

SOUTH EAST DORMS



Fig. 1. The Southeast dorms from the southwest, February 1997. Sellery at the left, Ogg's twin towers in the center, and Witte on the far right. Gordon Commons is in front of Ogg near the top of the picture. Serf is visible at the lower right. [Del Brown Photo, AP-70]

The southeast dorms were built in three stages in 1961, 1962 and 1963. They provide housing for 4000 undergraduate students. The dormitories are named for George Sellery, Edwin Witte, Frederic Ogg, and the food facility for Edgar Gordon.

The most remarkable thing about this, the largest housing development in University history is how smoothly it went. From concept in February 1959, to the opening of Gordon Commons in 1965, there were no serious difficulties.

In response to the general University expansion "sketch plan", approved by the regents in February 1959, the Division of Residence Halls drew up a Ten Year Housing Plan. This plan, drawn up by Newell J. Smith of Residence Halls, is dated May 1959, but was not presented to the regents until July 1959. The preliminary plan, covering years 1960-1970 called for reserving the 16 acre area bounded by University Avenue, Park, West Dayton and Frances Streets, for expansion of fireproof University housing facilities, to house up to 4000 undergraduate students. It asked that provisions be

made for recreational land, adequate parking and the same kind of social programs that existed at other residence halls. Interestingly this initial proposal does not contain a request for food service facilities. There were requests for other kinds of housing in that and other areas, including graduate student apartments and cooperative housing, which plans were later abandoned.¹

The plan was presented to the regents by president Elvehjem and Smith of Residence Halls on July 8, 1960. They pointed out that even with the opening of Chadbourne Hall and the Elm Drive dorms the previous fall, the dorms were full and an estimated 300 women had been turned away for lack of accommodation. The plan was geared to provide University housing for half of the projected enrollment increases for the decade. Regent Rennebohm complained that he had heard from private landlords who had been unable to find tenants, and cast doubts on the projected housing shortage. Rennebohm was of the opinion that the planned dorms were too nice. "Places that are better than 80 per cent of them are used to at home." Others questioned whether or not the University would be unfairly competing with the private rental market. But after discussion the regents passed a resolution to allow the preparation of analysis sketches for the first stage of the project to house about 1000 undergraduates.²

Following this initial approval, the project began to progress quickly. On February 1, 1961 Residence Halls obtained a preliminary study of the project by the architectural firm of J. & G. Daverman of Grand Rapids Michigan. It outlined five possible layouts for dorms in the area. These plans included one that proposed a cluster of 'Y' shaped dorms like Chadbourne Hall, another that featured dorms straddling Dayton Street. All the proposals now included construction in three phases, dining facilities and recreational areas. One reason for now including dining facilities was that lending agencies were unwilling to loan on large dorms without them. In that same month, the regents approved the funding of land purchase in the dorm area from a revolving Residence Halls account, with the loans guaranteed by WARF.³

Further discussion of the dorm project was held by the regents in March 1961. As presented by dean Wendt, the project now consisted of four dorms eight story high holding 500 students each and one fourteen story dorm holding 1000, and a food preparation and dining facility for 3000. The regents asked why the dorms could not all be fourteen stories, and were told that it would raise the density of students in the area passed the design limit of 4000 students on 16 acres. In April 1961 the purchase of land in the area of phase one began, with purchase prices coming in at or below appraised value. One of the reasons this site had been selected was that it was a rundown older neighborhood, judging from pictures and descriptions it was very like the current state of the West Mifflin Street area. The removal of the old houses in the area would displace an estimated 900 students. In May 1961 the regents voted on the architect's plans for the Southeast dorm #1 project for submission to the Housing and Home Finance Agency, a Federal lending agency. The estimated cost of the dorm was \$6.8 million. When some regents remarked that this compared unfavorably with the cost of the recently completed Chadbourne Hall, they were reminded that the southeast dorms were the first University dormitories whose cost would include the expense of real estate. That cost was about \$1 million per block. It was estimated that rates in all dorms would have to rise about \$100 per student to pay for the new dorms. Regent Jensen said that it seemed to him that the dorm would be more of a "club" than a dormitory for a serious purpose, he was outraged by the presence of parking spaces, provision for television, and suggested eliminating elevators from the first four floors to encourage student exercise. The regents continued to debate the merits of the project for most of the morning but this meeting saw the last serious opposition to the southeast dorm project.⁴

On July 20, 1961 the regents approved without discussion the preliminary plans for southeast dorm #1. At the same meeting they raised the credit limit of the revolving fund, used to purchase land, from \$4 million to \$5 million. The final plans and authority for bids were approved on December 8, 1961. The contracts were let on February 9, 1962, with the general contract going to the J. L. Simmons Company of Chicago. Total cost was \$4.3 million of which \$1.1 million was land cost. A month later

the financing was finalized with interest rate between 3 and 4 per cent on bonds running until the year 2001. Construction was under way on the first southeast dorm.⁵

