

HISTORICAL SOCIETY



Fig. 1. The State Historical Society Building in 1900. Four stories of steel and Bedford limestone, the windowless fourth floor is hidden by the entablature. [9/2 Historical Society folder jf-24]

This building was constructed for use by both the University Library and the State Historical Library, and opened in 1900. The north stack wing was added in 1914. The University left the building in 1950 for Memorial Library. The last large modification was the west addition in 1965.

By the middle 1890s both the library of the university and the collections of the Wisconsin State Historical Society had gone from pillar to post for years. The University library had variously occupied parts of North Hall, South Hall, Bascom Hall, and finally together with basements all over campus the 1878 Library Hall. The Historical Society collection's course was even more tortuous. Starting with a single bookcase in 1849 in the state capitol¹, it moved successively to the basement of the home of society chairman Lyman Draper, the basement of a local church, back to enlarged rooms in the capitol, and back to the church. The legislature from time to time considered the matter of funding a separate building for the collections, but there were always delays, objections, and failure.²

The state of the University library in Library Hall was very bad. The reading room was so crowded that some students were forced to stand while studying. They were sharing the building with the military drill classes. Book purchases were well below the levels of all other schools of its class.

While the contents of the historical society collection was already notable and a pride to the state (especially to the university students who had access to it in the capitol) it was in large part inaccessible due to inadequate space. It was also hideously vulnerable to fire, to which the capitol building was demonstrably not immune. A much larger and fireproof building was needed. Society director Lyman Draper began a "vigorous campaign" for a new building.

In late 1891 university president T. C. Chamberlin as a member of the Historical Society executive committee suggested that the committee ask the legislature for a building near the univer-

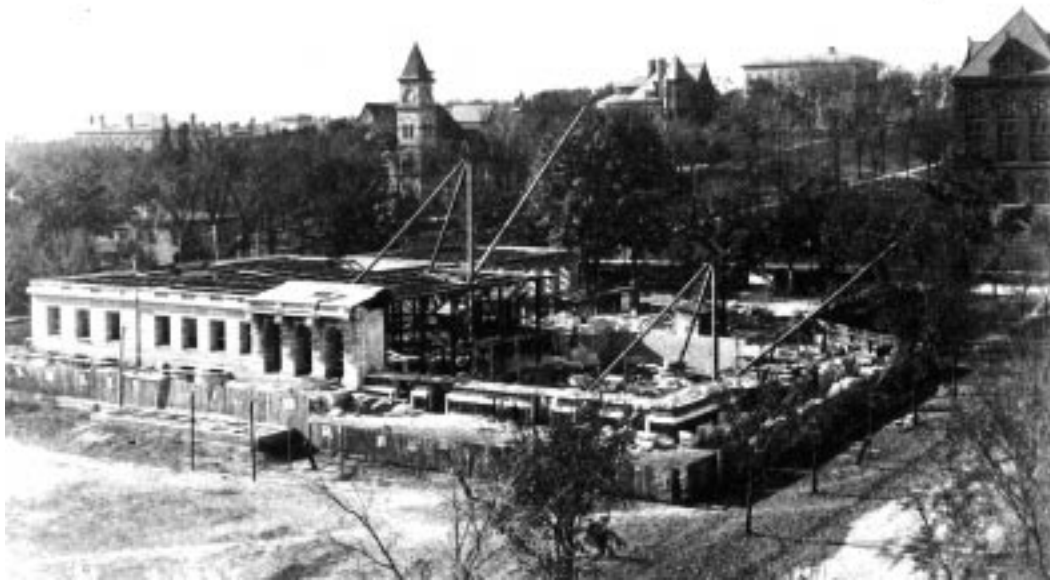


Fig. 2. March 1897, the Historical Society Library under construction. At the completion point of the first contract, the first floor is nearly done. This photo was probably taken from the roof of the Red Gym. [SHSW WHi(x3) 35007 lot 136]

sity campus which would house both the university library and the Historical Society collections and library. Then in 1895 a measure was passed granting \$180,000 for the project and specifying that the university deed to the state eight lots of land on the lower campus to provide a site for the building. Subsequent legislatures added to the appropriation (1897-\$240,000; 1899-\$200,000) leading to a total of about \$580,000 usable construction funds.³

The commission to oversee the erection of the building organized an architectural competition which included most regionally and a few nationally significant firms.⁴ In November of 1895, the submitted plans were examined and critiqued by the commission. They asked two of the architectural firms, Ferry and Clas, and Van Brunt & Howe to redesign and resubmit plans. Most of the criticisms involved the amount of light in the stacks and reading rooms, though Ferry and Clas's original domed design is referred to as having "exceptionally massive features of doubtful value." Van Brunt & Howe's design gets similar remarks: "It is a matter of regret that a plan ... should exhibit ... so little judgement and good taste." In December 1895 the commission settled on the design of Ferry and Clas, who had removed the dome, added skylights and reportioned the reading room.

