

GYMNASIUM AND ARMORY



Fig. 1. Porter and Conover's 1891 design drawing from the Aegis. Armory/Gym folder #2 jf-19]



Fig. 2. Gym during construction 1894. Sheds in foreground held temporary boiler and tools. [Armory/gym folder #1 jf-21]

The Red Gym was built in 1892 as a combination gymnasium and armory. It quickly became too small and obsolete. In the middle 1960s its gymnasium function was superseded by a new gym on the west end of campus. Under maintained and under-utilized for 60 years, it was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1974, and will be renovated for use as a campus visitors center in the late 1990s.

In 1894 the Daily Cardinal reports a student showing his parents around the campus for the first time was heard to say: "Yes dad, the science hall is a nice building, but our gymnasium!" The building still has that effect on people, the shock of seeing a red brick castle with its sense of stupendous mass, solidity and permanence in its beautiful setting by the lake, here in the late 20th century. The arguments about its looks being inappropriate to a campus, its lack of modern facilities and cost of upkeep tend to pale when faced with the colossal visual impact it makes from Langdon Street or from Lake Mendota. As much as any building on the campus the old red gym reflects the time and values of its builders.

Gymnastics began to gather popularity in U. S. colleges in the 1850s. By the 1880s Harvard, Yale and other prestigious schools were spending large sums to build elaborate gymnasiums. In northern climates where the weather renders exercise dangerous for months of the year, buildings designed for exercise take on additional importance. The University of Wisconsin had no gym after 1891 when the old wooden gym on Bascom Hill burned. During the efforts to fund the new science buildings in 1885, the regents had attempted without success to get an appropriation for a new gym. Then in 1891 the legislature passed a 1/10 mill tax for the purposes of building several buildings, a dairy building, a college of law and an armory.¹ When planning was begun for the armory, the dairy and law buildings were well under way. In May 1891, president Chamberlin and some of the regents travelled east to examine some college structures and gather ideas for the UW building. In several instances they saw that the same building served for a gymnasium and armory.²



Fig. 3. The gym in its 1899 setting. The houses on the right were removed 1910 for the gym annex and 1956 for the construction of the Wisconsin Center, the old boat house is seen behind the gym at the left. [9/2 armory/gym folder #1 jf-18]

In the late 19th century there was a series of serious civil disorders caused by the rising resentment of workers and thinkers against the excesses of capitalism. Among the worst of these were the Haymarket riot in Chicago in 1886, the Homestead Pennsylvania war in 1892, while the Wisconsin building was under construction. There was a belief by authorities that armories should be constructed in urban areas in case of uprisings of this kind. They would serve as assembly areas for troops and storage for arms. In fact in the 1880s the Wisconsin National Guard was called out to break strikes and put down insurrections in Milwaukee and in Superior. The nature of the building intended by the legislature was clearly military. A contemporary writer's description of the First Regimental Armory in Chicago applies well to the red gym: " the design is to the last degree military, and cannot fail to impress the passer-by with the full extent of its purpose and the ability to carry it out."³

The plans by local architects Conover and Porter needed to reflect this double purpose of the building: armory and college gymnasium. They examined many other buildings and plans, and by December of 1891 had progressed to the point shown in Fig. 1. The design is very similar both in appearance and function to the Eighth Regimental Armory in New York, which had been featured in architectural trade papers and in Harpers Weekly.⁴ The architects argued that because of the size of the proposed building it could not be built of stone as planned and stay within the budget. With the agreement of the regents red brick trimmed with sandstone was substituted. By May 14, 1892 Conover and Porter had working drawings ready. The regents building committee opened contractor's bids on May 31, 1892, but rejected them all. The regents agreed to raise the appropriation for the building from \$75,000 to \$100,000. On July 25, 1892, the new bids were opened and the contract awarded to T. C. McCarthy for \$97,373. McCarthy was a university favorite who was already working on Smith Hall and the law building.

