

MEMORIAL UNION



Fig. 1. The Memorial Union from Langdon Street, in 1930. The theatre wing was later built at the left of the picture. Just visible at the extreme right of the picture is the old YMCA, demolished in 1955.

The Memorial Union was built in 1926 to provide a "living room for the campus". The functions of a student union had been previously housed in the old YMCA building and other temporary spaces. The union was largely financed by private donations. The theatre wing to the west was added in 1938. The design was by architect Arthur Peabody.

The usual starting point for the story of the Wisconsin Union is the inaugural address of Charles Van Hise in 1903. While it is true that Van Hise called for a union after the style of Oxford and Cambridge, and that he periodically asked the legislature for funds to build a union, nothing of a definite nature was specified in this or any other speech, and except for the land along Langdon Street and a \$375,000 appropriation from the 1913 legislature that was promptly cancelled by the 1915 body, nothing was forthcoming from the state. It is thus hard to see Van Hise's speech as anything but an early expression of hope for the project that would later be accomplished by others, by which time Van Hise was dead.

Another version of the origin of the idea of the Wisconsin Union appears in a letter written by Willard Stephenson to Ted Stempel, two men who had been involved in the original union plan. As Stephenson recalls it, in the fall of 1907 "professor Frank C. Sharp, stopped [George] Hill and me ... and told us that the 'Y' was about to lose its building on a mortgage foreclosure and he asked us if we

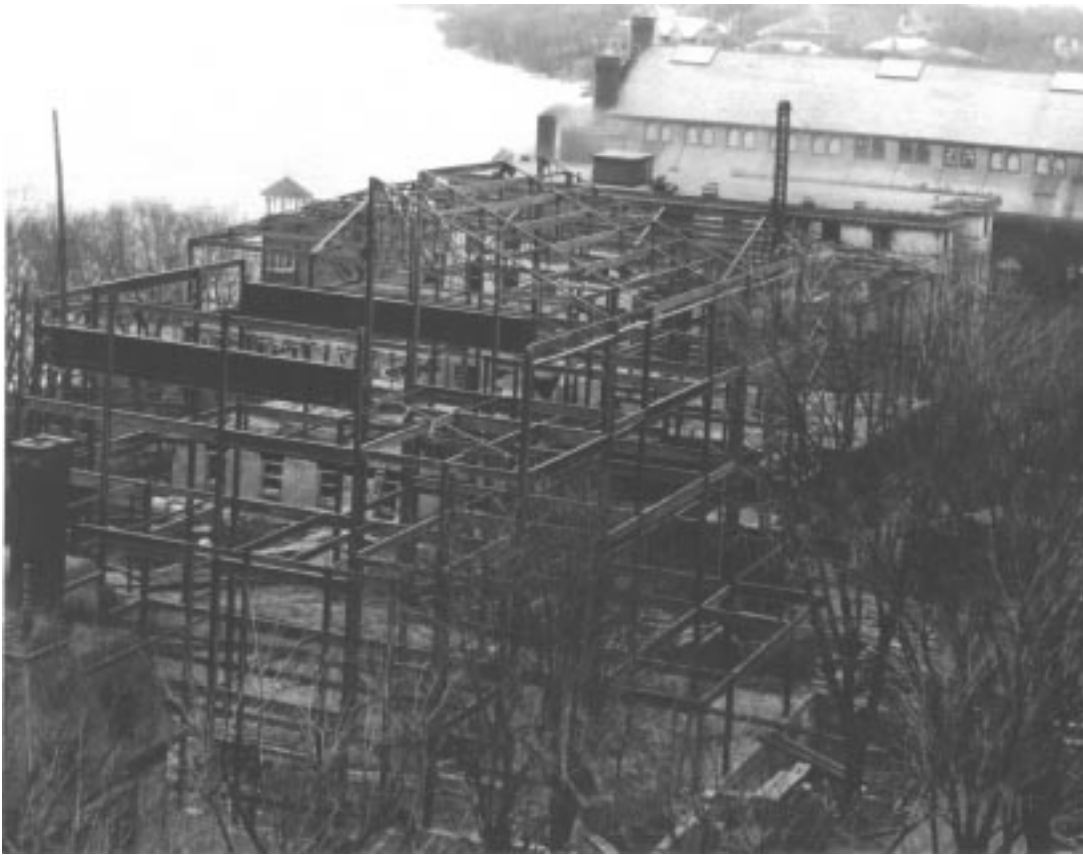


Fig. 2. The Union under construction, from Science Hall, 1928. [M188].

