



Texas A&M University's Academic Building as an Incubator of Knowledge and Tradition

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Abstract

At its inception in fall of 1873 Langford (1963) Texas A&M University, then known as the Agricultural and Mechanical College of Texas, was little more than a lone building called Old Main, shortly followed by its close neighbor Old Gathright. For ten years these two buildings were the entirety of the College. When Old Main burnt down in 1912, a new and grand building was constructed on the same site in 1914. This new building, the Academic Building, has been honored with housing the Texas Liberty Bell replica, was a catalyst for a plethora of Aggie traditions, and is an incubator for new departments to sally forth. The Academic Building has been both a catalyst and a witness to the lives of Aggies since its inception. As Texas A&M University grew around this building, however, the prestige and focus on the Academic Building in the foreground has dwindled. Recognized by all Aggies, but now visited by few, the future of the Academic Building's status and purpose is uncertain. This research is a commentary on emergence and submergence, the life of an iconic presence at Texas A&M University, and on the necessity of keeping historic university buildings in the foreground of campus life. Finally, this research questions the responsibility of stewardship and *de rigueur* of maintaining a historical narrative of a building central to the history of the American tertiary educational landscape in a period of modernity and expansion.

Keywords: Academic History, Academic Building, Texas A&M University



Introduction

The past: A History of the Academic Building

At its inception in fall of 1873 (Langford, 1963) Texas A&M University, then known as the Agricultural and Mechanical College of Texas, was little more than a lone building called Old Main shortly followed by its close neighbor Old Gathright. For ten years these two buildings were the entirety of the College, (Langford, 1963, p. 3). The Old Main building, with a capacity of 600 people, was described by Governor Richard Coke as “exceedingly well built, of the best material, modeled with fine taste, and with interior arrangements and divisions admirably suiting it for the purpose for which it is built”. (Langford, 1963, p. 5). ‘Soon forty or so students—all men—listened as six professors—also all men—lectured on engineering, agriculture, and military tactics. The first class of Texas Agricultural and Mechanical College; more commonly known today as Texas A&M, was born’ (Texas A&M is Founded, 2011).

The early days of Bryan and College Station

The history, the present, and the future of Texas A&M University’s story is inextricably linked to the Academic Building, built on the site of the original Old Main Building. The Academic Building has played a prominent role in the social, political, and academic life of the institution over the last century. The growth of Texas A&M University has directly affected the size of Bryan and College Station, and the Texas economy.

To understand the impact of Old Main and Academic Building on the present day it is necessary to dig into the past before Texas A&M University was even a thought on the consciousness of history. In 1821, the first permanent European settlers of Brazos County, Robert Millican, brought his wife, sons and daughters from Missouri and settled south of present-day Millican. Three years later, James Hope receives a land grant followed by the Millicans who began to expand their settlement (Brazos Genealogy, 2013). Brazos County slowly grew over the next twenty years. The 1850 census marks the population at 614 which grew rapidly to 2,776 eleven years later by 1861.

In 1862, Abraham Lincoln approved the Land Grant Act to donate public land to institutions to benefit agriculture and mechanical arts. This policy eventually trickled down to Texas. On April 17, 1871 the Agricultural and Mechanical College of Texas was enacted by



the Texas Legislature. The agreed site was located at 30.6014° N, 96.3144° W in the state of Texas, approximately 97 miles north of Houston, 183 miles south of Dallas, 174 miles south of Fort Worth, 108 miles southwest of Austin, and 180 miles southwest of San Antonio. \$75,000 was appropriated, paving the way for eventual completion and opening of Old Main Building, the birthplace of Texas A&M University in 1876 (Brazos County Historical Timeline, n.d.). The location of this nest provided an incubator for the emergence of Aggieland.

Old Main

According to (Langford, 1963), Old Main, built in 1875 at a cost of \$100,000 formed the foundation of the then Texas Agriculture and Mechanical College. The building influenced, and was influenced by a series of events that formed the character of the university at the time, many of which continue to echo to present day through its successor, the Academic Building.