In the May of 1962 while the construction of dorm #1 was going on, the regents approved without dissent the general plan for the rest of the project. The regents were now in a hurry for housing as enrollment was rising faster than had been predicted. There would be two more dorms and a food service building, the dorms to hold 1130, and 1000 students respectively to be finished in 1964 and 1965. This was essentially the rest of the original ten year plan. The second dorm would be identical to the first, then under construction. This would save time in plan preparation. In January 1963 the financing of the second dorm was completed, and contracts were let on February 8, 1963 with J. P. Cullen and Son the general contractor for \$2.3 million. Total cost of dorm #2 was \$3.53 million.⁶

The preliminary plans for southeast dorm #3 were approved on May 10, 1963. Financing was again at 3.5 per cent for 50 years. Dorm #3 was designed for 960 men students, 480 in each of the two towers. Estimated cost was \$4.5 million for dorm #3 and the food service building. On June 10, 1963 the regents voted that the dorms be named as follows: the commons building be named Edgar B. Gordon Commons; southeast dorm #1 be named George C. Sellery Hall; that southeast dorm #2 be named Edwin E. Witte Hall; that southeast dorm #3 be named Frederic A. Ogg Hall.⁷

The final plans for Ogg Hall were approved on September 6, 1963, and the contracts were let on November 11, 1963. The general contractor was J. H. Findorff and Son with a contract of \$2.2 million. Total cost for dorm #3 was 4.5 million. The final plans for Gordon Commons were approved on March 6, 1964, and the construction bids were let on June 8, 1964. The general contractor was J. P. Cullen and Son of Janesville for \$1.1 million. Total costs were \$3.8 million. This part of the project was paid for by state funds.⁸

Dorm #1, Sellery Hall, opened in the fall of 1963 with room for 1100 students. Dorm #2, Witte Hall, opened in the fall of 1964, for another 1100. Dorm #3, Ogg Hall, and Gordon Commons opened in the fall of 1965 with space for 960 students. The ten year plan's vision of housing for almost 4000 undergraduates was complete. The formal dedication of the Southeast dorms was held on May 8, 1966, almost seven years to the day from the initial design of the dorm project by Residence Halls.⁹

All three dorms are of reinforced concrete construction faced with brick and of similar design. Each of the three took the form of two tower sections rising from a common base section. In the case of Sellery and Witte which are identical except for the relative spacing of the towers, the towers are 40 by 200 feet, ten floors high, and the common base is a basement and one story, holding utilities, activity rooms, laundry and luggage rooms. The towers are arranged with a house per floor, with each house having a lounge, lobby and common rooms. They were designed to be used as a women's wing and a men's wing. Overall height is 92 feet. Ogg Hall is slightly different, with two symmetrical 66 by 110 foot towers 12 floors high over the basement and first floor shared section. Total height is 127 feet. Ogg was designed to be used by men only. All three dorms are now co-ed by floor. Gordon Commons is a basement and one floor rectangle 209 by 250 feet, containing six large dining rooms and kitchen facilities for 3000. It is connected by tunnel to Ogg Hall, and by elevated foot bridge to Witte Hall.

The total cost of the huge project had been about \$24 million, financed through bond issues that would not mature until about the turn of the century. But in the 1980s when interest rates approached 15 per cent, the holders of these bonds were willing to cash them in at 50 cents on the dollar, and the debt load on the dorms was completely liquidated. Even the impersonal forces of the market place went easy on this project.¹⁰

The student community of 3200 undergraduates has been operating at capacity since 1965. The Southeast Recreational Facility (SERF) built in the 1980s added considerable attraction to the dorms.



Fig. 2. The first of the southeast dorms going up: Sellery Hall Under construction, September 24, 1962. [Series 26/1, Southeast Dorms, ns-1734]

As the University expands to the south and east of Bascom Hill, the southeast dorms are more and more in a location central to the campus.

- 1) Residence Halls Ten Year Construction Program, May 10, 1960, Transcription of Notes from Regent Meeting, July 8, 1960, series 1/1/3 box 89 folder July 1960.
- 2) Transcription of Notes from Regent Meeting, July 8, 1960, series 1/1/3 box 89 folder July 1960. *Regent's Minutes*, July 8, 1960, September 9-10, 1960.
- 3) *Regent's Minutes*, February 10-11, 1961; The Daverman Architectural Report, February 1, 1961, series 24/9/2 box 15.
- 4) *Regent's Minutes*, March 10, 1961, April 7, 1961, May 12-13, 1961; *Daily Cardinal*, January 10, 11, 12, 1961.
- 5) *Regent's Minutes*, July 20-21, 1961, December 8, 1961, February 9, 1962, exhibit G., March 9, 1962, May 4, 1962.
- 6) *Regent's Minutes*, July 13, 1962, January 11, 1963, February 8, 1963, April 5, 1963.
- 7) *Regent's Minutes*, June 10, 1963, the individual houses were also named at this meeting.
- 8) *Regent's Minutes*, May 10, 1963, September 6, 1963, December 6, 1963 exhibit I, March 6, 1964, June 8, 1964.
- 9) Dedication Brochure, Archives Sellery Hall subject folder.
- 10) Plans in the physical plant plans room; Interview spring 1994 with Charles Stathas, University legal counsel.