could make any suggestions that might head it off."¹

Stephenson says that they suggested turning the first floor of the YMCA into a student union along the lines of the union they had seen in Ann Arbor. "The Y adopted our plan and we set about organizing the Union ... we ordered all religious literature sent up to the second floor, and turned the first floor into a student club, with cigar stand, billiard tables, popular magazines, etc." As the story goes, the presence of the union on the first floor made the moribund YMCA so popular that it had its "most prosperous year ever."²

In the spring of 1916 however, the drinking, gaming and general level of uproar, compelled the directors of the YMCA to terminate the agreement and ask the union to remove itself. The facilities had been no more than barely adequate. The union moved to a frame house on Langdon Street, previously the student infirmary, then to another at Langdon and Park, formerly the home of the university president. These makeshift quarters were inadequate and unsafe.

The union was surprisingly active during these nomadic years sponsoring a range of activities for students. These included 'Union Vodvil' a variety stage show (mounted at rented local theatres) featuring student actors (including the great Frederic March), the Haresfoot show troupe, free dancing lessons for the men, dances at Lathrop Hall, and concert series which booked world quality acts (Pablo Casals, Heifitz and Serge Rachmaninoff, among others).

These activities were very popular, and in some cases fairly profitable. The union board gradually developed a regular structure that could survive the loss of key personnel to graduation, and keep the union self-supporting. But the better the union performed its purposes, the clearer became its lack of facilities. The old president's house contained the union offices, an office for Haresfoot, and one or two gathering or games rooms. The lack of space precluded much improve-



Fig. 3. The beginning of theatre wing construction, 1939. [x25 - 469]

ment.

Then in 1918 regent Walter Kohler, business man and later [1928] state governor, became intensely and personally interested in the student union. Kohler had set up an employees union at his factory in Kohler, Wisconsin, and was both pleased with and proud of the results. It was obvious to Kohler that the sharply rising enrollment at the university had resulted in the loss of the homey atmosphere in which all the students and faculty knew each other, and that a union could help provide a return to that closely-knit attitude. He was appointed (by president Van Hise) chairman of a committee to initiate plans for securing funding for the construction of a "memorial building", without resorting to legislative appropriations.

It was clear to the regents that a union was a necessity to the university and that the state was not likely to provide for such a building.³ Kohler, with the help of university business manager H. J. Thorkelson, and others began to lay the groundwork for the fund-raising that culminated in the Memorial Union. Throughout 1918 and 1919 this committee travelled and visited unions around the country, and held meetings in Milwaukee and Madison at which funding and features were discussed. These meetings yielded a plan that would cost an estimated \$500,000, be called the "Memorial Union", and be funded by donations.

A permanent fund-raising committee was appointed by the regents with students as president and vice president, and including regent Kohler, dean Goodnight and Madison businessman Carl Johnson.⁴ The labors of this committee would last for years and yield spectacular results. The sources



Fig. 4. The completed union from the air, c. 1952, over Lake Mendota. The old YMCA is still standing between the union and the red gym. Note the gymnasium annex, just to the east of the red gym, and cars parked on library mall in front of the Historical Society. The Lakeshore cafeteria has not yet been built on the east side of the union. [folder 8/2 lower campus folder]

targeted by the fund-raisers were the student body, high school students, alumni, faculty, the city of Madison, business men and friends of the university throughout the state. They set up a system of geographical regions, with chairmen and fund-raising goals. The method was to ask for pledges to pay a fixed amount at a later date, in a lump sum or installments. The pledge would not be binding unless the 50% point was reached, in the first case, \$250,000.

This goal was reached so quickly (by October 1920) that the plan was almost immediately extended to \$1 million. Oddly for a plan run by so many capable and successful business people, accurate estimates of the proposed building's cost would never be obtained, and even more remarkably would never include the costs of furnishing or decorating. Both these lacks would cause trouble later. The most logical explanation is that so few university unions existed at that time that examples of successful ones to examine were lacking. This was also a time of uncertain prices, both for postwar material, and labor, because of the early difficulties with labor union organization.

