

# STERLING HALL



Fig. 1. C. 1917 Sterling Hall. In the background: Bascom and the unfinished west end of Birge. In the foreground, the neighborhood later replaced by the Service Memorial Institute. [g1002]

*Sterling Hall was built in 1915 to house physics, political economy and commerce. In 1958 a wing was added on the south side to house the army math research center. This center was the target of a bombing in August 1970. The building is now the home of physics and astronomy.*

In 1913, the College of Letters and Sciences was shoehorned into three buildings (Main, North and South Halls). Not for more than a decade had building space been erected for L&S, despite the fact that enrollment had risen more sharply in that college than any other, including some who had been provided with several new buildings. Both president Van Hise and Dean of Letters and Sciences Birge were determined to change this circumstance. Their approach was to plan for the construction of two structures, a liberal arts building and a physics building. In the spring of 1913, conferences began with department heads to plan the new facilities. The plan for the liberal arts building gradually became a large addition to University Hall, and the physics building took shape as the regents debated the best location for it. In October 1913 the regents decided on the site proposed by the consulting architects Laird and Cret: the north side of the 'court of honor' formed by University Hall, Birge Hall and the new building. It was to be a four story building, with physics in the lower two floors. Then during the winter of 1913, estimates were obtained and the thinking began to change. The Committee on Constructional Development recommended that the decision to locate the physics building on the court of honor be rescinded in favor of a site north of the Chemistry building and east of Charter Street.<sup>1</sup> President Van Hise explained that the adoption of this plan eliminated the need for a very costly "Madison stone" building required for a building in such a conspicuous location as the top of Bascom Hill, and that considering the likely appropriation, the available space in a building on Charter Street would be one third larger than the space on the Hill site. Professor Snow, the head of the physics department voiced unspecified concerns about electrical disturbances, but decides that the

additional space more than made up for the disadvantage.<sup>2</sup>

In this plan the lower two floors were to be given to Physics, who were concerned about vibration in a tall building, and the upper two floors were unassigned. On January 21, 1914, the regents approved Laird and Cret's plan for the physics building. The office of Arthur Peabody the university's supervising architect proceeded to generate detailed drawings for the building and advertising for bids. On December 17, 1914, the regents opened bids and awarded the contract to the lowest bidder, the Wisconsin Construction Company for \$180,775.

It was not until seven months later, in August 1915, the regents reported that the legislatures of 1915-16 and 1916-17 had appropriated \$190,000 for "the construction of a Medical or Physics Building."<sup>3</sup> This delay caused serious trouble for the project. Because all building contracts had to be signed by the governor, the go-ahead to start construction was delayed until August 21, 1915, a full eight months after the bids had been calculated by the contractor. In this interval prices of material and labor had risen substantially, and the contractor argued that he could no longer agree to put up the building for the contract price. This argument was taken by the regents to the state attorney general. After conferences among the principals, the order to begin work was given, with no relief given to the contractor<sup>4</sup>. The contract stipulated that the whole building be completed within eighteen months of the work order, i.e. by April 1917.

Due to these legal problems with the contractor, as well as labor and material shortages, the completion of the physics building was delayed by eight months. The public inspection and dedication of the building took place on January 15, 1918. Total cost was \$190,000. A rededication of the building took place in the summer of 1921, after the regents voted that "the Physics-Economics Building be named Sterling Hall."<sup>5</sup>

"The building has four stories and a basement, of which the basement, first and second stories are occupied by the Department of Physics, the third story by the Department of Political Economy and the fourth story by the Course in Commerce. The space beneath the Auditorium floor will be utilized for the University Telephone Exchange."<sup>6</sup> This arrangement of the building had taken considerable diplomacy on Van Hise's part. The department of history had wanted the space but after the building site was moved to the less prestigious Charter Street location, they opted to wait for a different building; the next neediest department was the medical department under dean Bardeen, who agreed that when physics moved out of Science Hall the medical department would have ample room in that building (and that his school would move to the top of the priority list).<sup>7</sup> Political Science and Commerce appear to have been chosen to free up the most space in existing buildings. Political Economy stayed only until 1919; Commerce until 1956.

Throughout the twentieth century the physics department with men like Mendenhall and



Fig. 2. Sterling Addition c. 1960. [series 9/1 Sterling Hall, x25-2885]

Fig. 3. The aftermath of the August 24, 1974 bombing. [x25-2622]

Benjamin Snow, (who made physics "less unpopular than at other universities"), developed a worldwide reputation in teaching and research. By 1955 this reputation was such that the federal government after consideration of all U. S. universities selected Wisconsin as the site for the Army Mathematics Research Center (AMRC). In December 1955, the regents accepted the government's offer of the AMRC, and a gift of \$400,000 from WARF for a four story addition to the east side of Sterling



Hall to house the center and the university computing service. Due to bureaucratic, financial and construction delays the new addition was not dedicated until April 1959, although it had apparently already been in use for some time. The new \$800,000 six-floor south wing (see Fig. 2) housed the AMRC on floors two, three and four, physics on the first floor and basement, including high energy physics and in an attached one-story building to the north an atom-smasher. The Numerical Analysis laboratory moved from the basement of Bascom Hall to the fifth floor of the Sterling addition. The department of astronomy moved to the sixth floor, as the beginning of its escape from the obsolete facilities at the Washburn Observatory.<sup>8</sup>

The beginning and use of the Army Math Research Center is strikingly similar to that of the Federal Forest Laboratory, which was similarly funded and utilized before and during WW I. For various reasons, the AMRC became increasingly the focal point of the movement in the late 1960s to limit the role of the university in military research pertaining to the war in Southeast Asia. This resistance culminated in the August 24, 1970 bombing of Sterling Hall. A truck sized bomb was detonated in the alleyway just to the south of the building. In the ensuing explosion a physics researcher (Robert Fassnacht) was killed, and about 2 million dollars worth of damage occurred to campus building (principally Sterling, Chamberlin, the new chemistry building, and Birge Hall). The bomb which was slightly west of the wing containing the target, (see Fig. 3) did little damage to the AMRC (principally a paper and pencil operation). The addition after repairs were made now [1993] houses mainly the astronomy department and some physics facilities.

1) *Regent's Minutes*, December 3, 1913.

2) Van Hise to the Regents, November 28, 1913, in Regent's papers for December 13, 1913.

3) *Regent's Minutes*, August 19, 1915.

4) *Regent's Minutes*, October 13, 1915.

5) *Regent's Minutes*, June 21, 1921.

6) Program of Reception, January 15, 1918. Archives Sterling Hall subject file.

7) Parts of the negotiations for space appear in telegrams from Van Hise to business manager Bumpus in series 24/1/1 box 3 folder "V". The liberal arts building was dropped entirely since the history department could be accommodated in Bascom and South Halls, after commerce and political science left.

8) *The Daily Cardinal*, April 16, 1959, *Wisconsin Alumni Magazine*, December 1959 p. 10.