885, he moved into a house the university owned at 41 East Avenue, occupied earlier by Professors Bela Macksoon and Herbert Tuttle, and later by President Schurman. That house has long since been demolished. For two brief periods when the Whites went to Berlin in 1879, the vice-president, William ChanningRussel, and his family moved in. While White was in St. Petersburg in 1893, a group of bachelor professors, including Burr, Ernest Hufcut, and Duncan Campbell Lee, lived at 27 East Avenue, still the street address of the Andrew Dickson White House. The mansion served from 1935 to 1973 as the University Art Museum.

The present use of White’s old mansion, on what Willard Fiske called Breezy Knoll, as the home of Cornell’s Society for the Humanities, seems particularly appropriate. White’s plan for awarding fellowship programs, university lectures, seminars, conferences, luncheons, receptions, and dinners. The two front rooms are used during the academic year as classrooms. During the summer, the Andrew Dickson White House provides space for special programs, most recently the summer sessions of the School of Criticism and Theory. It is also widely known as a splendid facility for wedding ceremonies and receptions. Over the south wing of the building there is a combined seminar room/reference library used by Society Fellows. The many bedrooms on the second and third floors have been converted into studies that now house the Society Fellows, the Director of the Society and administrative staff.

The Andrew Dickson White House was founded in 1860 as a private residence for Andrew D. White and his family. The mansion was originally known as the “White Villa” and was designed by architect A.D. White in the Italianate style. The house was constructed between 1868 and 1870 and was completed in 1871. The building is made of red sandstone and features a large front porch with columns, a two-story addition, and a mansard roof.

Andrew Dickson White, Cornell University’s first president and co-founder, had his Victorian villa built for his use as president of the university in 1871. He announced at the time that he would spend $50,000 on the house, and give it to the university for use of future presidents when he retired. Work began in July and by mid-January of 1872, the chimneys were finished and the roofs boarded, though the slates were not yet in place. White’s papers in the Cornell archives contain many letters and accounts concerning construction and furnishing of the house. In late April 1872, White wrote his wife that the house was coming on satisfactorily except for the steam heating, “and that is an utter failure from top to bottom.”

Andrew Dickson White House

For two years, White struggled with the heating. Inadequate systems were altered, amplified, tested, and replaced. A lawsuit was brought against the first supplier in Syracuse, and the Cornell vice-president, William ChanningRussel, sent White reports on room temperatures, steam pressure, outside temperature, and amount of coal consumed in attempts to warm the house. The house obviously needed its five fireplaces. In June of 1874, the entire family, servants and all, moved from Syracuse to the new house. In addition to A.D. White and his wife, Mary OutwaterWhite, there were four children ranging in age from two months to fifteen years.

An English stone carver, Robert Richardson, did his first Ithaca work on the White villa. His fine stone corbels and capitals flank the front entrance to the house and carry a moral reminder, “Do men gather grapes of thorns or figs of thistles?” The carving on the left side includes birds, butterflies, fruit, and flowers, while those on the right reproduce poisonous plants and repellent creatures. White felt that art should serve a moral purpose. Through his half-century’s association with the university, he had stained glass windows, sculpture, paintings, benches, bells, fountains, and memorial plaques placed around the grounds to remind students of the accomplishments of the past.

An old newspaper clipping reports that the balcony floor above the vestibule of the villa was “of Cleveland stone, weighing over two tons,” and that it supported a “balustrade...
of twenty small stone pillars, no two of which are carved similar." The balcony served as more than "an elegant frontispiece to the dwelling," for White used to address victorious crews from the balcony on their return from Ithaca, and on several occasions stood upon it to acknowledge serenading students who came to welcome him back after his frequent absences.

After passing through the small vestibule, visitors enter a broad, forty-two foot central hall, which is open to the ceiling of the second floor hallway through a central balustrade "well hole." It was White's announced intention to furnish the hallway with a "number of richly carved Florentine chairs," and to cover the walls with pictures. At the rear of the hall is a gently rising stairway with rail and balusters leading up from a walnut newel. The staircase is particularly inviting to children; and, indeed, White's granddaughter, Priscilla Ferry, recalled that she "used to slide down the banister and land on a big white polar bear rug." The heavily carved sideboard may be a seventeenth century German piece that White mentioned in an early will; it appears in photographs of his St. Petersburg dining room. The Guerlac Room, which is forty-three feet long, has seen many changes. Originally, the entire wall surface was covered with bookshelves. When the addition to the south end of the house was added, White considered making the old library into a dining room. A letter from William H. Miller answered White's inquiry, telling him that by removing the bookcases, the room would be large enough to seat forty guests for dinner.

After the death of White's last surviving daughter, Karin White, in 1971, a number of family pieces – a wing chair with a rampant lion stitched to it, a pair of embroidered leather chairs – were photographed. A medallion he found a foil-covered slip of paper in the small hole behind it. On the paper was a message written in German script and dated Spen-dau, September 24, 1868. Professor George Lincoln Burr rendered the message in English as, "Go out into the world and testify to what is born, even in prison walls, from strength, from patience, and from loving toil. The United Workmen."

Opening from an east door of the living room is the conservatory. Built in the angle between the old library and the dining room, it affords a fine view of the gardens at the rear of the house. Priscilla Ferry once recalled "the fountain in the conservatory tinkling away and perfumes from the flowers making every meal elegant and festive." In 1899, the Class of 1952 donated funds to restore the conservatory to its original splendor and maintain it with plants and orchids.

Photographs of the original dining room show simple light walls with a dado and a handsome ceiling patterned with a lacing of walnut moldings and turned pendants. The only piece of furniture that survives from the original dining room is the small folding serving table with spiral legs, the gift of Mr. Courtney Crawford, Law 1954. The studied leather chairs of that time have been replaced by a set of more elaborately carved chairs found in Seneca County for the House by Mr. Jay Cantor 1964, an art historian and preservationist who served as artistic director during the renovation of the House.