Construction began early in 1896. What with the vagaries of state funding, the difficulties in procuring materials and the normal ups and downs of contractor operations it was not finished until 1900. The building was opened with an elaborate ceremony on October 19, 1900.⁵ The money available to the commission did not cover the northwest stack wing, so only the stack on the south end was built initially. As built with the single stack wing, the capacity of the new library was estimated at 415,000 volumes. The two libraries agreed to share the stack space until the other stack could be added.

In keeping with the intent to house two distinct libraries, separate except for reading rooms and book handling facilities, the building was U-shaped in design with the bottom of the 'U' facing east toward the lower campus and the city. The University library was in the north end, and the state collection in the south end. The arms of the 'U' were the stack wings, only the southern of which was built originally. The stacks are six (shorter) stories high. The main entrance is on the east side but smaller entrances admit from State and Langdon Streets. Originally a fourth entrance existed on the Park Street side for the convenience of users from "the hill". A beautiful two-story reading room on

the second floor has enormous windows out onto the east facade. The level of trim and appointments in the building are a constant reminder that the state did not pinch pennies on its monument.

The remarkable circumstance of two distinct state entities cooperating to the degree that they could build and share this magnificent structure will be appreciated by anyone who works in the highly competitive atmospheres of the state government, the university or large business. The people most responsible for this amazing feat seem to be university president Charles K. Adams, historical society director Reuben Gold Thwaites, and a succession of visionary governors and legislators.

The joint libraries began to have space problems very early, the second stack wing being required in 1914 when the building was less than two decades old. This raised the theoretical capacity of the library to 675,000 volumes and it proved adequate until the 1940s, when the situation became critical. At that time during the post WW II student boom books and newspapers were stacked on window sills and piled on the floor. Storage was so tight that thousands of items were labelled inaccessible in the card catalog. The ventilation system had not worked for years because of the books piled in the ventilation stacks! ⁶ Quonset huts were set up on the library mall after the WW II, for study space and storage.

Then in 1949 at the height of the space crunch the state legislature approved funding for a new university library, and three years later the university moved out of the Historical library building. The historic society breathed a huge sigh of relief and began to repair the damage done by a half century of heavy dual use. This first major renovation cost \$471,739 (nearly as much as the original construction). Some floors were divided into two levels, large spaces were subdivided for more office space. Worn stonework and trim were replaced, using casts from the original parts. The second floor reading room was reconditioned, including the installation of fluorescent lighting and covering of the skylights. It was at this time that the original windows on the first floor were filled in. At this time the legend "State Historical Society" was engraved in stone over the East facade, removing all doubt about whether it was the university library or not. ⁷ All this work took about a year and a half, during which time the building remained open. ⁸

It is a measure of how crowded the building must have been in the 1940s, that even with the university library gone, the building was cramped for space. The Historical Society is a collection and collections grow. The museum on the fourth floor was a particular problem. Its removal to a separate building on the square at Carroll and State Streets, solved the problem. In 1965 a large T-shaped addition was built which filled in the space between the stack wings and extended the west side toward Park Street. This addition used limestone from the same Bedford Indiana quarry as the original structure and added 103,000 square feet of space, and produced the current configuration of the building. A second major interior renovation took place at this time also.

1) This bookcase still stands in the second floor hall of the library building.

2) These began as early as 1882, when a bill proposing a \$100,000 building on the capitol square was introduced by Assemblyman Ostrander.

3) Wisconsin State Historical Library Building Memorial Volume 1901 p. 103.

4) These included Ferry and Clas (Milwaukee), Van Brunt & Howe (Kansas City), Charles Frost (Chicago), Peabody and Stearns (Boston), H. C. Koch (Milwaukee) and others.

5) Lord, Clifford, *Clio's Servant*, p. 124-125.

6) *Wisconsin Alumni Magazine*, December 1957, p. 18

7) Many students called it the university library, leading to a fable that the building had accidentally been built backwards, with its back to the university. See Daily Cardinal December 7, 1951.

8) *Wisconsin Alumni Magazine*, December 1957, p. 18-20.