

# KRONSHAGE DORMITORIES



Fig. 1. 1940: Mack House. Mack, Turner and Gilman houses were the first three units of the Kronshage dorms. Three stories with a basement, built of concrete and steel and sheathed with sandstone rubble masonry. They were originally called "A, B and C". [Series 26/1, Kronshage, ns-1519]

*Erected in response to a severe shortage of inexpensive student housing, the first three houses of the Kronshage group were occupied in the fall of 1938. The other five houses followed in the fall of 1939. With Tripp and Adams Halls, they brought men's dorm space to 1200.*

On the afternoon of November 30, 1936, a fire broke out in the Mueller shoe shop at 651 University Avenue. The blaze was extinguished by eight o'clock; but unknown to fire-fighters four university students had been living in windowless uninspected rooms in the rear of the building. When freshman Richard Ranney returned from classes, he discovered that his 22 year old brother Donald had been killed in the fire. Donald Ranney's body was recovered from the basement. He had been working odd jobs and living in the cheapest possible manner in order to return to the university, which he had attended briefly, then withdrawn due to poverty. The outrage of students at this loss, and the horror of Madison resident's that conditions like this were tolerated, had an enormous long-rang effect on student housing in Madison.<sup>1</sup>

Less than one month later, the regents received a report on the student housing situation, which stated that 55% of the 6884 men enrolled in the university were living in private commercial housing in Madison, and that one third of those were in unapproved or uninspected housing. The report states that most of this housing was not fireproof, and was substandard in nearly every way. The point is continually made that what is needed is not inspection, since removing these units from the market will reduce the housing pool to an unsuitably small size. The housing was being used because it was cheap, and there was a class of students who lived in it strictly because it was all they could afford. What was needed was decent *and cheap* housing.<sup>2</sup>

The report recommended a return to the university city concept from the days of the Van Hise dorms. A key question was whether the university would or should take responsibility for housing students who are too poor to pay the customary expenses of college. Implicit in the university's

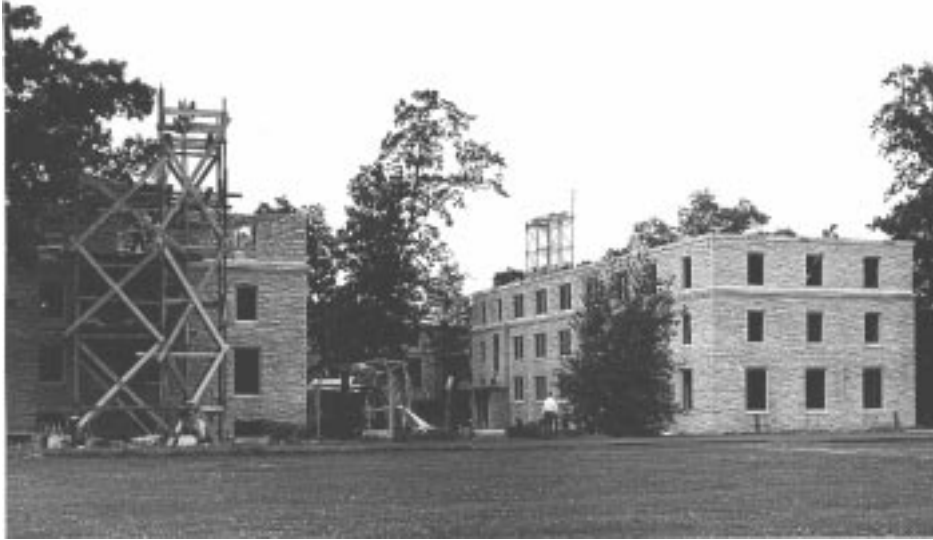


Fig. 2. July 1938,  
Gilman and Turner  
houses going up. [Series  
26/1, Kronshage, jf-72]

response to this and subsequent reports was yes, they did intend to provide for such students. The crux of the regent's problem was how to fund housing units at a time when the great depression lingered and money just to keep the university open was scarce.

The regents asked the university business office for an analysis of dormitory construction. This report concluded that the state was very unlikely to provide funds for dormitories, that there was a housing shortage and that construction of low cost dormitories was the logical solution. The report further says that a project of about \$475,000, financed through borrowing by the Wisconsin University Building Corporation (WUBC) was financially feasible.<sup>3</sup>

The committee on dormitories (Don Halverson, Otto Kowalke and Harold Bradley) presented a report in November 1937, which recommended placing the new dorms on the lake-shore to the west of the Van Hise dormitories (as suggested by the 1908 Laird Cret and Peabody general plan), that they should be three stories high, with double rooms comprising houses of forty men each with meeting rooms. Total capacity was recommended at 200 men. Substantial recreational facilities were suggested, for sports and hobbies, since "...destruction, gambling, and drinking become a minimum worry if boys are busy and happy at work and play."<sup>4</sup>

