

OBSERVATORY HILL OFFICE



Fig. 1. Observatory Hill Office 1900. [Series 9/1, Observatory Hill Office, jf-101]

Built as a private residence about 1855 by Loring Guild, the house and land was acquired as part of the University's experimental farm in 1859, from professor Daniel Read. The house was used as the home of the University president until President Bascom moved to a house on State Street and it became the home of the resident director of the Observatory. Since the 1959 departure of the Astronomy Department, the building has held several academic programs, and now houses the La Follete Institute for Research in the Social Sciences.

In 1882 President John Bascom described Observatory Hill as "a spot not to be surpassed in beauty ... a point at which the beauty of earth and the peace of heaven touch each other."¹ Anyone who has been to Observatory Hill, even briefly, can understand what Bascom meant. One supposes that this is similar to the feelings that led the ancient indigenous mound builders to choose this spot overlooking Lake Mendota for some striking effigy mounds extant.

After the area was acquired by James Doty in the 1830s the spot occupied by the Italianate house later known as the Observatory Hill Office was bought and sold several times in the ebb and flow of the booming of Madison real estate. Previous to 1855 it was owned by Loring Guild, a local merchant, and the area was known as "Guild's addition." The property's assessed value rose sharply in 1855, presumably as the result of the construction of the house. Loring Guild lived there until November of 1855 when it was sold to Oliver Morley for \$1000, then to A. Eugene Morley in 1862 for \$1000. A. E. Morley and his wife Lydia lived in the house until July 19, 1864, at which time they sold

everything "except the use of the house until the 15th of September next, and reserving one-third of the potatoes in the ground ..."2 for \$3500 to Professor Daniel Read of the University. Professor Read was living in South Hall and making \$1000 per year. Although the purchase price was a major investment for Read, the clear probability of expansion by the University made it a safe one.

The 1866 legislature required that the University acquire land for an experimental farm, in the immediate vicinity of the University, not less than 200 acres. The money was to be raised from the sale of \$40,000 worth of Dane County bonds. The land selected by the regents was the 195 acres directly to the west of University Hill, between University Avenue (then the Sauk road) and Lake Mendota.³ Because this land had been platted as residential lots its acquisition by the regents was very complicated. Historian Pyre reports that regent N. B. Van Slyke arranged the purchase of 60 titles.⁴, including the land and house belonging to Professor Read. On January 29, 1859 Daniel and Alice Read sold to the U.W. board of regents the "spot not to be surpassed in beauty" for \$6000. On April 24, 1867 the UW regents resolved: "That inasmuch as it is desirable that the President should reside on the University grounds, the late residence of Prof. Read be hereafter known as the 'President's House' and that it be appropriated to that use without change."⁵

Modifications to the house began with the northwest addition by D. R. Jones in the 1870s. In 1903 a major remodelling, designed by architect J. T. W. Jennings⁶, the half story above the brick was added giving essentially the current configuration. President Chadbourne lived there, as did his two successors, presidents Twombly and Bascom. President Bascom's job offer from the regents explicitly includes the use of the house. Judging from the oldest available plans of the house it appears to have originally had at least three grand rooms on the first floor, possibly including a kitchen, and four to six rooms on the second floor and a full attic above. It was beautifully finished with a fancy oak staircase in the entry hall. Porches on the north and south sides took advantage of the spectacular view. Bascom, his wife and their five children eventually moved to a new president's house on State Street in 1878⁷, partly for the additional space, and partly as an example of increased town and gown connection which Bascom was championing. The house then became known as the astronomer's house and was occupied by the directors of the Washburn Observatory (including the first director James Watson and the famous Joel Stebbens) until the Observatory was abandoned by the Astronomy Department in 1959 when the Pine Bluff site was opened.

The building was used in the 1960s for the Departments of Social Work and Preventive Medicine, then stood empty for a short time. In 1973 the house became the home for Programs in Health Administration which included one of the first Administrative Medicine programs in the country. It is currently [1993] occupied by the LaFollette Institute for Research in the Social Sciences.

Standing on the porch of the building one can imagine what it was like to live there when Madison was a village of 2,000 people a mile away, and the French and Indian fur trade was only twenty years gone.

1) [John Bascom] description of Washburn Observatory State Historical Society Historic Preservation site file.

2) Dane County Deed vol. 65 p. 7.

3) *Regent's Report* 1866 p. 4.

4) Pyre, J. F. A. *Wisconsin*, p. 167.

5) *Regent's Minutes*, April 24, 1867, Vol. C. p. 72.

6) Department of Planning and Construction flat file #9-4.

7) Pyre, J. F. A. *Wisconsin*, p. 167.