

OLD LANGDON STREET



Fig. 1. Science Hall and the first neighborhood swallowed by the university. Langdon Street Houses, left to right: presidents house, Olin house, Raymer house, Birge house, c. 1900. [Series 7/2, Lower Campus folder #1, jf-106]

In 1890, except for a handful of agricultural buildings, the University of Wisconsin campus was contained entirely on the Hill. The presidents of the university had been living since the 1850s in the house on observatory hill [now the observatory office]. John Bascom, because of a need for larger and more convenient housing for his large family, and as part of his effort to reduce the gap between 'town and gown', left the observatory hill house for a house at 620 State Street. The university had purchased this land and house in 1880, from ex-governor Nelson Dewey [now the site of the Tower apartments]. Then because of rising maintenance and a desire to accumulate land nearer the university, in 1887, the regents exchanged this State Street property with Nancy and Charles Bross for lots 1 and part of lot 2, in block 2 (approximately the current [1993] location of the memorial union theater). The house on this property (772 Langdon Street) became the new presidents house (see Fig. 2). Thomas Chamberlin was the first university president to live there, from 1888 through 1891, In 1892 the new president C. K. Adams moved in and lived there until 1900 when his health failed, and he resigned. He was replaced as president by acting president E. A. Birge who held that post from 1901 to 1902. Since dean Birge already had a house on Langdon Street (744 Langdon, purchased for \$800 in 1879) he stayed in his own home during this period. The president's house at 772 Langdon stood empty until Charles Van Hise became president and moved there in 1904.¹

At this time [1904] the row of houses on Langdon Street consisted of 772 (the presidents house), 762 the home of attorney and land speculator John Olin, 752 the home of war hero, regent, and politician George Raymer, and 744 the home of dean Birge (see Fig. 1, left to right.). As befits



Fig. 2. The presidents house [1888-1925], corner of Park and Langdon Streets, c. 1890. This house was the home of Charles Bross, and sold to UW in 1887.

an upper class professional neighborhood, occupancy was very stable. It was the voracious appetite of the university for expansion that finally altered the neighborhood. In 1910 the Olin property (parts of lots 2 and 3) was purchased for \$55,000 and in 1912 with an \$12,000 addition became the UW Clinical laboratory. In 1914 the Raymer property was purchased for \$45,000 and was initially intended for administrative space but later that year at the request of dean Bardeen was altered to house the student infirmary.²

The buildings kept these functions until the early 1920s. In 1921 752 Langdon appears in the city directory as the UW Union, and the Birge house at 744 as the home of Blankenship, since Birge (appointed acting president again after the death of Van Hise in 1918) had finally moved into the presidents house. The old infirmary had become expendable after a new infirmary was built in 1918.

By 1925, the expenses of maintaining the old frame buildings and their limited size had doomed them all. President Birge moved to a new president's house in the University Heights neighborhood, leaving the old house to be used for miscellaneous functions. The house at 752 was still listed as the Wisconsin Union Building, 762 was called the old clinic and ticket office, and 744 Langdon, the old Birge house had already (c. 1908) been demolished to make way for the Y. M. C. A. building. The planning of the memorial union included the investigation of several different sites on the lower campus, but because of the convenience and the increasingly low value of the old Langdon Street houses, the site in the 700 block of Langdon was selected, and in August, 1925 the regents approved the demolition of both the 'present union building' (752) and the old clinic building at 762. The demolition contract was let in October 1925 to J. F. Icke. These old houses while not especially long lived fulfilled several important functions (particularly the original site of the university's medical school) for the university, and form memories for the oldest students and Madison residents alike.³

1) University and Madison City Directories; Dane County Register of Deeds;

2) *The University of Wisconsin*, Curti and Carstensen vol. 2, p. 491; Papers of the Executive Committee, October 31, 1910, July 10, 1914; Report of the Regents, 1912-1914, p. 339; Regent's Minutes, January 21, 1914.

3) Executive Committee Minutes, August 4, 1925; Daily Cardinal, December 13, 1925.