

OLD SCIENCE HALL



Fig. 1. Old Science Hall 1878 (from Park Street).
[series 9/1 Old Science Hall, x25-315]



Fig. 2. Science Hall after fire 1884 (from S. E.).
[series 9/1 Old Science Hall, x25-571]

The first Science Hall opened in 1877 in the same spot as the current Science Hall. Its cost was less than \$100,000. It provided laboratory and faculty office space for all the science and engineering departments. A fire, probably begun in a forge room, completely destroyed the building in December 1884.

When John Bascom became president of the University in the fall of 1874, the crowding in Main Hall had become severe. Though the building had been open less than twenty years, the lecture rooms, halls, stairwells, and storage facilities were inadequate for the enrollment. This was especially true in the scientific fields, which had been generally disregarded in the early plans for the University. President Bascom and the regents immediately placed an expansion of the University's science facilities as the number one item on their priority list:

A Hall of natural science. This, as it seems to us, is *just now the one great desideratum* of the University ... There is now no suitable room for the laboratory. It not only finds very poor accommodation in the basement of the University building, but from the nature of the work done there, it is a perpetual annoyance to those who are in the rooms above.¹

In short it was crowded and it stank. The situation was evidently very bad, since the legislature, normally skeptical and slow moving when it came to the University's requests for funds, responded almost immediately with an appropriation of \$80,000 "for the purpose of building an additional University edifice for scientific purposes."²

With the energy and forethought characteristic of President Bascom's early administration, plans, specifications and construction estimates had already been procured and approved by the regents in 1874.³ Milwaukee architect H. C. Koch's design won over several competing architects'. His Italianate design of Madison sandstone and wood frame consisted of three floors over a raised basement.⁴ On June 15, 1875, the regents opened eight contractors' bids for the project and selected David Stephens for the job. Stephens's bid of \$69,975 was undoubtedly made possible by the fact that he owned the quarry that could supply the "Madison sandstone" specified by the architect. The contract required that Stephens have the building entirely completed by October 1, 1876. Heating apparatus was let under separate

contract. Due to problems in finding adequately seasoned wood, and a windstorm in September of 1876 which knocked down some walls, the fall '76 deadline came and went. It was not until June of 1877 that the University Building Committee could finally report to the regents: "The building entrusted to your committee is completed."⁵ The grand total for the project was \$96,932.

When Science Hall opened in 1877, it was the second purely instructional building on the campus. It was a 'U' shape, with the 136 by 60 foot base along Park Street, and two 78 by 42 foot wings pointing west up the hill. This shape corresponds closely to that of its replacement, the current Science Hall. The basement contained labs, shops and utilities. On the second floor were the departments of chemistry and physics, labs, lecture halls, and offices. The third floor was occupied by the civil engineers, and the geological department. The fourth floor contained the department of natural history, including the University cabinet, or collection. The front of the fourth floor was outfitted as an art gallery (open to the public for a few hours each week) for the University's embryonic collection of art.

Science Hall was the pride of the University. The legislature had been invited to visit it, and the University catalogues carried sketches of the floor plans. It was equipped with gas lights and flush toilets. Not all was well, however. In December of 1883, Professor Conover warned the executive committee that the floors would have to be shored up or they would collapse.⁶ As it turned out, neither were the floors shored up nor did they collapse.

At 8 PM on December 1, 1884, fire alarms sounded on campus. "When the first spectators arrived the fire was confined to the forge room and with suitable conveniences might have been easily extinguished."⁷ The executive committee later reported: "Owing to the fact that the appliances at the building for putting out fires could not be reached by those persons who were early at the fire, and the utterly useless help provided by the fire department of the city of Madison, nothing was done to stay the progress of the fire, and it simply burned out".⁸ By 9:30 students were dragging what they could reach of the professor's collections from the flaming building. Parts of the collections of professors Daniels and Van Hise were saved.

The day after the fire the regents leased machine shop facilities from the Lake City Food Company located at the foot of Park Street. They evacuated all the students from the North Dormitory to provide classroom space.⁹ Plans were also begun to arrange for the building of a new science hall. The University Press reported: "As the willing students responded to the alarm little did they realize that it was the trumpet of doom for the best of the seven buildings of the University, the destruction of hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of property, and the choicest products of the accumulated labor of years."¹⁰ Old Science Hall remains to this day the only major building lost to a fire in the University's history.

1) *Report of the Regents of the University of Wisconsin*, 1874 p. 13.

2) *Laws of Wisconsin* 1875, Chapter 61. The date of the regents plea for the building was June 18, 1874. The law authorizing the appropriation for the building was passed February 25, 1875. For the legislature dealing with the University this is high speed indeed.

3) *Report of the Regents of the University of Wisconsin*, 1875 p. 14. The regents refer to actions taken the previous year.

4) *Regents Minutes*, April 8, 1875 p. 225. Other architects submitting plans were S. A. Schmidtner, E. F. Mix, D. R. Jones and J. S. Parkinson.

5) *Report of the Regents of the University of Wisconsin*, 1877 p. 32.

6) Curti and Carstensen, *The University of Wisconsin*, vol. 1 p. 320. The evidence is that the building was very cheaply built; see also Thwaites, *The University of Wisconsin* p. 108 note 2.

7) *University Press* December 6, 1884 p. 1.

8) *Proceedings of the Board of Regents* series 1/1/2 pp. 440-1.

9) This ended forever the use of North Hall as a dormitory.

10) *University Press* December 6, 1884 p. 1.