In December 1937, the regents cautiously approved financing for one or two houses for thirty to forty boys at a cost not to exceed \$40,000. The following March they approved the plans and arrangements by the state engineer, and now requested bids and contracts on up to eight units. The building committee investigated the idea of prefabricated building units. But after a storm of public protest, and the estimates of minuscule savings over conventional construction the idea was scrapped. Students argued unsuccessfully that the dorms should be designed by Frank Lloyd Wright. The bids the regents received changed their thinking considerably, In April, the regents approved three buildings to cost \$70,000 each, and the financing of \$289,000 through the UWBC. George Nelson and Son of Madison was chosen as lowest bidder (\$129,430) on May 2, 1938. Construction began May 9, 1938. Completion was scheduled for occupancy by September 1938. By July the nearby residents of Tripp and Adams were complaining about the construction noise.<sup>5</sup>

The first three dorms of the Kronshage group, initially called "A, B and C" (later Turner, Gilman and Mack houses), were ready as per Nelson's contract for occupancy in the fall of 1938. They had different organizations. Dorm A was a full service unit with maid service and food service in the Van Hise dining facility, yearly cost was \$96 for room and \$245 for board. Dorm B residents paid \$75 for room and \$245 for board, but had no maid service. Dorm C was cooperative, meaning

that there was no maid or janitor service and the residents could choose whether to board at the refectory or elsewhere. The fees were to reflect the actual cost, estimated at about \$70 per year exclusive of board. These first three units of the Kronshage dormitories held 240 men.<sup>6</sup>

During the construction of these first three units, the regents had received word that the federal Public Works Administration had granted them \$229,909 for the dormitory project. With this money, and with the head start they had on the project, the regents planned to complete the group, by adding five more units and a refectory. The total cost of the project was estimated at \$510,909. On October 14, 1938, the regents awarded the general construction contract to Jacobson Bros. of Chicago for \$297,000. Construction proceeded very rapidly. Ground was broken on October 19, 1938, amid some regret that two fine Indian mounds and a popular wooded area were being destroyed for the new foundations. During the summer of 1939 as the five new units were going up, the regents decided on names for the eight houses: Frederick J. Turner, Stephen W. Gilman, John G. D. Mack, Grant Showerman, Allan D. Conover, Thomas Chamberlin, Burr Jones, and Magnus Swenson, all named for outstanding university regents or scholars. Since the refectory was named for Theodore Kronshage, the group became known as the Kronshage group.<sup>7</sup>

The construction was completed in time for the fall semester of 1939, a year after the first three units had been finished. They were full from the first with a total of 640 students, the director of housing saying that the waiting list was as long after the opening as before. Of the five new houses two (Jones and Swenson) were cooperative, though unlike Mack house, refectory meals were required. Kronshage was the first refectory on campus to adopt the cafeteria style of food service.

Considering that they were intended as low cost housing, the dorms had considerable amenities. The full basements were used as public space to provide: a barber shop (in Mack), a nonprofit cooperative store (Mack), a library and music room (Gilman). By the end of the first semester, the students had begun a newspaper, the Dorm Dweller, and a radio station. The dorms were administered, after the fashion of Tripp and Adams, by a student self-government organization. The dorms had turned out very much as the dorm committee of Halverson, Kowalke and Bradley had envisioned. For the modern student who may be tempted to view these dorm rooms as small and low quality, the qualifications for university approved housing at the time Donald Ranney died in the fire, included: no more than twelve students per single bathroom, a forty watt light bulb per student, and a hot water supply available for washing and shaving. The dorms must have seemed like palaces to the students accustomed to those standards. Decoration and trim was kept to a minimum as befit a low cost project.

The dormitory city by the Lake, including the Van Hise dorms and the new Kronshage dorms, comprised nearly 1200 men students, and they were about to be joined by the 540 women of the new women's dorm on the lake shore Elizabeth Waters Hall, begun at the same time as the second group of Kronshage units.

1) *Daily Cardinal*, December 1, 1936, p. 1, December 3, 1936, p. 1; *Wisconsin Alumni Magazine*, January, 1937, p. 172.

2) The Student Housing Situation, Goodnight and Dollard, regents papers December 6, 1937.

3) Proposals for Additional University Dormitories, J. D. Phillips, March, 1937, series 24/1/1 box 126, dormitories folder.

4) A Proposal for Additional Dormitories for Men, November 23, 1937. series 24/1/1 box 156.

5) *Regent's Minutes*, December 7-8, 1937, March 8-9, 1938, April 26-27, 1938, October 14, 1938; *Daily Cardinal*, December 9, 1937, January 20, 1938, January 21, 1938, April 26, 1938, July 14, 1938, September 23, 1938, October 9, 1938.

6) *Daily Cardinal*, October 1, 1938, October 7, 1938; *Wisconsin Alumni Magazine*, November 1938.

7) *Regent's Minutes*, October 14, 1938, June 16-17, 1939; *Daily Cardinal*, May 3, 1938, July 30, 1938, October 21, 1938, October 1, 1939, October 20, 1938; *Wisconsin Alumni Magazine*, April 1940, p. 213.