

OLD INFIRMARY



Fig. 1. Original infirmary from the west. c. 1920. The 1930 addition was attached to the end of the infirmary at the right of the picture. [G1026]

This building was built in 1917 with donated funds and served as a student infirmary, then medical school space until the late 1980s when it became home of the department of social work. A 1930 addition enlarged the infirmary and connected it to the Wisconsin General Hospital.

In 1916 there was considerable controversy surrounding the idea of the University founding a four year medical college. But in the wake of a 1908 typhoid scare at the university medical dean Charles Bardeen and president Van Hise argued strongly for building at least a student infirmary.

There was a small student health clinic beginning in 1910 under Dr. Evans at 821 State Street later moved [1914] to the Raymer house on Langdon Street. This too was quickly outmoded, although its high level of use by the students helped pave the way for later developments. For a time also a commercial arrangement was made for supervised care of students with Madison General Hospital (on whose board of directors was Charles Bardeen). Indeed at one time in 1911 Bardeen proposed building a student infirmary as an annex to Madison General.

Private donations were sought for an infirmary, and in June 1917 large donations were received from the family of Harold C. Bradley (\$50,000), T. E. Brittingham (\$25,000), and a Mr. Carl Johnson (who hoped with little success to remain anonymous, \$25,000) and the legislature responded with an appropriation of \$50,000.¹ After deciding to build with this unexpected bounty not only a student infirmary but the first unit of a research hospital (Bradley Memorial), the regents decided to locate the infirmary and hospital on the property they already owned in the area bounded by University Avenue on the south, Linden Drive on the north, Charter Street on the east and Warren [later Lorch] Street on the west.

In the general plan of 1908 by Laird Cret and Peabody, this area had been reserved for the

school of engineering, but the practical necessities of the rising medical school made that plan obsolete. The remainder of 1917 was taken up with site selection and preliminary planning. The basic plan was to erect the infirmary and Bradley Memorial Hospital as wings to a new medical clinic building to be built at a later time. These plans by the office of Arthur Peabody (Alden Aust credits Henry Nyeland for both buildings²) with assistance from the architectural firm of Ferry and Clas, were ready for bids by March 1918. On May 10, 1918 the regents awarded the contract for construction of both the infirmary and the Bradley Hospital to the Chicago contractors Dahl-Stedman Co., for \$137,445. During the spring and summer of 1918, the removal of existing houses and the construction of the infirmary progressed without incident. The infirmary was finished in the winter of 1918.

The building when complete was two stories above a raised basement of buff brick with Bedford stone trim, an unfinished attic and a red tile roof. There was room for about 40 students. The total cost was \$60,000. The design was intended to harmonize with the recently completed home economics and extension building across Linden Drive, which the medical college hoped to one day take over. Although the building now appears to have been randomly placed in the middle of a block, this is the result of the university later vacating two streets in the area.

The construction of the new infirmary came just in time. In 1918 an epidemic of influenza broke out among the general population of Madison and in the student population where crowded living conditions and daily exposure to the infection in class rooms made the spread of disease fast and very dangerous. A student food server in a rooming house was later blamed for most of the outbreak. There were approximately 750 cases of influenza treated at the new infirmary, which was so overloaded that the adjacent Bradley Hospital, though still unfinished was pressed into service, as was the University Club. There were six fatalities among the students. There were other epidemics in the years following the First World War; small pox, typhoid fever, diphtheria and more influenza in 1919, 1925 and 1928. The infirmary was credited with helping to limit the spread of disease at the university. The great service of the medical school in these emergencies did much to win support for their later undertakings. The epidemic of 1928 found the university enrollment so much higher than the capacity of the infirmary to handle during an outbreak of disease that as a precautionary measure the university was closed for four days just before Christmas vacation in 1928.

Shortly after this the university successfully asked the legislature for funds to build an addition to the infirmary. Architect Arthur Peabody designed a flat-roofed wing that ran south toward the recently completed Wisconsin General Hospital. This addition approximately doubled the size of the infirmary to about 100 beds. This new section was connected to the hospital, which Peabody complained made 'his' infirmary look like an addition to the hospital, which indeed it does. This addition was completed in 1930 by contractor William Christensen of Racine at a cost of \$100,000. In 1934 student health director Dr. Charles Lyght could report that "typhoid fever whose ravages led to the establishment of a student health center at Wisconsin has become practically non-existent."³

The infirmary although more or less constantly out of room and viewed skeptically by students, continued to function as intended well into the 1960s, but the student clinic functions were eventually moved to a much larger facility on University Avenue, and the old infirmary building became absorbed into the medical school complex. Then in the 1980s the medical school left the old hospital site for the new hospital and clinics buildings on the west end of campus. In 1993 in the wake of the demolition of the old Wisconsin High School the old infirmary underwent a \$655,000 remodeling and became the home of the school of social work (formerly housed in the Wisconsin High School).

1) *Regent's Report*, 1918-1920, p. 15-16.

2) Alden Aust: *A Tabular history of the buildings of the University of Wisconsin*. 1937

3) *Wisconsin Alumni Magazine*, May 1934 p. 155.