

THE PALIMPSEST

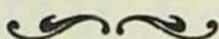
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The Cradle of the University

Faneuil Hall in Boston is familiarly known as the "Cradle of Liberty" because it was the "meeting place of American patriots during the Revolutionary period" and the Mechanics' Academy in Iowa City may, with equal propriety, be referred to as the "Cradle" of the State University of Iowa. For it was in this building that the University's educational program began.

How did the Mechanics' Academy come to be? The story goes back to the first half of the nineteenth century when men began to recognize that training of the mind would make the hands more efficient. Artisans, craftsmen, and mechanics frequently banded themselves together in mutual aid associations, not only for the development of craftsmanship, but for the promotion of cultural education as well. Such an organization was the Mechanic's (later written Mechanics') Mutual Aid Association of Iowa City, which was formed in 1841 to "promote such measures as may tend to

the advancement of the mechanical arts; and also whatever may tend to the promotion of education, and the advancement of the arts and the sciences."

The Iowa Legislative Assembly, meeting in Butler's Capitol, gave substantial aid to this Association, on January 4, 1842, by incorporating it and granting it a building site, on condition that within two years a building worth not less than one thousand dollars should be erected upon the proposed site, and with the further provision that title should revert to the State if the land ceased to be used for literary purposes. The site thus donated consisted of the south half of the west half of block sixty, known as the "school reserve". It was situated directly north of Iowa Avenue and east of Linn Street — the site of the building now known as East Hall. Two years later the north half of the school reserve was also donated to the Mechanics' Association on the same terms.

The Association consisted of more than forty members, with James N. Ball, president, Thomas Comb and Louis S. Swafford, vice presidents, Edward Lanning, secretary, and A. G. Adams, treasurer. The work of erecting the building was a coöperative task. James N. Ball, a stone cutter, contributed of his skill toward supplying the building with a secure foundation. Sylvanus Johnson, another member of the Association,

“made and furnished the brick for the building”, while Louis S. Swafford, a carpenter, made all the window frames — “they being all of oak lumber, from Felkner’s mill”. Other members of the Association worked on the building as carpenters, brick masons, stone cutters, plasterers, and painters.

The building project was begun in the spring of 1842 and on June 14th the cornerstone was laid. That was a gala day for Iowa City and its approximately one thousand inhabitants — the occasion of a public parade in which there was a city-wide interest. A procession which formed in front of Butler’s Capitol on Washington Street was composed of members of the Association, invited guests, teachers and pupils of the schools of the city, and citizens, numbering in all over two hundred. The route of the procession was west to Clinton Street, south to Burlington, east to Dubuque, north to Iowa Avenue, thence east to the place of building. Music for the occasion was furnished by the Methodist Protestant Church choir, Rev. Michael Hummer of the Presbyterian Church acted as chaplain, and Rev. John Libby, then pastor of the Methodist Protestant Church, delivered the oration.

With the aid of many hands the building project moved forward with dispatch. It took the

form of a substantial two-story brick structure, with a basement. The building was approximately thirty by sixty feet in dimensions and was surmounted by a belfry. A tablet some two by one and one-half feet in size, placed about half way up in the center of the front wall, probably gave the name and date, but this inscription is not recorded.

Because of the generous aid given by many workmen, little money was expended in the building project. Indeed, it is said, less than fifty dollars in money "actually passed hands" in the erection of this building, valued at between three and four thousand dollars. At that time it was said to be the best school building in the Territory of Iowa. When the building was ready for occupancy it was supplied with a carefully selected library, which was maintained for several years, with Louis S. Swafford as librarian.

In May, 1843, the trustees of the Academy announced that the services of Mrs. Sarah C. Morey, "an accomplished lady favorably known as a teacher, both here and elsewhere, have been secured". Under her leadership as principal of the girls' department, they said, "parents can have no excuse for withholding their patronage." The cost of instruction was to be paid by the patrons of the school at rates that varied according to the

branches taught. For the common branches the charge was to be three dollars for a term of three months. Other subjects ranged as high as six dollars per session of three months. "Music on the Piano" was "extra", costing ten dollars per term.

In August, 1843, it was reported that the school was in very good condition, although some things were not conducted in a manner to please all members of the committee. It was conceded, however, that "we cannot expect to get teachers that will be perfect in everything". At that time there were 42 boys and 63 girls in attendance. The total income from tuition for five months was estimated at \$319.52 and the salary of teachers amounted to \$247, leaving a balance of \$72.52 to the credit of the Association. A little later in the fall, the trustees announced that Hugh and William Hamilton, graduates of Kenyon College, Ohio, had been secured "to conduct the male department", and that Mrs. George S. Hampton, "a lady favorably known to this community, will take charge of the female department." In October, 1843, members of the Association were urged to secure pupils for the Academy. About the same time, also, orders were issued to assess an extra charge of thirty-one cents per pupil for fuel during the winter session.