The committee informed each subscriber by letter that the goal had changed to \$1 million, and stopped the practice of soliciting conditional pledges, asking instead for straight subscriptions. Much of the fund-raising effort was directed by professor of advertising and marketing, E. H. Gardner, who took a three semester leave of absence from teaching to aid the union drive. Gardner held this position until the fall of 1923, when he returned to teaching, and was replaced by his assistant John Dollard. Dollard was also serving the faculty committee which planned the men's dormitories. His elevation to secretary of the memorial union building committee signaled the beginning of the second major effort in fund raising.

Dollard changed the emphasis from the big contributor idea that had raised the first half

million quickly but as quickly slowed, to a small donation based program emphasizing school spirit, every alumni and every student a 'Wisconsin man', asking small contributions but numerous enough to raise a substantial sum. A report made of previous efforts, had shown that the lists of alumni were deficient in number and accuracy, and Dollard and new recruit Porter Butts, editor of the Daily Cardinal, managed to update and utilize alumni lists to great effect over the next few years. Dollard was also very effective at recruiting student leaders to boost student donations.

When Dollard took over in the fall of 1923, total pledges were \$803,000, with \$221,000 cash in hand, much from the big donors of Gardner's (including over \$200,000 from the university's trust funds, particularly the Stephen Tripp bequest). The combination of Dollard's fund-raising ideas and Butt's control over the student newspaper raised almost as much money as hysteria. In the fall of 1925, in part by pitting the pride of the four classes against each other (the class of '26 fired a three-inch cannon over observatory hill for every \$500 collected) Dollard raised \$133,000 from students alone. He also was instrumental in the ongoing efforts to develop plans for the building, and was generally credited for the three unit building plan, with the union, commons, and theatre in three separate sections. Porter Butts took over as director of the Union in late 1926 when Dollard left Wisconsin to follow his professor mentor Max Mason, who had been named president of the University of Chicago.

The design of the building was not without ups and downs. The first design was done by state architect Arthur Peabody in 1919 or 1920. In the earliest days of organization, the union committee had agreed that they were a fund-raising body and that the planning, contracting and erecting of the building would be handled by the university through the regents. Peabody's initial design, from the early \$500,000 days, was essentially a small copy of Washington D. C.'s Pan-American union building. Peabody did several iterations of this plan.

Porter Butts remembers that the first design was intended merely as a fund raising aid. As soon as the stakes were raised to \$1 million, the union board altered their thinking and decided to hire their own architect. Since state architect Peabody was legally responsible for the design, the committee could only hire a consultant for him. By April 1922 the board had decided, with Kohler's help, on Alexander C. Eschweiler of Milwaukee. Eschweiler and Peabody agreed to an arrangement in which Eschweiler would act as Peabody's assistant. A formal contract to this effect was signed by the board and Eschweiler on July 1, 1922. Eschweiler's pay was to be 1.5% of the cost of the final building. The relationship among the board, Peabody, and Eschweiler eventually dissolved into legal wrangling. Through the fall and winter of 1923 the board worked with Eschweiler in an attempt to get a building they liked. By February 1924 the board threw in the towel, declaring that Peabody was in charge of the job, and that he could use Eschweiler's services if he liked. Peabody had nothing but scorn for the consultant's work, and didn't mind saying so.

By the fall of 1924 Peabody had new sketches ready for examination by the board, but with the extensive and repeated iterations asked by the board (the first plans had no doors out to the lake side, few electrical outlets in meeting rooms, insufficient bathrooms, and other wants) it was not until spring of 1925 that the final plans took shape. In 1926 when shown the final drawings by the board, Mr. Eschweiler, in a final act of pique refuse to sign drawings without having had any constructive part in their preparation. He eventually settled with the board for about \$15,000. His influence on the actual design appears to have been minimal to nonexistent. The final design by Peabody borrowed heavily from the northern Italian Renaissance palaces of Venice and Padua. Considerable criticism resulted from this design as being derivative and inappropriate for a Wisconsin building. F. L. Wright later said of it "Yes it speaks Italian, extremely bad Italian, and very difficult to understand."⁵ The four story building is of Bedford limestone with accent panels of Madison sandstone, a green tile roof, and steps of Winona travertine.

