

# OLD LAW BUILDING



Fig. 1. Law Building from the east c. 1894. [series 9/1 Law School (Old), x25-1309]

*Erected in 1891, the first law building became unsuited to teaching the law in 1903 when the case method of teaching was introduced. Beginning in the 1930s the building became the nucleus of a series of additions that after the 1963 removal of the original structure make up the current law complex.*

In 1890 the law department of the University of Wisconsin had led a precarious life. It was first established as a paper entity in 1857, but budget constraints and lack of qualified personnel prevented the actual creation of the school until 1868, when twelve students were enrolled. The course was one year long with no entrance requirement except character references.

The facilities available to the new law school were extremely variable. A small room near the rotunda in Main Hall proved unsuitable, since the faculty of local lawyers and judges all had offices a mile away in downtown Madison. The school then began to meet in rooms in the unfinished capitol building, then moved to two rooms above a saloon. For twenty years the school continued a kind of Flying Dutchman's existence. In the 1880s the requirements for the now three semester course, had become age of 21, a common school education, and "good moral character". By 1889 112 students met these standards. At their June 1876 meeting the University regents began to actively consider a permanent home for the College of Law: they directed a committee to locate a suitable lot for the law school not to cost more than a thousand dollars. Nothing came of this attempt. For the next fifteen years, no formal discussion on the law school appears in the regents minutes.

Then in the spring of 1891 the regents took an informal ballot on the location of the law building whether on the university grounds or "upon lands to be purchased." The initial vote was split



Fig. 2. Law Building after library addition complete c. 1940. [series 9/1, Law School (Old), x25-767]

between a university location and a downtown one, then after discussion the vote was unanimous in favor of the university grounds location specified as west of the library hall building and between the library hall and the agriculture building [South Hall].<sup>1</sup>

Things now started moving briskly. By August, 1891 the regents had screened several architects (H. C. Koch, Holbrook, Ferry and Clas, Conover and Porter) and selected Charles S. Frost of Chicago. They had approved, discussed and modified Frost's plan<sup>2</sup>, and called for contractors bids<sup>3</sup>. This choice fell on local contractor T. C. McCarthy who was also building Hiram Smith Hall at the other end of campus.

The foundation was laid in the fall of 1891 with the intention of occupying the building in September of 1892. Due to bad weather and McCarthy's overextension this deadline passed; the next target set by the regents was January of 1893. But in August of 1893 the regents were still discussing details of finish like choice of seats and lighting fixtures.<sup>4</sup> The final statement from architect Frost for \$72938.73 is dated October 28, 1893. Classes were held in the new building in the fall of 1893.

The ground plan was rectangular with a semicircular rotunda at the back. The first floor was devoted to the school of Economics.<sup>5</sup> On the first and second floor were offices of the president and dean of the university driven out of Main Hall by overcrowding. The Daily Cardinal says: "The Superior sandstone of which it is built give it a substantial and legal air."<sup>6</sup> (see Fig. 1) The Victorian brownstone was certainly a distinct departure from the staid plain architectural styles that typified the rest of campus buildings (except Assembly Hall). The hexagonal tower was occupied by the president's consultation room and part of the law library. The buildings location with its substantial presence on the hill (see Fig. 2) was important to the law school because it was a clear signal from

Fig. 3. The 1893 brownstone Law Building makes way for the new glass and steel building. The cornerstone and a gargoyle from over the door of this building are set near the entrance of the new one. Taken from Birge Hall in 1963. [series 9/1, Law School (Old), jf-22]



the University that the law school was an integral part of the university The regents report : "The College for the first time in its history seems fully incorporated as an integral part of the University. The building although none too large even for the present accommodations of the College, is in most respects admirably adapted to the purpose for which it is designed."<sup>7</sup>

The old brownstone was satisfactory to the law department for about fifteen years. The reasons for discontent go beyond the simple need for more space suffered by most old buildings on campus. In 1903 Harry S. Richards became dean of the Law School. Richards introduced the case method of teaching law which uses informal discussion of cases and legal problems, instead of mass lectures to the entire class. This teaching style requires a large number of moderate size rooms with large desks for each student. The old building could not meet these new requirements. The second serious problem with the law building was the burgeoning library collection which numbered about 4,000 volumes in 1893 but had grown to 40,000 by 1929. Libraries with their enormous floor loads are notoriously hard for old buildings to accommodate.<sup>8</sup> For the wood frame old brownstone, structural engineers forbade expansion of the library.

With these intractable problems to overcome in 1939 the University began an addition to the Law Building of yellow sandstone (see Fig. 2) attached to the east side of the old building. One of the few projects at the University to utilize depression-era federal funding, the addition housed the library, and was the first of a series of additions that would culminate in the removal of the old brownstone. This was finally accomplished in 1963 (see Fig. 3).

1) *Regent's Minutes*, April 8, 1891. When the student paper *Aegis* reported the choice of location on June 12, 1891, they said: "The Law Building is to be placed between Assembly Hall and Ladies Hall. How nice for the lawyers."

2) They omitted a cupola, flagstaff, and the name from the outside of the building. Most significantly they changed the exterior stone from Frost's unspecified choice to Superior sandstone, and in a remarkable display of hands-on administration University President Chamberlin ( a geologist) went on an 1892 tour of stone quarries to select the most suitable stone. His report (archives series 1/1/3/ box 10), discusses quarries at Houghton Point, Bass Island, Wilson Island, Presque Island, all near Bayfield, and the winner, the Arcadia quarry near Superior.

3) *Regent's Minutes*, July 9, 1891, and August 6, 1891.

4) *Regent's Minutes*, August 9, 1893.

5) *Daily Cardinal*, December 21, 1892.

6) *Ibid.*

7) *Regent's Report*, 1894, p. 51.

8) Much of the 1990s remodelling of the state capitol was necessitated by the need to remove or accommodate the large legal libraries in the 90 year old building.