In the spring of 1844 there was competition for the teaching positions. One lady agreed to take charge of the girls' department and pay the Association eighteen and three-fourths per cent of all collectible bills for tuition. Mrs. Morey and Miss H. M. Owen offered to conduct this department for twenty-five per cent of the income, provided the trustees advertised the school and collected the bills. Dr. William Reynolds said that he would take charge of one room and pay \$60 a year for the use of it. The Hamilton brothers offered to take one room and keep up the classical department for a year for ninety per cent of the collectible bills. The two women and the Hamilton brothers were engaged.

In the fall of 1844 it was announced that the male and female departments of the Academy would be combined under the direction of the Hamilton brothers, and that any kind of merchantable produce or labor would be accepted in payment of tuition. Board could be obtained for \$1.25 per week, and students would have the use of the library free of charge. In May of the following year the two departments were again separated, the boys' department under the leadership of A. B. McCalmont, and the girls' department under the direction of Mrs. M. M. Simmons and Miss L. F. McIlvaine. For the fall term, the prin-

cipals were Dr. William Reynolds and Miss McIlvaine.

In November, 1845, the upper story of the Academy building was leased to the Masonic lodge. A little later the Masons agreed that the Odd Fellows might also use the hall for their meetings. The first floor and the basement continued to be used for school purposes. For several years thereafter the entire building was used for private schools conducted by various individuals, including Dr. William Reynolds, H. W. Lathrop, D. S. Warren, and Mrs. Sarah C. Morey. In July, 1853, Iowa City, then newly incorporated, rented it for the first public school established by the city, with H. W. Lathrop as principal and Miss Nancy McCaddon as assistant, at salaries respectively of \$450 and \$250 per year. The annual rental paid by the city for the use of the building was \$230.

In the meantime attempts were being made to organize the University which had been established by law in 1847. On May 8, 1854, a committee of the trustees reported that a conditional contract had been drawn for the rental of the Mechanics' Academy building "for the accommodation of the Faculty and students", at \$135, from April 15 to November 1, 1854. It was not, however, until the spring of 1855 that the University

opened its first classes for a brief term of sixteen weeks. The rent paid was \$300 per year.

To promote punctual attendance at classes, the trustees, in April, 1855, purchased a bell from the Constitutional Presbyterian Church (New School) for \$76.45 and had it installed in the belfry of the Academy. How long this bell hung there is not recorded. Possibly it was removed when the building became a dormitory in 1866. An old bell now on the University campus bears the date 1844, the year previous to the building of the old stone church from which the Academy bell came. Is this the old Academy bell? Would that the tongues of bells could talk.

But let us not digress too far. The Academy building served as the center of University activities until 1858, when the Capitol, soon known as the Central Building, became available for University purposes. What use was made of the Academy building during the years 1858-1860 when most of the University classes were suspended is not recorded, but in 1860 the Normal Department, which had functioned in the Capitol building, was installed in the rooms of the old Academy and for a time the building bore a sign, "State Normal School". The trustees, however, objected to this claim of a department to independence, so the sign was removed.

At the time Oliver M. Spencer became president of the University in 1862, the Normal Department was returned to the Central Building (Old Capitol) but the "model school" was conducted in the basement of the Academy building. For three years, 1862 to 1865, the State Historical Society of Iowa occupied the first floor. Thus for more than a score of years, the building erected and owned by the Mechanics' Mutual Aid Association of Iowa City played a varied role in the economic and cultural program of the city and the University.

By 1866, however, the corporation had almost disappeared. Members had died, moved away, or lost interest. Most of the shares of stock had finally come into possession of Robert Hutchinson, one of the original incorporators. The question was raised whether the title to the property should not revert to the State since, it was asserted, the management did not meet the conditions of the original grant.

Meanwhile the University had grown slowly but surely and it needed more room. The Mechanics' Academy building was conveniently situated. It was only two blocks from the central University campus and was surrounded by "a handsome grove of stately oaks". The University decided to acquire the property and in March,

1866, the General Assembly of Iowa passed an act which declared that the title to the lot on which the Mechanics' Academy building stood had reverted to the State, because it was no longer used for "literary" purposes. This law transferred the title in fee to the University, with the provision, however, that the State should not be liable for the claims of any party or parties whatsoever.

The act opened the way for the University to make such barter or purchase as was necessary to satisfy the remaining claims of the stockholders, chiefly Mr. Hutchinson. Thereupon the University transferred to Mr. Hutchinson a lot on College Street in Iowa City in exchange for his remaining rights in the property and the Mechanics' Academy building became University property.

A committee was authorized to have the building refitted in a suitable manner for students' rooms and the sum of \$500 was allocated for that purpose. Thus the old building became a dormitory, subjected to all the defacements that characterized college dormitories in the decade of the seventies. Its abuses were well described by H. W. Lathrop, historian, when he said: "This old building then became the scene of so many pranks and so much mischief by the students occupying it, that it was nicknamed the 'Old Sin Trap'." The sobriquet was sometimes spelled "Syntrap".

