

OLD GYMNASIUM

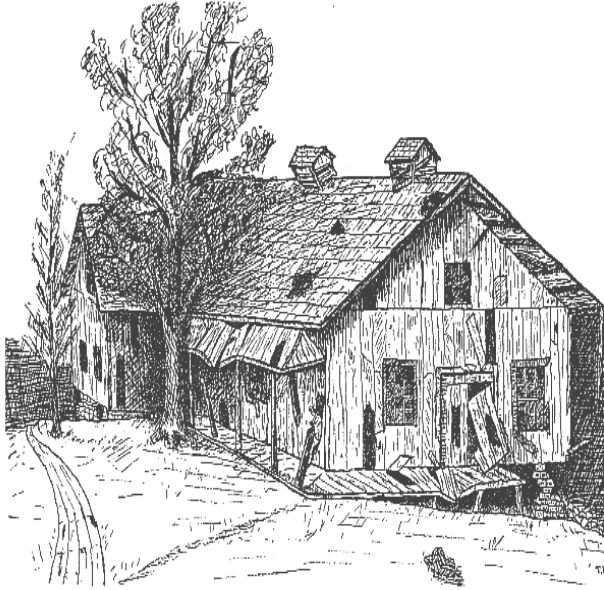


Fig. 1. from the 1891 Badger. [1891 Badger p. 158]

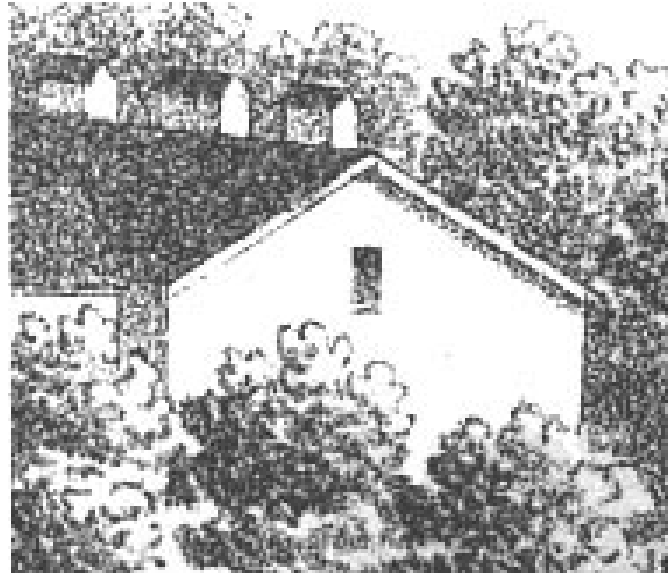


Fig. 2. Detail from an etching of the U.W. c. 1880. [x25-258]

Built in 1870 to provide drill and storage space for the University battalion, and some recreational space, the old gymnasium burned in 1891.

For several years after the Civil War the military department of the University was forced to use various parts of University Hall as a drill hall. This was a very undesirable situation since it disrupted all aspects of the school's operation. On June 22, 1870, the board of regents called Col. W. S. Franklin to explain "the proposed building to be used for drill and gymnastic exercises."¹ The colonel must have been persuasive because later in the same meeting we find the following resolution: "That the Executive Committee be authorized to expend a sum not exceeding three thousand dollars in the erection of a suitable building for military drill and gymnastic exercises." By the time of the regents report of September 1870, they could write:

A building for drill and gymnastic exercises has just been completed at a cost of about \$4000. It is a plain substantial structure admirably adapted for the uses for which it was designed. The main building is 100 feet by 50 feet. To this is attached a wing, 34 feet by 20 feet, containing an armory and office for the Professor of military tactics ... It leaves at our disposal much room in University Hall before occupied for military purposes ... It relieves the building of much noise and disturbance incident to military drill. Besides it affords commodious room not only for drill but for exercise during cold or rainy weather.²

In meetings in the following year the board gave increasing latitude to the Professor of Military Science in constructing and furnishing the gym as well as rules for its use. Col. Franklin having withdrawn by 1871, this professor was W. J. L. Nicodemus, who was also Professor of Civil

Engineering.

The location (300 feet northwest of University Hall and 500 feet east of the Observatory Office) as shown on campus maps is approximately where the carillon tower now stands. The uses to which this cheap wood-framed structure was put nearly guaranteed a short and troubled life, and the gym did not disappoint. By 1884 the regents were asking for a new one: "If we are to receive the full benefit from our campus we need a new gymnasium in connection with it."³ Then in a shriller tone in 1886: "Our gymnasium is altogether superannuated and meets its purpose in a very clumsy and inadequate way."⁴ This is near the beginning of the discussion that culminated in the building of the Red Gym and Armory on Langdon St., and the language increasingly reflects, in retrospect, this new goal. Also as the student enrollment grew the gym was no longer so commodious. "The increasing size of the battalion made it necessary to abandon the gymnasium and to conduct the drill in inclement weather in Library Hall. This was not done without some protest ... The need for a suitable drill hall is pressing."⁵

No clear photographs of the old gym are known to exist, but the two drawings (from opposite ends of the reliability spectrum) above, Fig. 1 (a student drawing from the 1891 Badger year book), and Fig. 2 (a detail from a commissioned etching of the University), make it clear that the gym was essentially a farm building.

On the night of June 12, 1891, the old gym was destroyed by a fire of unknown origin. An eyewitness report in a student diary says: "I was just going to bed when I saw the sky all lighted up. We ran down and it [the gym] was all ablaze. An alarm was sounded after a while and the fire department turned out, but it was a half an hour ... before water was put on the building and then it was too late to do anything but save the sidewalk ... The building was not worth much but it is bad for the reputation of the University to have it go in this way."⁶

The *Wisconsin State Journal* reported that "President Chamberlin is of the opinion that the building was fired by some representatives of a low class who have been hanging around the place for the past two weeks."⁷

This fire caused so little stir that neither the *Daily Cardinal* nor the next regents report even mentioned it. The *Aegis* (a student publication) printed a memorial for the building on Sept. 11, 1891 (p. 7). They reported that "dutiful Patrick [Pat Walsh the longtime University janitor] who had guarded the Gym for years stood by and joyfully watched the angry flames as he thought of the mighty burden that was lifted from his shoulders."⁸ At the subsequent meeting the regents vote that "the \$3000 insurance on Gymnasium when received be covered into the general fund was by vote concurred."⁹ Thus passed and was quickly forgotten the fifth building on the UW campus.

1) Minutes of the board of regents of the University of Wisconsin June 22, 1870, Vol. C p. 134

2) Report of the Regents of the University of Wisconsin 1870 p. 30-31

3) Report of the Regents of the University of Wisconsin 1884 p. 36

4) Report of the Regents of the University of Wisconsin 1886 p. 36

5) Report of the Regents of the University of Wisconsin 1888 p. 45

6) Sidney Dean Townley, *Diary of a Student, 1886-1892* p. 105, Archives series 20/0/3

7) *Wisconsin State Journal*, June 13 1892 p. 3 The Journal also says that the city fire department could not use the U.W. hydrants, a lesson that had apparently not been learned in the Science Hall fire of 1884.

8) *Aegis* Sept. 11, 1891 p. 7

9) Minutes of the regents June 16, 1891, Vol. D p. 100