

AGRICULTURE HALL



Fig. 1. Agriculture Hall, c. 1963. The octagonal library can be seen protruding from the rear of the building. Visible in the upper left are the King Hall greenhouses. [series 8/5, GC 554]

Agriculture Hall was designed as the administrative and research home of the College of Agriculture. It was the birthplace of nearly all current disciplines of the College, except dairying, horticulture, and agricultural physics. Begun in 1902, it was occupied in the winter of 1903. The building is almost entirely unmodified, and was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1985.

At the turn of the century the college of agriculture was contained in only three buildings, Agriculture Hall [now South Hall], Smith Hall, and King Hall. All the offices and most of the laboratories were in South Hall. The attendance of the agricultural short course had risen from 19 students in 1886 to 196 in 1901. The crowding was intense, and the faculty had given up all space except the bare minimum for offices. Dean William Henry, an experienced and skilled lobbyist began the campaign for a building for the college of agriculture. Mention had been made of such a "projected building" as early as 1898, during the planning of the agricultural heating station. In the summer of 1901 Henry and university architect J. T. W. Jennings began to make plans for the necessary building, they visited similar facilities at a number of colleges in the east. Acting president Birge placed the need for it "first among the necessities of the university."¹ The need was so obvious that the battle was short. The legislature of 1901 acting on a request from Henry for \$175,000 granted an appropriation of \$150,000 for the construction of a central building for the college of agriculture. It was understood at that time, that a later legislature would have to appropriate more money to furnish the building; that is that the \$150,000 was intended for the structure itself.

Jennings modified the plans to account for the drop in appropriation², and the building contract was let to T. C. McCarthy in October 1901, for \$143,179. Construction began immediately, the

excavation was completed in the fall of 1901, strikes delayed work in the spring of 1902, but the structure was erected, roofed in and heated by December 1902. A second appropriation for \$25,000 to furnish the building was passed in May 1903, and the completion of the building took until December 1903 when the building first went into service with the 1903 short course students.³

The building was a 200 foot by 64 foot rectangle with its long dimension set along Linden Drive. It was three stories high over a full height basement. A two-story octagonal wing protrudes off the north side of the main building. This octagon housed on its bottom level the agricultural library and reading rooms. The second level held a 750-seat auditorium including a balcony suspended from iron rods from the ceiling. Construction style was slow burn mill construction, a masonry and wood combination intended to catch fire with difficulty and spread not at all. The material was brick, with trimmings of Bedford limestone and terra cotta, the roof was of red tile, and the outside metalwork of copper.⁴

Stylistically, Jennings used his favored Beaux Arts classical revival style. In terms of material and general style the agricultural college was very similar to the engineering building on Bascom Hill completed only a year earlier. It has several features that separate it dramatically from the considerably more budget conscious engineering building, namely the grand and imposing Linden Street entrance, with its four Ionic columns, the north entrance, a classical wall that is if possible even more dramatic than the front entrance. A huge raised letter stone plaque "Auditorium and Library Hall of Agriculture" is surrounded by swags and cartouches and all manner of classical ornamentation.

The agricultural library, which had been growing steadily since William Henry became dean, became too large, too heavily used, and too vulnerable to fire to remain in the lower octagon level. In 1928 a pair of concrete and brick wings were added to the back of the octagon to house the library. In 1910, with typical chutzpah, University architect Arthur Peabody convinced the regents that the work of his predecessor Jennings on the building was laughably ugly and hired a contractor to chip off a black finish on the headers of the building. It is no longer possible to determine where this alteration was done, or what the original looked like.⁵

The agricultural college building was the first home of a large number of disciplines which now have departments and buildings of their own. Among these are: veterinary science, poultry science, agricultural economics, agricultural chemistry, home economics, bacteriology, agronomy, agricultural engineering and genetics. This function of Agriculture Hall is similar to the role that Science Hall played in the development of the sciences in the college of L & S.

Except for the library wings, remodelled for Landscape Architecture for \$194,000 in 1969, and the installation of some tile floors and dropped ceilings, the Agricultural College Building has been almost completely unaltered through its ninety years of service to the university, recalling president E. A. Birge's 1902 words " In our new Agricultural Hall we have a structure which should stand for ages as in some fair measure representative of the intelligence, earnestness, and ambition of the agricultural people of Wisconsin at the beginning of the twentieth century."⁶

1) *Regent's Report*, 1900 p. 26

2) Some extant artists sketches indicate that the building might have been originally expandable into a quadrangle which would have engulfed the octagonal auditorium.

3) *Wisconsin Alumni Magazine*, November 1901 p. 63; *Daily Cardinal*, March 12, 1902, September 25, 1902, October 1, 1902, December 10, 1902, May 14, 1903, September 30, 1903, December 7, 1903.

4) *Nomination Papers National Register of Historic Places*, State Historical Society, Historic Preservation Office.

5) *Minutes of the Executive Committee*, August 31, 1928, *Minutes of the Board of Regents*, December 7, 1910.

6) *Report of the Board of Regents*, Presidents report 1902 p. 17, Regents Minutes, February 14, 1969 Exhibit K.