

OLD MUSIC HALL



Fig. 1. Assembly and Library Hall c. 1890. [x25-1566]

Music Hall was built in 1878 as a combination assembly hall and university library. Its function as an assembly hall was superseded by the Red Gym in 1892, and as a library by the Historical Society Library building in 1900. It was the home of the music department from 1900 until 1969 when Humanities opened. It is now home to the opera department and the department of regional and urban planning. Music Hall is listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

When the University Press released a special supplement on March 2, 1880, to celebrate the formal dedication of the University's new Assembly Hall it marked the climax of a long and unusual campaign on the part of the regents, the legislature and University president John Bascom.

As early as the 1869 requests were heard for a new building: "We need a public hall for the use of the College Societies. There is not in any of our present buildings a room large enough to accommodate the young men of the University."¹ The enrollment at this time was a little over 400. President Bascom arrived in the fall of 1874 bringing with him a strong moral sense and a conviction that he should exercise it upon the students of the University. The fact that he had no way to do this is made clear: "The University can be expected to have no adequate *esprit du corps*, until there is a room in which the whole body of students and the faculty can be assembled for ... those occasional talks, frequent hints on discipline ... which are never so appropriately or effectively given to detachments as to the entire body of pupils."²

The regents quote a member of the 1874 board of visitors as saying "I think the library of the University is a disgrace to the state."³ The library was indeed in sad shape; housed in tiny quarters in Main [Bascom] Hall, without a catalogue or librarian on site. Expenditures on books and publications were running around \$250 per year. These two pressing needs of the University, an assembly hall and a library would be beautifully united by Bascom, the regent's building committee, and David R. Jones, the architect eventually selected by them.

The funding of the Assembly Hall was unusual. In the winter of 1874 the state legislature gave to the University the property on Madison's east side known as the Soldiers' Orphans Home, previously the home of real estate developer Leonard J. Farwell, with the orders to establish a medical college. Since there was no support in the state for a medical college the regents asked permission of the legislature to dispose of the property and use the money for needed buildings.⁴ This wish was granted and the amount realized from the sale was enough to allow the regents to ask for design proposals and bids for the projected Assembly Hall. For several reasons, including the expiration of a \$10,000 yearly appropriation, Bascom's influence, and a general recognition that the state had not been fair to the University, the legislature in 1876 passed an act providing a one-tenth mill (that is one hundredth of a cent for each dollar of assessed property value) in the state tax to go to the University as income. This levy was intended to provide for all needs and redress all past failures and irregularities in regard to the University's funding. The combination of the 1876 mill tax and the Soldiers' Orphans home sale provided enough money for the Assembly Hall.

On June 21, 1876 the regents voted that an Assembly Hall should be built and also appointed a committee to decide on the best location.⁵ The committee reported to the board in January of 1877 that they had not been able to agree on a spot for the building, and that since the building would have to be exactly adapted to its site, no plans had been procured. President Bascom then presented to the board the "plan, seating capacity, and location for Assembly Hall."⁶ Apparently Bascom and the architect had been busy. The Executive Committee of the regents on July 30th, 1878 examined plans by architects H. C. Koch and D. R. Jones and selected Jones' plans for a combination Assembly Hall and Library. David R. Jones, a Welsh immigrant with a private practice in Madison, was paid approximately \$1700 over the next 2 years for the plans and construction superintendence.

Jones' "pseudo Gothic" design, with its lancet windows of stained glass, its Gothic arches and buttresses and its square central tower, is so called because it is reminiscent of the Gothic style of Cathedral design in Europe without rigidly adhering to that style. Many beautiful features are apparent: the overall proportions; the contrast of the light Madison sandstone from the Stephen's Quarry (at the current site of Hoyt Park), with the dark Superior sandstone trim. This effect is especially striking in the arches over the windows. The magnificent stained glass is best viewed from the entry hall to the auditorium on a sunny day.

Work began in the spring of 1878, by the principal contractor John Bentley and Son of Milwaukee. Chicago craftsman George A. Misch was hired in April 1879 to supply all the stained glass for the building and was paid a total of \$775 upon fitting the sashes in the building. Most of the original glass has been lost and replaced over the years.

The tower's clock, has been a city landmark and familiar symbol of the University campus, since its erection. In the contract with the Seth Thomas Clock Co. dated January 29th, 1879 and signed by Seth E. Thomas Jr., the company promised to provide the regents with an eight day hour-striking tower clock with four six foot faces, and a clock that would be in all particulars as to size, quality and performance equal to the tower clock recently put up at Ann Arbor, Michigan. This included a 2000 pound bell cast in Troy, New York. It would keep accurate time not varying over ten seconds per month for five years. In 1933 the mechanical weight crank mechanism (a two hour, two man job every eight days to raise a one-ton weight from the ground to treetop level) was electrified.

