

BASCOM HALL



Fig 1. The 'Main Edifice' c. 1880 [9/1 Bascom Hall folder #1, x25-839]



Fig 2. New portico, new dome, new south wing. c. 1900. [Bascom folder #2, jf5]

Fig. 3. Dire combustion and confus'd events, the burning of Main Hall Oct. 10, 1916. Students from the nearby Engineering building (visible on the roof in the picture) tried to put the fire out, but the fire hoses were so rotted that they would deliver no water to the blaze. [9/1, Bascom Hall Fire, x25-2359]



Bascom Hall (designed by William Tinsley) was opened in 1859 as the first entirely instructional building at the University. Its construction and financing caused the University considerable difficulty and embarrassment. It was known variously as the Main edifice, University Hall, and finally Bascom Hall. It was added to in 1899, 1905 and 1927. Its dome was lost in a 1916 fire.

In his 1852 Annual Report to the Regents, Chancellor Lathrop states "After the completion of the second dormitory building [South Hall], I shall not be disposed to recommend the application of

any farther portion of the present endowment to building purposes. The balance will barely be sufficient for a permanent productive fund."¹ If by this statement Lathrop meant that the building days of the University (from the original endowment) were near an end, his resolve did not survive the decade. Only four years after Lathrop's indisposition for more building, the regents say: "The whole number of students for the year ending December 17th 1856 is 169 an increase of more than fifty on the numbers for 1855 ... it has become a matter of strict necessity to proceed to the erection of the main edifice of the University."² By the time Main Hall was opened on August 10, 1859, the finances and to a degree the reputation of the University were seriously damaged. What did the regents expect to build?

This building is designed for public rooms, for recitation, lecture, library, cabinet, apparatus. It will contain also, the astronomical observatory, the working laboratory, apartments suitable to the residence of two families of the faculty, the principal dining hall for the use of Students, and a chapel. All the departments in Science, Literature and Arts and in the professional schools of Medicine and Law will find ample accommodation in the proposed edifice.³

Later it would be made to serve as a drill hall and a water tower too. It is difficult to imagine that a board of men experienced in business and the University's operation could have seriously believed that it was possible to do all that with a building that they could afford to erect. To pay for it the regents asked the legislature for a loan from the university fund of \$35,000 to build the main edifice. The 1857 legislature responded with authorization for a \$40,000 loan (from the University's original endowment fund). The regents gave in part the following instructions to the building committee (made up of some regents): "In a word it should be plain, substantial, comfortable and exactly adapted to the purposes for which it is designed and no other."⁴ In a word it would be none of these things. The plan selected by the building committee was submitted by William Tinsley of Indianapolis. Mr. Tinsley's biographer says: "As originally designed and built [see fig. 1] , it was a handsome and dignified if somewhat pompous, edifice in the grand manner of the high Italian Renaissance."⁵

By the time Tinsley's plan was announced the building committee could also report that the contract for the building had been "awarded to James Campbell of Madison for the entire work complete, at \$36,550." The contract called for completion of the entire structure by November 1, 1858.⁶

This was slightly disingenuous of the committee who would later report that when they first put the contract out there were no bids at or under the total appropriations for the work (\$40,000). To circumvent this difficulty, the committee reduced the project's specifications until they got a bid under the limit. The problems with this method of meeting a budget were immediately obvious. The new plan did not include a basement, or once the basement was put back in the plan, the necessary structural strength or finishing for the upper levels of the building. As construction commenced these items were put back in the plan in the belief that they could be paid for from the excess income from the endowment fund.⁷

Adding to these machinations were a nationwide financial panic in 1857, and contractors who were increasingly skeptical of the financial solidity of the University. It is not surprising then that the committee states in referring to the regents involvement in the construction of the main edifice: "The history of their financial affairs is one of considerable embarrassment".⁸ Some of this embarrassment was due to an unsympathetic legislature. At several points in the construction process money to pay for the work was generated by selling bonds at 10% to local citizens. At last when the building was opened for use in August 1859 it was a year late, and had cost over \$60,000, a cost overrun of 50 per cent. It also had unfinished rooms on the upper level, and a roof that leaked badly. The board of regents in 1860 admitted that the affair had been difficult and embarrassing, and that the financial resources of the university had been and would be restricted for years.⁹



Fig 4. Modern configuration of Bascom Hall c. 1955. [series 9/1, Bascom folder #3 ns-640]

What had the University gotten for all this effort and cost in dollars and credibility? The regents say in 1860:

Though ... it may be criticized in some of its parts, it is upon the whole the best building for educational purposes that has yet been erected in the West ... the central point of educational interest in Wisconsin for generations yet to come.¹⁰

The first hints of how well the building was designed came early. In 1859 President Barnard hired a professor of hygiene, Dr. David B. Reid, known as the man who ventilated Parliament. Dr. Reid left after one year declaring what they needed was heat rather than ventilation. Students who had known this from the first cold days, kept warm by huddling over fires built on the basement floor.¹¹

Within twenty years of its opening University Hall was being described as "never a fortunate building ... very small, ill-furnished and ill-ventilated"¹² The board of visitors in 1882 referred to the "criminally stupid method" of ventilating the main building¹³.

