

NORTH HALL



Fig. 1. The first building on campus, in the days when the Bascom Elms were young and North Hall had a hitching post, c. 1885. [series 9/1 North Hall, x25-310]

North Hall was the first building of the University of Wisconsin. Constructed in 1851 at a cost of \$19,000, it served as the entire physical plant of the University for four years. When the first Science Hall burned in 1884, the University eliminated the dormitory function of North Hall in favor of instructional space. Since then it has housed a series of academic departments, and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

The original plan for the University was developed in 1850 by Chancellor Lathrop, regents Mills and Dean, and drawn by architect John Rague. Rague's plan, which has since been lost, called for four dormitory buildings and a "central edifice."¹ When the teenaged D. K. Tenney, a Madison youth and student at the "Wisconsin College", walked up College Hill to view the progress of the first building of the fledgling University of Wisconsin in May of 1850, he had hiked through thick and untracked woods from the end of State Street at Gilman Street. He told the workmen that he meant to attend the University when they had completed the building. They replied: "Young man, if you intend studying here, now is your chance. You may lay the corner stone."² Tenney had apprenticed as a bricklayer to his father and complied. The building, proceeded under the direction of contractor James Livesey and was built for a total cost of about \$19,000. At this time the projected maximum enrollment of the University was 256 young men.³

On September 17, 1851, North Hall opened, and for the next four years North Hall contained the entire University. The University comprised about thirty students, three faculty (J. W. Sterling, O. M. Conover, and John H. Lathrop) and a janitor (John Conklin). The students and Conklin were housed on the first three floors, which contained 24 suites, each with a study and two bedrooms. On the fourth floor were the lecture rooms, studies and chapel. The bulk of the resident students were members of Professor Sterling's previous year's preparatory class which had met in a small building in downtown Madison. The following year's preparatory students, who were not yet college students, did not live in North Hall but took their class work and study

periods there.

Student pranks and behavior were an issue from the earliest days of the University. The faculty insisted on daily room inspections, rigidly enforced study and class times⁴, including a prompt 6 AM class time enforced by a large bell installed on the second floor. This schedule lasted until the rebellious students removed and hid the clapper until a more reasonable class time was negotiated.⁵

Students could board with residents in town, eat at restaurants, or feed themselves which was sometimes considerably cheaper. Many financially strapped students, including John Muir, were said to have survived principally on baked potatoes and "involuntary contributions of the surrounding inhabitants many of whom had cows, pigs or poultry who took turns contributing to the rising generation."⁶ Later a general mess hall was established on the first floor to lower student costs. The catalogs for the 1860s promise board may be had for less than \$3 per week. It is also likely that some students kept cows on the grounds. In 1861 the regents formally banned all pasturing of animals on campus.⁷

The living conditions were quite primitive even for the frontier. One alumnus described the well water as being so hard it was like chewing limestone and "as hard to get as to drink. It's a wonder it didn't kill us all."⁸ For sanitation there were privies, which were regularly upset or set afire. The regents were proud to boast that the building was heated by woodburning furnaces, but the contractors were ordered to install two additional furnaces to keep the temperature tolerable for the students. On any cold day with a wind the cry would go up from the windward side of the building for the janitor to stoke the furnace: "Wood up John! Wood up!"⁹ Since all students spent hours in the building all were required to contribute to the firewood fund even if they lived off campus. In 1865, as a budgetary step, the furnaces were replaced by stoves in each room, and students had to furnish their own wood. Much damage ensued to the woods surrounding the building.

The litany of pranks and hijinks (after one of which D. K. Tenney "received an invitation to adopt some other institution as his alma mater"¹⁰) continues for more than three decades. Finally when the first Science Hall burned in 1884, the last dormitory spaces in North Hall were switched to instructional space, never to be switched back. North Hall was later in turn the home of pharmacy, German and Scandinavian, mathematics, the Madison Weather Bureau, and political science. These various tenants required many and massive interior modifications. The continued presence and practical use of "the crude stone box of North Hall"¹¹ serves as a reminder of the day when the University of Wisconsin was a tiny flickering dream on the frontier.

1) Curti and Carstensen, *The University of Wisconsin*, vol. 1, pp. 66-68.

2) *Wisconsin Alumni Magazine*, Some Early University and North Hall History [L. S. W.] Feb. 1904 p. 146. The Wisconsin College was the contemporary name of the University, which met in the Madison Female Academy building in 1849-1850, and became the University of Wisconsin.

3) Ridiculous as this figure seems now, it was 30 years before this figure was regularly exceeded, making this one of the most accurate long-range enrollment predictions in the University's history.

4) 6-7 AM, 9-12 AM, 2-5 PM, 7-9 PM, and curfew at 9 PM. According to one alumnus, the first elevator used at the University was a large basket and rope used to hoist late students into the building. (*Wisconsin Alumni Magazine*, 1904 p. 150.).

5) *Wisconsin Alumni Magazine*, April 1906 p. 329.

6) *Wisconsin Alumni Magazine*, Some Early University and North Hall History [L. S. W.] Feb. 1904 p. 151.

7) Minutes of the Board of Regents, January, 17, 1861, Vol. A p. 293. The regents say: "No person what-ever shall be allowed to pasture any cows, horses or other animals in the University grounds...".

8) *Wisconsin Alumni Magazine*, April 1906 p. 329.

9) *Wisconsin Alumni Magazine*, April 1906 p. 328.

10) *Wisconsin Alumni Magazine*, Some Early University and North Hall History [L.S. W.] Feb. 1904 p. 149. "He received an invitation to meet the faculty, but the art of conversation deserted him and he was not as entertaining as he might have been."

11) Thwaites, Reuben G. *The University of Wisconsin Its History and Its Alumni*, p. 174.