

OLD BOAT HOUSE



Fig. 1. The Boat House and rowing tank house (far left) as viewed from Lake Mendota , with an 8-oared gig practicing in foreground, about 1900. [x25-1158]

The first University boat house was built with student subscriptions in 1893. It housed student and faculty boats, a commercial boat launch, and lifesaving equipment. It was demolished in 1968 when new facilities for crew and lifesaving were erected.

The story of the university boathouse is one of the strangest of all the University buildings. It stood on university land but was built not by the university but by the students. It was used by university organizations, students and by Madison residents and businesses, eventually came to be owned by the university and was demolished after serving for nearly eighty years.

As early as 1874 rowing was organized on an intramural basis. In 1886 an editorial in the University Press said: "Students from other colleges visiting the University have often expressed surprise on learning that we possessed no boat club. With unrivalled facilities and an abundance of talent in this line, when we stop and think of the matter it must seem rather unaccountable even to ourselves."¹ In 1889 several students transferred into the UW who had experience of competitive rowing elsewhere, and brought with them a double shell which became a big attraction. Among these students was W. T. Saucerman who became instrumental in the new boat club which was established in the winter of 1891. This club had a mainly proselytizing function, though they did manage to buy a pair of eight oared gigs and stage a regatta in spring 1892, and began planning a boathouse.²

In the spring of 1892 the Cardinal shouted "Hurrah for the Boat Club", reporting that the club

had obtained plans from architects Conover and Porter, for a boat house that surpasses any such structure in the United States. The club had permission from the regents to build on the north end of the three lots occupied by the new armory, with a long term lease.³ During the summer of 1892 construction was begun. Before completion the boat house ran into difficulties. Mr. Saucerman, the organizer of the club, was apparently at the end either of his funds or patience. The corporation agreed to buy him out with two \$500 mortgages and \$415 worth of stock.⁴

Then in December of 1892 the Cardinal trumpeted "The Greatest College Meeting In the History of the University." At this meeting chaired by president Adams, a new corporation was formed which proposed to take over the project and raise \$4500 to finish the building.⁵ The collection of subscriptions dragged through the winter of 1893, with contractors Longfield and Co. threatening to sell the building if not paid promptly. Finally in March 1893 the contractors received \$1730 for "completing the boat house." After further settlement with Mr. Saucerman the boat house was opened for business in May 1893.

Boats were rented to the public for 15 cents per hour, students boats were stored, bait was sold, and plans were made to arrange a steam boat landing. The 72 X 80 foot building had room with overhead storage for 80 small boats and several racing shells, there was a large second floor space suitable for club and social gatherings. Three channels connected Lake Mendota to the lower floor. The new and handsome boat house (see Fig. 1) was a real success, with nearly every class organizing a crew, the tower was used as a lifeguard lookout, and a foghorn was installed for safety. In 1896 Mr. Saucerman successfully applied to the regents to have his law school tuition waived, pleading poverty due to the boat house endeavor. In 1897 a rowing tank was built (by the university) east of the boat house. Then in April of 1908 the regents notified the University Boathouse Company that the (apparently 15 year) lease of the ground had expired. The lease was not renewed and in 1908 by an unknown arrangement the building became university property.⁶ On March 2, 1908 the shareholders voted 501 to 0 to disband the corporation. As use by the Athletic department grew, the public and student use was restricted, over the protests of students, faculty and Madison residents. The regents remodelled the boat house extensively to plans by Arthur Peabody in 1916.⁷ The building served until in April 1963 the regents gave permission to begin demolition of the east section of the boat house to make way for the alumni house.⁸ Not until 1968, after the completion of the new crew house, and the Gilman lifesaving station, was the remaining west section demolished.

1) *University Press and Badger*, May 14, 1886 p. 6, *Daily Cardinal*, May 13, 1897 p. 3.

2) The older club had organized and begun the planning for a boat house five years earlier: *University Press and Badger*, May 7, 1886, *University Press*, September 24, 1886.

3) *Daily Cardinal* April 11, 1892 p. 1, May 18, 1892, April 24, 1894, November 28, 1893, April 17, 1894; *The Aegis*, January 20, 1893; .

4) *Daily Cardinal*, June 1, 1892 p. 1, *University Badger*, 1894, p. 131.

5) *Daily Cardinal*, December 14, 1892 p. 1

6) *Regent's Minutes*, February 18, 1908, *Wisconsin Alumni Magazine*, February-March, 1908; Papers of the Executive Committee, February 24, 1908 and March 30, 1908, series 1/2/2 box 11; *Daily Cardinal*, December 4, 1896, January 8, 1897.

7) *Regent's Report*, 1916 p. 248.

8) *Regent's Minutes*, April 5, 1963.