Initially the center of administration and academia for the College, it later added residences in 1887. Old Main was a stately, semi-classic building four stories in height with its top floor enclosed by a mansard roof. Exterior walls were solid brick load bearing walls, with three floors. Towers for four floors mostly included interior walls, timber comprised all of the floor and roof framing. Old Main appeared red. Bricks were a mixture of cherry red, arches over the windows and doors with limestone belt courses. The front of the building featured modified classic columns, cornices and balustrades which formed a combination porched balcony. A highly decorative cornice ran around the building at the fourth floor level and in somewhat simpler form was repeated at the top of the towers. The roof was made of variegated slate with star-like patterns worked in between the windows.

Old Main was designed by the architect, Mr. Jacob Larmour (1822-1901). Victor (2010) outlines the life of the primary architect of Old Main. Mr. Jacob Larmour (1822-1901), was born in Hackensack, New Jersey, on June 26, 1822. He practiced architecture until 1857 in New York City before moving his family to Jackson, Mississippi. After the civil war ended the family moved to Indianapolis, Indiana, and then to Minneapolis, Minnesota. In 1871, Larmour moved to Austin, Texas, with his family. He was the only architect listed in the first Austin City Directory (1872–73). His first work, Old Main, built between 1871 and 1874,



began a blossoming career: Larmour and his offices produced more than fifty documented public, commercial, and residential buildings in Texas over his thirty year career. Notably, he was also appointed the state architect by Governor Oran M. Roberts in 1883 and was a charter member of the Texas State Association of Architects, organized in 1886. His designs exhibited the range of high-style architectural elements characteristic of the times. Notable works include: the First National Bank (1873) in Austin, the Travis County Courthouse (1875, demolished 1964), and the Travis County Jail and Jailer's House at Brazos and Eleventh streets (completed in collaboration with E. H. Klerke, 1875).

While Larmour is credited with designing an exemplary structure, there was discord regarding construction of Old Main and the building may have been erected to much poorer standards. The building contract was awarded to Chalmers and McMillan, but Langford (1963) describes how dissatisfaction arose which led to Mr. Braodus writing to Governor Davis to complain about the building quality of Chalmers and Macmille's work. Governor Davis suspended the work after they had been paid \$12,000 for building. The committee comprised of Robert Smith, Dr. Giesecke, Dr. Mark Francis, Dean Charles Puryyear, Dean Nagle and Dean Spence opted to select an alternate contractor. At the forefront of the decision was Robert Smith, the first professor of Mathematics in 1882. He served A&M Mechanical College for 49 years, (died in 1931) and is memorialized through a bronze tablet in Cushing Library (Langford, 1963) Although a fire gutted Old Main in 1912, and led to the construction of the Academic Building. The desire of the committee to create a distinct and significant building represents their understanding of the importance and grandeur of beginning an educational institution. The attention and precision placed on the building of Old Main set the tone for all the building which would follow. This was more than a functional space. It was the creation of a mindset, a nest, a home for all who would follow in their footsteps.

Academic Building

The architect

The Academic Building was born out of the ashes of Old Main and needed to carry the baton of all of the grandeur and ideals of Old Main. Many of the oldest buildings on Texas A&M University campus, including the Academic Building, have common features attributed to their architect, Dr. Frederick Giesecke. Giesecke is credited with designing a vast majority



of historical buildings on the campus. Designing the Academic Building was his first project. Aside from earning over five degrees in Civil Engineering, including a B.S in Mechanical Engineering from A&M Mechanical College in 1886, a S.B Degree in architecture from MIT in 1904 and a Ph.D. from University of Illinois in 1927. Three years after completing this degree he returned to Texas A&M University where he was also appointed head of Texas A&M University Department of Architecture and college architect and was named head of the Texas Engineering Experiment Station within a year (Frederick E. Giesecke, n.d.).

Giesecke travelled extensively throughout his career. Following his stint with the architecture program at Texas A&M University in 1912 he accepted a job with University of Texas conducting research as the Head of the Division of Engineering Bureau of Economic Geology and Technology before moving to Illinois to complete his Ph.D. studies. Despite moving from College Station, he was still instrumental in designing the Academic Building.

