

MERIT HOUSE



Fig. 1. Merit House shortly after its 1986 opening. [photo courtesy of Norm Sunstad of Residence Halls]

Merit House was built in 1985 with a donation from the Stone family. Initially academic merit and financial need were standards for acceptance, but these requirements have been eliminated. The dorm holds a total of 63 men and women.

Merit House was the first dormitory built by the University after the 1965 completion of the southeast dorms. Its genesis came in February 1984 when representatives of three generations of the Stone family approached the University with a plan to construct and donate a high quality low-rent dormitory. The Stones would provide plans, contract for and erect the building. The Stones comprised Samuel and Cecyle Stone of Laguna Beach, California, their son Mark an executive of the Metalex Corporation of Libertyville Illinois, and his sons David and Gary. Only Gary was a UW graduate.¹

The first issue to be resolved was a location for the building. The 1980 campus plan specified the area south and east of Dayton Street as a potential housing development area. A location in the Spring Street area was first examined, but rejected. By the end of March 1984 the search had narrowed to land at the existing parking lot #44 at the southeast corner Dayton and Park Streets. Because the Stones were requesting a 100 by 90 foot lot for the project, the University needed to acquire property adjacent to lot 44. The University would then grant the Stones a conditional use permit on the land to erect the building. The purchase of this land would not be completed until October 1984, and was to be paid for from residence halls revenue.²

The formal agreement between the Stones and the University was drawn up and signed in May

1984. It stated that the Stone family wished to donate a residence hall to be built on University land at a cost of \$1.25 million. The Stones would provide plans for the building, subject to the approval of the University, and contract for the construction of the residence hall. Applicants would be limited to full-time graduate and undergraduate students with a cumulative grade point average (GPA) of 3.0 or better, and who could demonstrate financial need. The building would be known as the Stone Residence Hall, after the three generations of the Stone family who were the donors. Construction was to begin as soon as possible. It was estimated that the residence hall would house from sixty to seventy students. The Stones made a separate agreement with the University of Wisconsin Foundation, a nonprofit channel for contributions to the University to disburse construction funds.³

In June 1984 the regents agreed to accept the residence hall gift, and to name it "Stone Residence Hall". The required state approval for the acquisition of the additional land came in July 1984.

Mark Stone, the second of the three generations was the principal actor from the Stone family in the construction of the building. In May 1984 he initiated a design contest in the University of Wisconsin School of Architecture at Milwaukee for the design of the residence hall. This competition required that each design team include one state licensed architect and at least two students. The winning entry was made by a team of four faculty member and two students. By October 1984 a preliminary design was ready, but was altered that same month to fit the exact dimension of the lot now in the hands of the University, and to meet state codes on accessibility standards for public buildings. These changes required the change from two stories to a shorter three story building and the addition of an elevator. Architects Jules, Van Oudenallen and Shields, formed the JVOS company to complete the design and supervise construction. In January 1985 Mark Stone authorized the preparation of construction drawing from the JVOS design. The construction drawings were completed and delivered on May 16, 1985. The Stones had selected a contractor, Robert Newcomb of Madison, by June 20, 1985. Construction began in July 1985. By November 11, 1985 the project was three weeks behind schedule, due to weather problems and material theft. It was hoped that the building would be completed in time for summer school in 1986.⁴

In December chancellor Shain informed Mark Stone that construction was proceeding well, and that completion was planned for summer 1986. Shain also asked Stone why all the documents for the project were marked "Merit House" instead of "Stone Residence hall" as agreed by the regents.² In February 1986 Mark Stone made clear to the chancellor that the family had changed its mind about the name and wished the building to be called "Merit House". This change was approved by the regents at its May 8, 1986 meeting.⁵

The formal dedication of Merit House took place on Friday May 30, 1986. Speakers included chancellor Irving Shain, and Norm Sunstad, director of University Housing.⁶

The building is a three story dumbbell shape, 180 feet long and 43 feet deep. For the accommodation of sixty three students there are nineteen double rooms with a bath and kitchenette each, in the end pods, and the center section of the building contains five suites of five single rooms; each suite has a bath, full kitchen and dining room, all rooms are furnished. There are community areas and washer/dryer facilities on the first floor. Residence in each suite are of the same sex. The building is sheathed in red brick, trimmed with marble iron and copper trim. It has a standing seam copper roof and copper flashing and downspouts. There are patios on the south side of the building, and parking south of that. All mechanical systems are housed in the attic.⁷

The total cost of the project came in slightly under the \$1.25 million donation. The regents accepted the building as a gift-in kind on June 6, 1986. In the summer of 1987 the University installed air-conditioners to attract summer conference groups. Norm Sunstad informed Mark Stone that "All is going extremely well at Merit House."³ With the Stone's permission the University no longer requires either a minimum GPA or financial need.⁸

The donation of Merit House closely parallels the donation of the Washburn Observatory in 1878, when Cadwallader C. Washburn selected the architect, the contractor and paid all the bills for the Observatory with minimal involvement of the University.

- 1) *Regent's Minutes*, June 8, 1984; *Wisconsin State Journal*, June 7, 1984; *Milwaukee Journal*, December 9, 1984; Rennebohm to Winter, May 24, 1984, papers of Residence Halls, Norm Sunstad's files.
- 2) *Regent's Minutes*, June 8, 1984; UW New Release, June 6, 1984, J. J. Koltes to Sunstad, October 10, 1984, Rennebohm to Winter, May 24, 1984, papers of Residence Halls, Norm Sunstad's files.
- 3) Memorandum of Understanding, May 4, 1984, papers of Residence Halls, Norm Sunstad's files.
- 4) Memorandum, Roeber to Fulop, October 29, 1984, Stone to Shain, October 30, 1984, Sunstad to Fulop, February 8, 1985, Lobe to Sunstad, May 17, 1985, Montgomery to Van Ess, June 20, 1985, *Wisconsin State Journal*, August 6, 1985; *Badger Herald*, November 14, 1985.
- 5) Shain to Stone, December 9, 1985, Shain to Brown, April 3, 1986, papers of Residence Halls, Norm Sunstad's files; *Regent's Minutes*, May 8, 1986.
- 6) Dedication program, papers of Residence Halls, Norm Sunstad's files.
- 7) Plans in plans room of physical plant; Merit House brochure, February 5, 1992, papers of Residence Halls, Norm Sunstad's files; interview with Norm Sunstad, fall 1994.
- 8) Sunstad to Stone, August 17, 1987, papers of Residence Halls, Norm Sunstad's files.