The edifice intended for generations to come needed rebuilding before the second generation had gone, due mainly to a large and rapid increase in enrollment. When University Hall was begun [1857] there were 169 students. By 1892 the enrollment had passed the one thousand mark. Since in the intervening years no other building intended for the general student body had been erected, the crowding was fierce. A new portico with wider stairways was built in 1895. A new dome followed in 1898. After repeated failures of the legislature to appropriate more funds for the alleviation of the crowding, in 1899 the regents report the completion of the south wing addition to University Hall which doubled the number of classrooms, added plumbing, provided a lecture hall with a capacity of 347 and allowed the University's administrative officers to return from their temporary exile in the recently finished Law Building. Of the south wing addition [see fig 2], the regents make this mysterious statement:

The architects—Messrs. Ferry and Clas—have succeeded in the difficult task of remodelling an old building of inferior architectural appearance into a dignified and impressive edifice, while preserving almost unchanged the essential features of the older structure.¹⁵

The plans by Ferry and Clas included a provisional north wing identical to the south wing. The construction of this north wing was deferred until 1905 when the enrollment had passed 3000. In 1904 the regents report declares: "the construction of the north wing has begun and will be ready for occupancy by the end of 1906."¹⁶ Those old grads who mourned the alteration of the old campus landmark were reassured: "The completion of the new north wing ... will add a charm which even alumni of early days will not be slow to recognize."¹⁷

The charm was nearly lost forever when in October of 1916 a fire of unknown origin completely destroyed the dome of University Hall [see fig. 3]. Though the regents took it calmly, it had been a very near miss. The long forgotten water supply tank in the base of the dome doused the blaze when the dome collapsed into it, saving the rest of the structure. The dome was never replaced.¹⁸

In 1927 nearly unnoticed in the uproar over the construction of the Memorial Union, a large and badly needed theater wing (originally conceived of as a liberal arts building) was added to the west (back) side of University Hall. The theatre was dedicated May 18, 1927. Except for interior remodelling this completed the modern [1993] configuration of the building [see fig. 4].

The name of the building was originally the main edifice, then (July 1859) University Hall, and in June 1920 under president Edward Birge became Bascom Hall, perhaps with the same sense of irony that led Birge to rename Ladies Hall Chadbourne Hall, since it was Bascom who in 1880 had referred to University Hall as "never a fortunate building".

- 1) *Regents Report of the University of Wisconsin* 1852 p. 22.
- 2) *Regents Report of the University of Wisconsin* 1856 p. 10.
- 3) *Regents Report of the University of Wisconsin* 1856 p. 11.
- 4) *Regents Minutes* April 14, 1857.
- 5) Forbes, *Victorian Architect*, p. 82. Forbes goes on: "The most reasonable hypothesis is that in hiring Tinsley the regents gave him considerable latitude but specified that University Hall must conform fairly closely to the general pattern and aspect of the long-accepted Rague drawings." These John F. Rague drawings were the original campus plan, calling for four dormitories and a main edifice on College Hill. These drawing have been long since lost.
- 6) *Report of the Regents of the University of Wisconsin* 1857 p. 35. Documents list payment authorization to Campbell March 10, 1860 by supervising architect Joseph Chatterson. (Memorial Library Archives series 1/1/3/6).
- 7) *Report of the Regents of the University of Wisconsin* 1860 p. 5.
- 8) *Report of the Regents of the University of Wisconsin* 1860 p. 9.
- 9) *Report of the Regents of the University of Wisconsin* 1860 p. 5.
- 10) *Report of the Regents of the University of Wisconsin* 1860 p. 6.
- 11) *Daily Cardinal* Aug. 11 1959, p. 5.
- 12) *Report of the Regents of the University of Wisconsin* 1880 p. 27.
- 13) *Report of the Regents of the University of Wisconsin* 1882 p. 51.
- 14) *Report of the Regents of the University of Wisconsin* 1899-1900 p. 8.
- 15) *Report of the Regents of the University of Wisconsin* 1904-06 p. 13. *Daily Cardinal*, November 1, 1895.
- 16) *Wisconsin Alumni Magazine*, May 1906 p. 370.
- 17) *Wisconsin Alumni Magazine*, May 1906 p. 367.
- 18) *Daily Cardinal* Aug. 11, 1959 p. 5. A collection was taken up by the class of 1923 to be used for a new dome or a clock tower on library mall. The latter use was made of the fund.