Throughout his career, Giesecke wrote numerous books and over 100 scholarly papers and received many honors for his accomplishments. In 1942, he received the F. Paul Anderson Gold Medal for outstanding contribution to the science of heating and ventilating. Giesecke's life was characterized by his desire to learn by study, experimentation and observation. His daily notebook contained an entry from an experiment he was conducting just two hours before he died of a heart attack on June 27, 1953 (Frederick E. Giesecke, n.d.). The Academic Building's magnificence is a tribute to the character of Giesecke. A man with less comprehension of architecture and design would have led to the construction of a lesser building and his precise contribution reflects an ample understanding of the importance of creating a building of structural and aesthetic bearing as a "centerpiece" (Tour Academic Building, n.d.) to nurture the growth of the university.

The changing design of Academic Building by decade

Upon completion, the Academic Building in each decade over its century of existence played roles shaped by the social, political, economic, and historical factors of the time which affected its service to the university and students.

Officially opened January 1, 1914 (Frederick E. Giesecke, n.d.), the first decade of the Academic Building, between 1910 and 1920 was characterized by three themes: fire, design, and establishment. Regarding fire and design, Old Main, Texas A&M's first building burnt



down in 1912 and was replaced by the Academic Building. Originally budgeted at \$190, 845 through the Texas Building Company based out of Fort Worth, the final cost increased to \$225,000 with the fireproof measures, including large amounts of concrete. (Boyett, 1912; Smith, 1912).

The opening of the building simultaneously signaled the practical use of the Academic Building while also setting the stage for Texas A&M University to officially take its place among the leading universities in Texas and the United States of America. The building functioned as a landmark for travelers to College Station, housed the major administrative and educational functions of the university; and began stabilizing the college as a whole. The flexibility of the building allowed it to cater to other primary needs, including: student shopping, registration, classes and storage of vital equipment. This aspect is a hidden theme throughout the building's history; it has been able to meet the needs of Texas A&M University at different times, often in the most unexpected ways. For example, when the need for space arose, a fourth floor was added to cater for the colleges growing population. Much like a family home, the façade may appear constant, while the internal dynamics are in constant flux. The concept of the Academic Building as an incubator is not a nascent idea and from its early days the building has been used as a conduit for growth.

Following the official opening, a sustained period of 'silence' emerged from 1920 to 1940. The Academic Building appeared to shrink into the background over the next twenty years in response to political, economic and social changes in the world. Little was written about the building and it was largely used for its primary purpose. The focus on the Great Depression took attention away from the college, as farmers, residents, and students bore the brunt of economic instability. Little was mentioned about how the building was used to respond to this, other than farmers would use the building as a means to sell some of their wares.

If the previous twenty years placed the Academic Building in the background, the period from 1940 to 1960 pushed it into the foreground again. It was over this period that the building rose to prominence and began to influence the campus in a variety of ways including acting as a sojourn for academic departments. In the lead up to United States involvement in World War II, the Academic Building hosted a war simulation and exhibition (Architects simulate war conditions with camouflage exhibits in academic building, 1941). This brought



the Texas A&M University community together and was part of prompting a massive response from A&M students who joined the war efforts. Because of Texas A&M Universities' participation in the war effort, Aggies receive a replica of the Liberty Bell from Governor Allan Shivers in an Independence Day ceremony (Liberty Bell gift from the state, 1968). According to Governor Shivers "No one suffered more than the Aggies, so we will give it to them" (Tour Academic Building, n.d.). This is significant, because it is the only replica that stands outside of a state capital in the United States of America. The fact it was placed in the Academic Building justifies the proposition that this building was foregrounded at this time and builds towards the Academic Building being a harbor for Texas A&M's history and traditions. It also enables the building to ascend beyond bricks and mortar and begin to hold a symbolic meaning for the university community. In this period the Academic Building emerges as a place of remembrance, honor, and selfless service. Once symbolism is associated with the Academic Building the subsequent placement of icons such as the statue of Sullivan Ross, the Century Tree, and the class mosaic of 1978 is logical. We place the things we value the most and wish to remember close to home. This idea of the Academic Building as a nest is further cemented through traditions. In this period the Academic Building develops as the source of Aggie ideology and later years would see it used as a battle ground for social discourse.