By the fall of 1925, the preliminary plans for the building were completed and approved by the regents. Dollard told the Cardinal "We will say it with stone from now on." This turned out to be only partly true. In an astute public relations move (donors had started to ask what their money was being used for) the union committee decided to build the foundation of the union in the spring of 1926, even though neither the plans nor the money for the building were complete. Architect Peabody suggested building the foundations first (a common method on public buildings, but seen as an immensely clever ruse when viewed through the Cardinal), since enough money was on hand to let that contract. Peabody also advanced the plans enough that the plans for the two projected sections (the theatre wing had been deleted) were reliable. This the regents agreed to, and the excavation contract went to George Fitton of Madison for \$4188.98 on November 30, 1925, and the contract for the foundations was let to C. B. Fritz for \$8,098 on June 2, 1926.

By August of 1926 the foundations were finished, the building fund stood at \$700,000, the regents had approved final plans and authorized bids on June 18, 1926. Unfortunately the lowest bid was almost \$100,000 over the money on hand. State law required that all cash must be on hand before a state contract could be let. The attorney general had early ruled that the union was a state building, even if built from donations. This meant that construction could not yet begin. Dollard persuaded the regents to delay consideration of the bids nine days until their October 13 meeting. The Cardinal howled "Memorial Union Must Raise \$100,000 Cash in Nine Days".

The foundations were built, plans were finished, \$700,000 was in the bank, the last big push was underway. The drive for funds among the students and faculty produced only \$20,000. The remaining \$70,000 was obtained according to the Cardinal by borrowing from a local bank (First Wisconsin of Madison), using as collateral the uncollected pledges (payment due by April 20, 1927) from the subscription drive.⁶ What sober banker would approve such a loan remains unrecorded in the Cardinal. In a 1974 interview Porter Butts, who was there, remembered that seven men (unidentified by Butts) signed personal notes for \$10,000 apiece.⁶ Regardless of how Dollard got it done, the regents, faced with the secretary with cash in hand, had little choice but to approve the lowest bid of \$773,000, for the first two units of the union. This they did on October 22, 1926.

The regents had a reason besides the cash in hand law for being stiff-necked about awarding the contract. The board was strongly, though not unanimously, pro-labor in the union organization battles then taking place in the country, and the lowest bidder was Jacob Pfeffer of Duluth, Minnesota, who ran an open shop. There was discussion and dissent on the board of regents regarding the use of a nonunion contractor from another state, but the law required that the lowest bidder be awarded the contract.

Pfeffer's men appeared within 48 hours of the signing of the contract, and materials began accumulating on the site. From October 1926 through March 1927 the job ran without incident. In April 1927, union workers left work and began to picket, protesting the use of nonunion personnel in key positions. The key men refused to join the union, and after three days, Pfeffer went back to Duluth for more workmen. Local labor leaders called for a strike. Picketers began to interfere with the coming and going of the workers both union and nonunion, stoning them and the taxicabs used to bring them to and from the job site. During April these episodes continued, growing more serious. Local law enforcement was conspicuous by its absence, and contractor Pfeffer erected a shanty behind the building as temporary housing for his crews.

On the night of May 20, 1927 a mob of 200 union men marched down Park Street and attacked the shanty in an attempt to dump it into the lake. When they could not move it they began to demolish it. Occupants were dragged forth, beaten and thrown into the lake. A man lost an eye, a jaw and ribs and teeth were broken. Police declined to respond to repeated riot calls by Mr. Butts. The attackers threw ink on the front of the building. Public opinion appears to have shifted against the

union after this episode. After it became clear that the city would be held responsible for the damage to the building, the law was enforced to protect the building and perhaps incidentally the workers. After a few other violent episodes in May of 1927, work proceeded. In June of 1927 the courts restrained the union members from interfering with the laborers. On May 30, 1927, the cornerstone ceremony was held. President Glenn Frank, rose from his sickbed to turn the first spade, and the gold star roll of Wisconsin war dead was placed in the ceremonial box in the cornerstone. Work proceeded using union and nonunion labor and the building shell was finished in July 1928.⁷

The plans and funding for the building had no provisions at all for furnishing the interior. As the erection of the shell proceeded, the fact that the union would be useless without furnishings began to dawn on all concerned. There was no chance that donations could be secured; that source had been bled white. Earlier the regents had approved for the Van Hise dormitories, a scheme (of Kohler's) by which capital could be borrowed through a dummy corporation. This corporation was called the University of Wisconsin Building Corporation (UWBC), and would borrow capital, construct buildings and would then lease the building back to the University. The regents approved the financing of the union furnishings by this method. In October 1927, the UWBC borrowed \$400,000 from the state annuity board for the union's furnishings.