After the old building had served for a time as a dormitory and had suffered much at the hands of its careless occupants, it was again rejuvenated and remodeled to serve yet another useful and worthy purpose. In June, 1873, two physicians — Dr. J. C. Shrader and Dr. E. F. Clapp — reported that “through the munificence of the board of regents of the State University, the west half of the block in Iowa City heretofore known as the Mechanics’ Academy, has been set apart for *hospital* purposes, to be managed by the members of the medical department of the University and by such members of the *regular profession* in Iowa City as may be necessary to insure the successful operation of the same.”

To guarantee the successful operation of this hospital, Johnson County was asked “to pay for six patients per week at the rate of four dollars per week, each patient, throughout the year”, and to pay at the same rate for any county patient that might be sent to the hospital. Provision was also made for the care of insane patients. The hospital was placed under the care and supervision of the Sisters of Mercy and was, therefore, called Mercy Hospital. It was not, however, a Catholic institution, but was maintained under the direction of the Board of Regents of the State University.

Before the Academy building had been legally

transferred to the University, a frame addition had been erected at the rear — or east side — of the building. When the building was revamped for hospital purposes, this addition was remodeled to make it about forty feet square and two stories high. This provided the amphitheatre. To aid in the remodeling of the building and the maintenance of the hospital, Iowa City contributed \$600 and private citizens “swelled the sum to nearly \$4,000”.

The editor of *The University Reporter* said in November, 1873:

“We visited, a few days since, that fine addition to our medical department, ‘Mercy Hospital.’ This hospital is old ‘Syntrap’ reconstructed and much modified. . . . The old, dingy, battered walls of ‘Syntrap’ have been repaired and nicely painted. Good substantial steps, leading to the doors at either end of the main building, have been substituted for the old rickety ones so promiscuously carved by the penknives of ‘the boys.’ The rear, or frame part of the building, has been raised to an equal height with the main part, and a broad covered stairway connects the upper story of this to the first floor of the main building.” There, upon turning to the left and ringing a bell, one would be “courteously received by one of the ‘Sisters of Mercy’”. Detailed descriptions were

likewise given of the "Reception Room", the "Male Ward", "Lecture Hall", "Dispensary", and the "Female Ward" on the second floor. After 1886 the old Academy building shared hospital service with the new Mercy Hospital unit opened in the old Dostal residence.

The years marched on. Time and misuse bore heavily on the old building. At length it was decided to raze the Mechanics' Academy and erect on its site a new and modern hospital. Accordingly, in January, 1897, the University Board of Regents advertised for bids for the purchase and removal, or the removal alone, of the antiquated building. The notices relative to these bids said:

"The old Medical Hospital now to be removed consists of a brick front and very thick walls, 54 feet and 4 inches long and 26 feet 6 inches wide and three stories high.

"The frame part, built to the brick, is about 42 feet long and 43 feet wide and two stories high."

E. H. Jayne and Company of Iowa City contracted to raze the entire hospital building and to place the brick and stone, the doors and windows, and the lumber in separate piles out of the way of workmen, for the sum of \$225 — the work to be completed by April 7, 1897. The fulfillment of this contract constituted the closing chapter in the history of this distinguished old building.

When the building was torn down in the spring of 1897, Colonel Albert W. Swalm of Oskaloosa, a member of the Board of Regents, directed that wood taken from the belfry tower be used to make gavels or souvenir mallets, and that one of these souvenirs be presented to each of the various colleges of the State. Such gavels were presented to Luther, Penn, Western, Lenox, Grinnell, Cornell, Tabor, and perhaps to other colleges, as well as to various individuals throughout the State.

Colonel Swalm also sent to Mr. O. A. Byington, who was then serving as a member of the Twenty-sixth General Assembly, fifty canes made from wood taken from the old Academy building to be distributed to members of the House of Representatives. Unfortunately the shipment of canes was missent and only thirty-eight were left for members of the House. Whereupon Mr. Byington ordered sixty-five more so that each member of the House might have a souvenir cane.

When the cornerstone of the old Academy building, laid in 1842, was removed in 1897, no trace was found of any contents, although a newspaper account of the ceremony attending the laying of the stone relates that a list of the objects deposited in the box was read. When the walls of the new hospital — now East Hall — were erected, the old cornerstone that had been in the

Academy building for 55 years, was supplied with new contents and placed in the wall at the lower south entrance of the new building, where the inscription: "Mechanics' Academy founded June 14th, A. D. 1842" might be easily read. It is there no longer. When the new medical unit was erected west of the Iowa River, the old cornerstone was taken from its second resting place and set in the front wall of the laboratory building at the east approach. The tablet which adorned the front wall of the original building has disappeared.

Candlesticks, gavels, and canes made from the stair posts and the belfry are in private hands. The bell *may* be preserved on the University campus. These fragments are the only physical remains of the Mechanics' Academy, but memory recalls that the first University classes were held within its walls, that its bell first rang out the call for assembly and classes, that the building served as the first hospital, and that the embryo of the University library began there. The Mechanics' Academy building was truly the "cradle of the University".

JACOB A. SWISHER