Ground was broken the fall of 1892 and by December 2, 1892 the foundation was complete. In January of 1893 university president Chamberlin was replaced by Charles K. Adams. The new president insisted on altering the plans for the gym to accommodate large assemblies on the second floor, which needed to be unbroken by stairwells due to it's intended use as a military drill space. Adams worked with Conover and Porter to design a 24 X 44 foot annex on the west side of the building containing stairways. This change added about \$7000 to the design, and was approved in

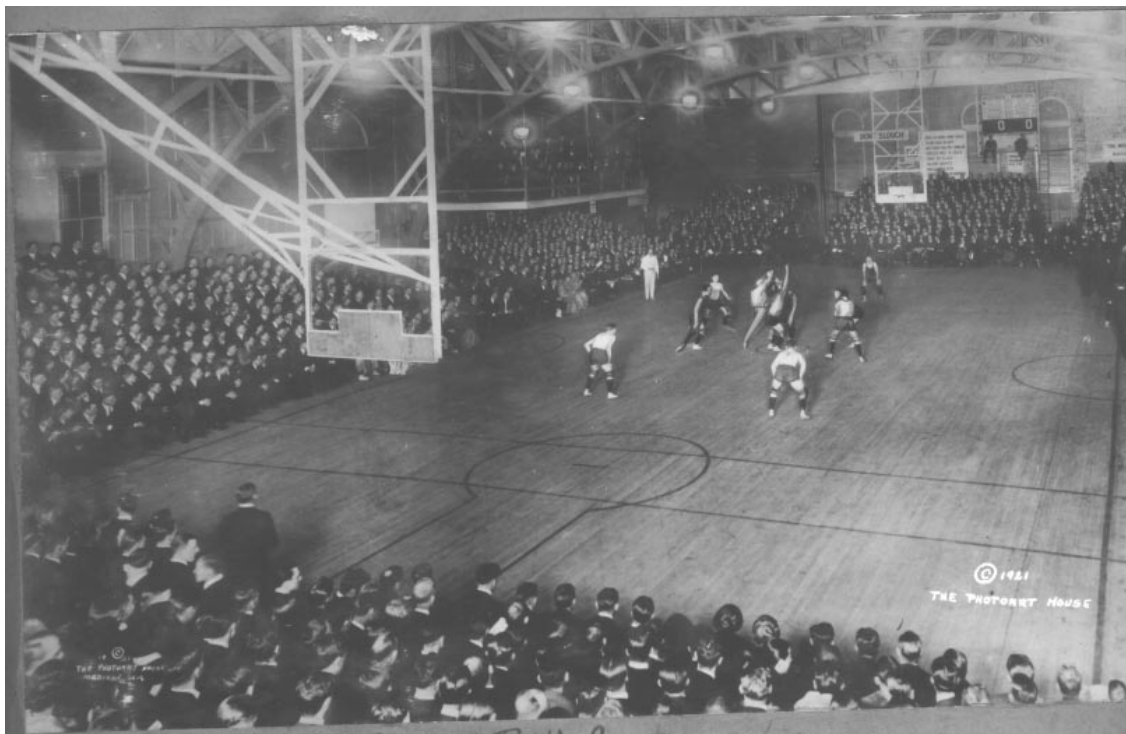


Fig. 4. The Wisconsin-Minnesota Game March 5, 1921. Note the uniformity of the spectators dress. This is in the second floor gymnasium. [Meure photo vol 17 p. 59, M83]

May 1893.

The cornerstone ceremony was held June 30, 1893. Building proceeded quickly throughout the summer and fall; by early October McCarthy had completed just under half his contract for construction. A few late changes were made. The most important was the decision to heat the gym from the main steam plant, behind science hall. When this decision was made (September 1893), the boilers originally intended for placement in the gym had already been ordered and delivered! Other minor changes involved preparing for the large assemblies anticipated for the second floor room. The men of the university had waited so long to have a gymnasium that they had to be restrained from using it until the contractor gave permission. Finally on September 17, 1894 the gym was officially opened for use.⁵ A petition by a women's group (in 1894) did not obtain permission for women to use the new gym, but gymnasium equipment and facilities were added to the plans for the Ladies Hall addition in 1895.

The opening ceremony for the gymnasium was held in early May of 1894. Classes were cancelled, the governor, the mayor of Madison and all residents of Wisconsin were invited. President Adams remarked "there is no reason why honest workmanship should not produce [buildings] that will last for the ages."⁶

The gym building was 196 feet by 106 feet and 101 feet high. The first floor held the office of the commandant, the artillery drill room, the bowling alleys, a locker room and a 20 X 80 foot swimming tank. The second floor was taken up almost completely by a 93 X 160 foot drill hall, with a 43 foot ceiling and main stairs wide enough to permit a battalion in columns of four. The third floor was used completely by the gymnasium proper. The gym was 160 X 65 feet, containing a baseball cage, gymnastic apparatus, and rowing machines. Two 160 foot rifle ranges and a 440 yard running track were placed in a level a few steps lower than the gym. Everyone was very impressed with the new facility which Adams described as "not only larger but also more perfectly adapted to the wants of physical culture than any other institution of the kind in the country." The building was formally accepted as completed by the building committee on January 31, 1895. The total cost excluding equipment was \$122,058.48.