The campus clock that was in the 1880s a rare and valued source of carefully regulated time for the city of Madison still keeps excellent time and rings the hours on the 2000 pound bell.⁷

Jones' specification called for the building to be completed by October 1879. Unknown holdups delayed its acceptance by the regent's building committee until January 6, 1880, and its formal dedication until March 2, 1880. The dedication was a major event in the city, attended by a large crowd (the Hall then seated 800) who heard music by the students, and speeches by the governor and president Bascom. The University Press commented: "The music ... was the pleasantest feature of the evening The whole entertainment was marred by the unpardonable rudeness of some occupants of the gallery."⁸

The reception Assembly Hall got was not uniformly good. Many complaints were heard about the conduct of the balcony audiences. Within a year the University Press was complaining that it was neither large enough nor conveniently located to the city. Students frequently complained about the rules governing the use of the library. Historian J. F. A. Pyre opines "Though not in itself unpleasing or inappropriate, it was unfortunate in setting the precedent of a departure from the simple rectangular lines of construction which had hitherto prevailed."⁹ In June 1885 the regents received a request from Lyman Draper of the Historical Society to change the name of the building from "Assembly Hall" to "Lathrop Hall" to honor the first chancellor and to alleviate confusion with the "Assembly chamber" at the capitol. The regents cheerfully obliged by changing the name to "Library Hall".¹⁰ The auditorium proved to be extremely useful for events that drew crowds that did not overwhelm the building's capacity. Its good acoustics and pleasant setting made it ideal for the frequent literary society debates and free lectures series, both well attended by Madison residents. Class parties and Greek Society socials were also common, attended by some debate on whether it was appropriate to hold such events in a "chapel". It was made clear by a University Press editorial that however much it looked like a church or how many times or by whom it had been referred to as a chapel, it was no such thing and had never been intended to be anything but secular.¹¹

By 1894 with the greatly increased student enrollment its place as a meeting hall for large crowds had been taken over by the new Gymnasium and Armory. Library Hall (whose reading room had a capacity of 75) became unsuitable for the University library with the growth of the student body and rising standards for libraries. In 1900 with the opening of the Historical Library Building, the University library moved out and the building was taken over by the Music Department, previously housed in Ladies Hall (Old Chadbourne Hall). As part of this change the building was remodelled to make the library stack area into two floors, which involved the removal of some of the large stained glass windows on the north and south sides, and the addition of several new windows. In 1908 the regents had electrical wiring installed to replace the existing gas lighting. The building became popularly known as Music Hall, although the name was not officially changed until 1910. These changes were followed by another major renovation in 1924, when a new entrance was created on the south side and the auditorium was largely remodelled. The Hall continued its life as a lecture hall hosting such speakers as Governor Robert LaFollette, John F. Kennedy, F. L. Wright and 'Wild Bill' Kiekhofer. Significant incidents in the building's history include the founding of the University Bookstore as the Co-op (1892), the introduction of the song 'On Wisconsin' by its authors Purdy and Beck (1909), and the memorial services for University presidents John Bascom (1911) and Charles Van Hise (1919).¹²

Until 1969 the building served as the main School of Music facility, playing host to musicians such as artist-in-residence Gunnar Johansen, Ray Dvorak, the Pro Arte Quartet, Aaron Copeland, and the Chicago Symphony. After the removal of the Music School to the Humanities building in 1969, the building became home to two programs: The School of Music's Opera department in the auditorium and eastern offices, and the Department of Urban and Regional Planning in the western end. A

huge and successful remodelling of the auditorium, including a reconstruction of the stage, acoustical redesign and new seating, was donated by the Rennebohm family and carried out between 1982-1985.¹³

- 1) *Report of the Regents of the University of Wisconsin*, 1869 p. 29.
- 2) *Report of the Regents of the University of Wisconsin*, 1874 p. 14.
- 3) *Report of the Regents of the University of Wisconsin*, 1874 p. 14.
- 4) *Report of the Regents of the University of Wisconsin*, 1875 pp. 4-5.
- 5) *Minutes of the Board of Regents*, June 21, 1876. Vol. C p. 264.
- 6) *Minutes of the Board of Regents*, January 16, 1877. Vol. C p. 270.
- 7) Gerloff, Barbara, *Pastiche A History of Music Hall*, University Archives Music Hall subject file. p. 5. This is a very complete and interesting article about Music Hall, and contains much detail about subjects mentioned here.
- 8) *University Press*, March 2, 1880 Supplement
- 9) J. F. A. Pyre, *Wisconsin*, p. 213
- 10) *Minutes of the Board of Regents*, June 24, 1885. Vol. C p. 452.
- 11) *University Press* January 25, 1880 p. 5. This debate began because the building was frequently referred to as the "chapel", both during planning and after construction. Bascom's preaching style, often evident in speeches given in Assembly Hall, added to the misconception.
- 12) Gerloff, Barbara, *Pastiche A History of Music Hall*, University Archives Music Hall subject file. pp. 24-30. For the action regarding electricity see Minutes of the Executive Committee January 27, 1908.
- 13) Gerloff, Barbara, *Pastiche A History of Music Hall*, University Archives Music Hall subject file. pp. 15-25. The new seating capacity of the concert hall is 375.