

OLD FOREST PRODUCTS LABORATORY



Fig. 1. The Forest Products lab shortly after completion c. 1910. [series 9/5 Mining and Metallurgy,jf-34]

Constructed in 1909, this building originally housed the Forest Product Laboratory. When Forest Products built a new lab in 1931 the building was taken over by Engineering's department of Mining and Metallurgy. That name has been changed to Material Science which is still in residence. The building was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1985.

In 1908 the U. S. Department of Agriculture's Forest Service laboratories were scattered in various facilities in the eastern part of the country. The decision was made to establish a central facility to encompass all their investigations into wood products. Letters were sent (in October 1908) to major universities asking if they would consider hosting such a facility. Seven responded in the affirmative. A competition ensued in which the schools made continually escalating offers in an effort to obtain the federal facility. Wisconsin decided to offer a site with a building costing \$30,000 in addition to the costs of heat, light and power.¹ The competition was narrowed to three: Wisconsin, Michigan and Minnesota, all schools with access to the forested areas of the upper Midwest and with strong engineering programs. In January of 1909 the U. S. Forest Service announced that Wisconsin had been chosen. Michigan congressman McGlaughlin then raised the argument that Michigan had not properly understood what was wanted and was now willing to make a larger appropriation for the laboratory than the Wisconsin offer.² In April the chief of the Forestry Service Gifford Pinchot, explained why Wisconsin had been chosen:

The propositions of the three universities as to buildings were substantially equal ... I add that among the factors considered, the following were necessarily given special weight: building site, and equipment of power heat and light; courses in instruction in forestry, agriculture,

engineering and science generally; general accessibility to the forest regions of the east central valley and south...³

Among the reasons that Wisconsin wanted the forest lab were: the addition of about \$30,000 worth of salaried jobs added to the city and state, the promise of assistance to the state's important lumber industry, and northern immigrant farmers.

In late April 1909, the regents settled on the University Avenue site, after considering a location on Linden Drive west of Agriculture Hall. Plans had already been accepted by the regents from the office of architect Arthur Peabody.⁴ The actual designer of the building was Albert F. Gallistell, a draftsman employed in the architect's office.⁵

The regents advertised for contractor's bids on May 8, 1909. The lowest bid was T. C. McCarthy's for \$44,424.⁶ This was for a building whose entire cost had been estimated and appropriated at \$30,000. The regents rejected all the bids. They raised the appropriation to \$50,000. They requested Peabody to alter the design to obtain a bid within the appropriation. In order to do this Peabody consulted with McCarthy; they reduced the thickness of the foundations and walls of the upper levels, and omitted some decorative work at the front entrance. The altered building went back out for bids (June 28, 1909) and came back with an acceptable offer. Ironically it was not McCarthy who now had the lowest bid, but Kirkman Construction of Chicago. Ground was broken July 12, 1909. The contract called for the contractor to have the building finished by October first 1909. Peabody's report of August says that the building is progressing well, the foundations finished, the first floor walls nearly complete. On June 1910 the *Daily Cardinal* announces the grand opening and dedication of the forestry lab. The ceremony was held on June 4, 1910. Speakers at the dedication included governor Davidson, president Van Hise, and prominent lumbermen.⁷

The finished building was a handsome two story C-shaped Georgian Revival building of red brick 182 X 90 feet. It features a red tile hipped roof, a modillioned cornice and brick quoins. It was intended to harmonize with the agriculture buildings on the other side of University Avenue and does so nicely.

Little was heard about the forestry lab until the first world war broke out. Then there was a burst of activity and publicity. The government did an enormous amount of research on the new field of aviation at the forestry lab and other university buildings. In 1917 airplanes were made of wood and fabric. The lab made tests on various woods, laminating processes, glues, and production techniques. The work force swelled to sixty. By the end of the war the work and significance of the forestry lab had been permanently expanded. In 1931 a new and much larger forest products lab was built on the western edge of Madison. The old building was taken over by the Engineering department of Mining and Metallurgy, housed until then in the old heating plant behind science hall. A 1975 addition to the east end provided better access to the upper floors. In 1996 a \$4.4 million two story addition (designed by HNTB architects of Milwaukee) was built on the south side of the building, which filled in the area between the wings and provided an access link to the ERB building. This addition was faithful to the original architecture of the building.⁸

1) *Regent's Minutes*, December 16, 1908. They were the University of Michigan, the University of Minnesota, the University of Illinois, Purdue University, Cornell University, Yale University, and the University of Wisconsin.

2) *Wisconsin Alumni Magazine*, February, 1909 p. 218.

3) *Wisconsin Alumni Magazine*, April, 1909 pp. 293-294.

4) Papers of the Executive Committee, April 6, 1909.

5) *A Tabular History of the Buildings of the University of Wisconsin*, Alden Aust, June 4, 1937, and the National Historic Preservation Nomination Papers, in the State Historical Society Historic Preservation Office.

6) Papers of the Executive Committee, May 24, 1909.

7) *Daily Cardinal*, June 2, 1910. The ceremony was delayed until 2 PM to allow visitors to watch the Washington-Wisconsin crew race.

8) Request for State Building Commission Action, May 23, 1973, series 83/35 box 16.