Among the changes made to the gym in the earliest days were several attempts to solve a ventilation problem under the floor at ground level, where joists were rotting from dampness and heat. The building was ventilated according to a highly innovative system designed by the architects and engineering professor Storm Bull; it utilized a huge floor fan on the first floor and a series of ducts and air shafts in the towers of the building. The system was not especially successful, and is now mostly removed. Other difficulties involved adding electrical lighting which had been generally an afterthought in the original design. In 1905 buttresses were added to the rear (north) wall to help avoid the kind of collapse which occurred at the New York armory after which the gym was modeled. The foundation and windows were modified at this time also.

The use of the second floor as a public assembly hall as envisioned by Charles Adams included speeches by William McKinley (1894), William Jennings Bryan (1912), Eugene Debs (1923), Upton Sinclair, (who, in 1922 had to promise not to refer to any controversy), and of course the famous Republican state conventions of 1902 and 1904 where UW alumnus Robert M. La Follette was nominated for governor.⁷

By 1911 the gym was already too small. When it opened in 1894 the enrollment was about 700, by 1910 it was almost 2000. The new president Charles Van Hise believed that the uses of the building, gymnasium, armory and assembly hall were "quite inconsistent with one another." One heavy user of gym space was the university basketball program. In the 1920s the Big Ten games were very popular in Madison. [See Fig. 4] Until the construction of the field house in 1930, these games packed the red gym. The regents decided to expand the space by building an annex onto the east side of the gym. This annex stood until the mid 1960s.

After the first world war (during which the gym was a dormitory for 900 men from the war department) the gym was hopelessly undersized, now trying to accommodate 5000 students. An antimilitary sentiment became strong in Wisconsin and it became the first state to eliminate the compulsory military training at a land grant university. After the Memorial union (1928) and the field house were completed, the gym was little needed for mass meetings and was used only for student registration. During the depression some athletes were allowed to live rent free on cots set up in the turrets. With this great decline in use, the gym was modified very little during the 30s and 40s. By 1953, the bowling alleys and rifle ranges were gone and offices created by partitioning the running track. Maintenance of the building also declined.

Shortly after WW II, plans to demolish the outmoded facility were made but sentiment and discussion delayed all demolition except for the annex which was torn down in July 1956. In the late 1950s plans were made for a new gym at a new location and in the fall of 1963 gym 1A located on the west end of Observatory Drive was opened. The old gym was supposed to come down then too, but in 1965 demolition was delayed until gym Unit II was built on the west end site. The building then remained in use as a gym and ROTC headquarters throughout the 1960s. A firebomb on January 2, 1970, aimed at but missing the ROTC offices, started a fire which burned for seven hours (helped by the ducts and air passages in the old towers). Substantial but nonfatal damage was suffered by the gym.

Now [1993] after decades of neglect and underutilization, plans are being made to find new uses for a building that has stood as a Madison and University landmark for 100 years. A committee headed by dean Mary Rouse has developed an extensive plan for the buildings reuse contained in a published report "Armory and Gymnasium Historic Structure Report". After restoration of the basic structure, including cleaning, repair, and reroofing of the exterior, the three main interior spaces will be reversibly converted to a University Visitors Center (first floor), multipurpose assembly space (second floor), and offices (third floor). In addition a tunnel connecting the building to the union will be built and a new addition on the east side of the building containing stairs to the second floor

space.⁸ These plans carry an estimate cost of about \$10 million, or approximately one hundred times the original cost of construction. When these plans are carried out the gym will once again bring amazement and wonder to campus visitors, as it did when it was new.

- 1) Laws of Wisconsin 1891 chapter 29
- 2) *Armory and Gymnasium Historic Structure Report*, p. 11
- 3) *Ibid.* pp. 8-9
- 4) *Ibid.* p. 9-10
- 5) *The Daily Cardinal*, September 18, 1894 p. 1.
- 6) *Armory and Gymnasium Historic Structure Report*, pp. 14-17
- 7) *Ibid* pp. 22-23
- 8) *Ibid* p. 173-189