

ALUMNI HOUSE



Fig. 1. Alumni House from Lake Street c. 1967. It is a three story building of steel and reinforced concrete, with Wisconsin field-stone sheathing on the lowest level. At left is the connecting link to the Wisconsin center. [series 9/2, Alumni House, jf-83]

The Alumni House was built with donated fund in 1965 to house the Wisconsin Alumni Foundation's offices and records. A major addition, the Below Alumni Center was begun in 1994.

The Wisconsin Alumni Association had its modern genesis in the great fund-raising drives of the 1920s for the memorial union. A list of alumni was laboriously assembled from the registrar's records by Porter Butts and his assistants to raise pledges for the union. From 1923 to the early 1950s the Alumni Association, was housed in small offices in the union, and other spaces. In 1930 at the request of the University, the Alumni Association became official supervisors of the "Bureau of Graduate Records", and the Bureau became a University department.

The Association first started a building fund in 1953 with a \$7500 donation from the class of 1903. The campaign was handled by the Association in cooperation with the Wisconsin Foundation. In September 1956 the regents voted that the old Washburn Observatory building could be remodelled for use as an alumni house. The Alumni Association threw themselves wholeheartedly into a fund-raising drive to remodel the observatory, which was estimated to cost \$225,000 and to take until the fall of 1959. In June 1959 Thomas Brittingham Jr. offered \$33,000 in matching funds, and the target was reached in November 1959.¹

On June 6, 1959, a month before construction was to start, the directors of the Alumni Association voted to abandon the observatory hill site. The impetus for this change was a report by the consulting architects which said that the building was too old and too small to be reasonably turned into the alumni house.²



Fig. 2. The demolition of the Sigma Chi fraternity house April 24, 1965. The site of the new alumni house.

The most sensible site turned out to be near the recently erected Wisconsin Center building on Langdon and Lake Streets. In August 1959 the Wisconsin Foundation began to bargain with the Sigma Chi fraternity for the purchase of their chapter house that stood at 630 N. Lake Street, on the land between the Wisconsin Center and Lake Mendota (see Fig. 2). In June 1961 the University decided to bring condemnation proceedings against the owners. The property was finally acquired by the Foundation for \$178,000 on December 26, 1961.³

In 1962 the architects Foeller, Schober, Safford and Jahn of Green Bay were selected to do the design. In 1963 the regents gave the Alumni Association permission to build on the Lake Street lot, with the understanding that when complete, the building and land would be donated to the University. Preliminary plans from the architects were approved by the regents in June 1964. The building was estimated at that time to cost about \$500,000.⁴

In February of 1964 bids came back from builders about \$300,000 over budget. This was a serious setback, for which the architects took the blame. The committee quickly decided that they could cut the deficit to \$200,000 by reducing certain features of the building (such as granite trim), and decided that they would go back to the alumni for more funding, despite the fact that they had publicly announced the end of that fund-raiser. The new budget was set at \$740,000. The second round of bids were opened September 23, 1965, and were \$32,000 over the new budget, but with strenuous negotiating were reduced to the required level. The general contractor was Vogel Brothers Building Company of Madison for \$464,347. Scheduling called for completion by the fall of 1965. In keeping with the stormy nature of the project, during the groundbreaking ceremony on October 23, 1965, a storm suddenly blew up off of Lake Mendota and drove participants (including governor Knowles) and spectators indoors to the Wisconsin Center auditorium. The building was formally dedicated on May 13, 1967 at which time it was presented as a gift to the University.⁵

The Alumni House is connected to the Wisconsin Center by a second floor corridor (see Fig.

1.) The first floor holds the main entrance from Lake Street, reception areas, offices and the Bureau of Graduate Records. On the second floor are the alumni lounge, and some offices, The third floor is designed as an addition to the Wisconsin Center contains the Lakeshore Meeting Room intended for lectures in the continuing education programs. A twelve foot wide walkway encircles the building at the second story level. The walkway and the Lakeshore Room provide unparalleled views over Lake Mendota.

In October 1994, groundbreaking was held for the Below Alumni Center addition. The Below Addition will provide a conference room, a library, and office space. A parking lot at the end of Lake Street will also be constructed.⁶

- 1) Berge to Fred, June 24, 1953, series 4/0/1 box 180; Rennebohm to Peterson, March 5, 1959, series 24/9/2 box 11; *Regent's Minutes*, September 8, 1956; Wisconsin Alumni Magazine, October 1956 p. 6; Wisconsin Alumni Magazine, October 1958, November 1958, December 1958, March 1959, April 1959.
- 2) *Wisconsin Alumni Magazine*, July 1959 p. 20;
- 3) Peterson to Rood, August 22, 1960, June 7, 1961, Peterson to Elvehjem, February 16, 1961, Memo, AWP, November 20, 1962 series 4/0/1 box 180; *Wisconsin Alumni Magazine*, January 1962, February 1962.
- 4) Peterson to Culbertson, January 12, 1963, series 4/0/3 box 180; *Regent's Minutes*, January 11, 1963, June 8, 1964. *Wisconsin Alumni Magazine*, July 1964.
- 5) Sites to Peterson, March 30, 1965, series 40/1/7-1 box 56; Building Committee Meeting, May 4, 1965, series 40/1/7-1 box 56; Rennebohm to building committee, September 24, 1965, Alumni House Meeting, April 6, 1965, Alumni House Reports, series 4/0/1 box 180; *Wisconsin Alumni Magazine*, August 1965, November 1965. *The Daily Cardinal*, November 3, 1966; *Wisconsin State Journal*, November 28, 1966.
- 6) Plans in physical plant plans room; Ceremony pamphlet, Archives Alumni House subject file, *Daily Cardinal*, October 26, 1994.