With the issue of funding resolved, in November 1927 the union board hired French interior designer Leon Pescheret, (designer of the Drake hotel in Chicago), who with his wife, and the constant input of Porter Butts and the union board, designed the interior of the union. The board asked that the decorating scheme reflect both the memorial nature of the building and the Wisconsin theme. The memorial hall contains walnut scrolls containing the names of Wisconsin war dead. The Old Madison Room, the Paul Bunyon and Beefeaters rooms, the Rathskeller and the general decoration scheme reflect the local, British, German and Indian influences on the state.

The completed union which opened October 5, 1928, was extremely popular from the beginning. By June of 1929 more than a million visitors used the union, making it the busiest union in the country.

The project had originally been conceived of as a men's union, both in Van Hise's vision of an Oxford style club, and by the intent of the first organizers, whose club at the YMCA was male only. But the women students of the university even though they had their own social center in Lathrop Hall, were so enthusiastic and supportive of the new union project, there was after 1920 almost no idea that the union would be for men only. The fact alone that the women outperformed the men in student fund-raising drives, as well as their participation in union activities like 'Vodvil' guaranteed them a place in the finished union. There was some segregation of the sexes in the building when the final plans were approved. Women were expected to confine themselves to the Ladies lounge on the great hall floor (now occupied by a travel agency), the ground floor cafeteria in the commons wing, and the ball rooms.

Almost immediately after opening there were complaints from both sides about the rightful places of the sexes. Throughout the first years, various schemes were tried, men on the ground floor, women on the great hall floor and shared spaces on the main floor. But as recognized by director Butts, these divisions were unnatural and not wanted by most students, and unenforceable to boot. They gradually fell away under the pressure of social change and increasing student enrollment. By far the most contentious point was the use of the Rathskeller, which had been intended as a men's only club. As the other barriers fell, the main lounge, the library and Tripp commons, the men consoled themselves with the rigid control of the Rathskeller. This barrier began to fall during the 1930s when dances, the most common way of meeting the opposite sex were held in the Rat. Then in July of 1937 the union board opened the Rat to women, though only for the summer session. In the summer of 1946, the Rat was opened to women during certain hours for the fall semester. These part time, on

and off again rules could not and did not last. Although there was no formal announced change, by 1950, there was no enforceable barrier to either sex in any part of the building, except bathrooms. This distinction too has now been eliminated, with the introduction of oddly named "Unisex" facilities. The skies have not opened, civilizations have not fallen, and the Memorial Union is more heavily used than ever.

The greatest lack of the new union was the theatre facilities which had been deleted for lack of funds. For more than a decade, the students made do with the limited facilities offered by the great hall on the third floor. Butts tells the story of an unnamed baritone who was interrupted in mid aria by the ringing of a telephone on the stage. With great composure, he lifted the phone, said "you can't call right now", hung up the phone, signaled the pianist, and resumed the aria.

In 1937 with federal Public Works money available, Butts and the board began to make plans for the theatre wing. Arthur Peabody, still state architect, agreed that he was not qualified to design a theatre, leaving the union board free to hire their own designer. They asked Lee Simonson, a nationally known theatre authority, to consult on the site and layout of the theatre. After surveying the site, and discussing the needs of the union with the board, Simonson recommended Michael Hare, a young theatre designer with Corbett and McMurray of New York. Mr. Peabody agreed to put Hare on the state architects staff, although he was paid by the union board, thus meeting the law regarding state buildings being designed by the state architects office.

The wing the board wanted included a large theatre to accommodate 1300, a small theatre for 300, facilities for the increasingly popular Hoofers outing club, bowling alleys, recording studios, and a new crafts shop. Hare's first design for the wing was presented to the board of regents in October of 1937. The regents hated it. They said the plans looked like a silo, a woman's hat, and a grain elevator. The modern streamlined look was a little too much for the regents and some of the general public (Madison's mayor James Law, an architect himself, was worried about the design destroying the natural beauty of North Park Street.). Within a few weeks, modifications to the Langdon Street face of the design were made, by architect Paul Cret, who was instrumental in the design of campus buildings from twenty years before. The modifications required the reduction of the small theatre to 168, and considerable rearrangement of interior spaces. But the facade of the building now blended suitably with the existing union.⁸

Ground was broken on the theatre wing on January 1, 1938. The general contractor was Jacobson Bros. of Chicago for \$486,370. With utilities and subcontracts, the total cost of construction was \$895,535. The funds were raised by donations of \$50,000, a PWA grant of \$236,000, and UWBC loans of \$580,000 from the state annuity board. Construction on the new wing proceeded without serious setback, except that on July 12, 1938, the west wall of the old union building, scheduled for demolition, to connect the new wing, collapsed without warning and killed two workmen. Investigation showed that the wall had been undermined by previous work by the crew. The construction progress mightily disrupted the traffic patterns and use of the union; the Paul Bunyon Room was taken over for use as the music room, which had been in the west section removed for construction.

The Theatre wing was opened to the public on October 8, 1938. The open house included radio addresses (from studios attached to the main theatre) by Simonson and Hare, the designers. The grand opening performance was a sellout performance of Lunt and Fontaine in *The Taming of the Shrew*. The theatre got rave reviews. Sinclair Lewis called it: "The most beautiful theatre in the world."⁹ Other concerts staged in the new wing in that first year were: Paul Robeson, Gunnar Johansen, and the Minneapolis Symphony. The entire wing, the auditorium with its advanced lighting capabilities, small theatre, craft shop, bowling alleys, and studios, was a complete success.

The radio and recording studios fell out of use after WHA radio obtained their own facilities for remote broadcast. The small theatre was named after alumnus and union board member Frederic

March in 1974. The Union Theatre has been a center of culture and arts in Madison ever since its opening. Even its "modern architecture" has lost any discordant impact over the years. This is partly because it is only obvious from certain angles [See Fig. 4]. F. L. Wright had an opinion about the theatre too: "You should have put up a tent, because this will all be obsolete in a few years on account of the designs I am making for theatres."

Other major modifications to the union are surprisingly few. The Hooper's boating facilities were greatly enlarged in the 1960s. In 1956, the ground floor of the commons wing, (the Lakeshore Cafeteria), was doubled in size and glassed in to take advantage of the view. Some modifications to the Great Hall helped increase its seating capacity. Many interior modifications have taken place over the years to accommodate changing activities. A typical example is the replacement of the flagstone floor in the Rathskellar with terrazzo in 1953 (the Paul Bunyon Room retains the old flooring). The opening of Union South in the 1970s occasioned reorganization of spaces.

The Memorial Union has brilliantly fulfilled the goals of its planners to become the social and leisure center of the campus of the University of Wisconsin. Remarkably in a job that has a usual span of four or five years, the Wisconsin Union has had in its sixty seven years of operation only two directors, Porter Butts (1927-1965) and Theodore Crabb (1968-).

More than any other university building, the Memorial Union is accessible. Visitors can wander into almost every part of the building, and there are always new and interesting things to look at, food to eat, places to rest, an art gallery. The broad terrace behind the building, originally designed by Charlotte Peabody, the architect's daughter, is the center of summer life on the campus. The Union is a wonderful addition to the campus, truly the living room of the university as hoped by president Glenn Frank during its construction.

1) Stephenson to Stempfel, February 8, 1954, These men were all members of the order of the Iron Cross, an senior's academic honors society. Stephenson said in the letter "I guess we can give old Charlie [Van Hise] credit, but the union was an Iron Cross project."

2) Ibid.

3) *Regent's Minutes*, December 4, 1918, volume J, p. 228.

4) *Regent's Minutes*, June 24, 1919, volume J, p. 298.

5) *Daily Cardinal*, October 28, 1932, p. 1.

6) *Daily Cardinal*, October 22, 1926 p. 1.

7) Cronon and Jenkins, *University of Wisconsin* vol. III pp. 589-600; Porter Butts interview, Oral History Project, University Archives.

8) *Porter Butts interview*, Oral History Project, University Archives; *Daily Cardinal*, October 17, 1937, January 12, 1938, July 14, 1938, October 6, 1939, October 21, 1939, *Wisconsin Alumni Magazine*, June 1937, November 1939; *Capital Times*, October 29, 1937; *New York Times*, March 20, 1938; *Regent's Minutes*, April 11, 1938; *Executive Committee Minutes*, April 14, 1938.

9) *Capital Times*, September 26, 1940.