The fame of the college attracted a large number of students and bolstered the growth of a variety of departments housed within the Academic Building. As a result, the History and economics departments moved out of Academic Building to Nagle Hall in 1957 (Nagle moving won't affect Academic Building, 1957). The move was one of many in the Academic Building's tenure. Each time, it has housed departments in their infancy, nurtured them to the point where they eventually move into their own space elsewhere on campus. The growth in student numbers continued and campus life required the Academic Building to adjust once more. Over the next twenty years, from 1960 to 1980, the building underwent renovations and the Architecture Department, formed under Dr. Giesecke finally grew to the point where it could move out into its own space. Much like a scion academic departments which began in the Academic Building grew up to blossom as buildings of their own. One can trace a family tree of Academic departments which have sprouted from the Academic Building. In this sense, the building is noteworthy in its purpose and meaning for the history of Texas A&M University.



In a bid to modernize the Academic Building, it received air conditioning in 1960 (Air conditioning work nears end in buildings, 1960) and this was the beginning of extensive renovations between 1963 and 1965 costing a total of \$900,000. This included a remodeled fourth floor, elevator at a cost of \$16,000 (Fourth floor of Academic Building being redied, 1963), relocation of the Liberty Bell replica (Academic Building loses Rotunda Bell, 1965) and moving the Architecture department to another location (Academic's fourth floor remodelled, 1963). In 1972, the Liberty Bell Replica was returned, and became a popular social spot for students (Ads catch eye, 1972) Another interesting feature worth mentioning is that Academic Building was jokingly referred to as *shopping center*. Items sold there include books, stereos, bicycles, motorcycles and engagement rings (Ads catch eye, 1972). This further perpetuates the use of the Academic Building as a nest or a hive for the university community. Societies hold the market place as an environment for socializing and community. In a similar way, during this period, the Academic Building provided this for the students.

By 1980, the façade of the Academic Building had been neglected and the prominence of the building had dwindled in the face of the construction of other buildings. Extensive restoration dominated the next twenty years of the Academic Building, attempting to maintain its foreground status among the students. In response, the main debate which dominated this period was the look and feel of the building. In 1980, elevator was replaced after injuring professor (Sims, 1980) and in 1983, restoration begins in earnest. Exterior work comprised the replacement and repair of small portions of the exterior brick and stone, installation of a urethane foam roof, repair of copper covered dome, repair of windows, frames and replacement of exterior doors, replacement of access ramp for handicapped (McGlohon, 1983). One such process includes patination, which, uses manure to age building materials such iron (Aggies planning to give building a shot of 'manuraty', 1983). However, the restoration was not without opposition. Architecture professor David Woodcock disputes change of Academic Building windows and won the argument (Heller, 1993). But, in 1994, the windows were replaced anyway-lower maintenance costs proposed as the major reason for the about turn (Clanton, 1994). The response from students and public was not positive. Student and public outcry about changing windows from wooden paneled to fiberglass (Whitley, 1995). Student organizations, professors across campus, and community members voiced their concern at the changes, but they went ahead anyway. Moments of conflict, like



this in the building's history, connote a deeper significance than just replacing windows. Just like a change to a family home, the change to the nest in the mind of the students and faculty carries a deeper meaning and has the potential to change the way the building is perceived. The modernization of a traditional aspect, such as the windows, can easily spark submerged feeling of tradition, history, and pride.

Two years later in September 1997, repairs were done again including repair of exterior holes and replacement of stone enclosure replaced (Academic Building repairs to begin: Weathering, age have caused deterioration, 1997) showing an attempt by the university to keep the building in the foreground, however; five years later, in 2002, the building catches fire again resulting in evacuation, electrical fault blamed (Fire causes Academic Building evacuation, 2002) hinting at a neglect in the upkeep of the building and signaling its gradual movement to the background.

Despite twelve years passing, at this point, all Battalion and other such articles relating to Academic Building have ceased. The period of silence characterized by the 1920-1940's has resumed. Although housing Hispanic Studies, International Studies, ESL Institute and Department of Sociology, the building has largely faded back into obscurity, into the ominous background. With talk about the Department of Sociology expanding and requiring further space, as well as the need for infant departments to access space, it appears the Academic Building is likely to continue its greatest tradition of all--nurturing Aggies until they are able to stand on their own two feet.

Departments

The Academic Building not only fluctuated between the background and the foreground throughout its history, but also acted as the husk for various departments to grow inside. The Academic Building was where many departments 'grew up,' before maturing into their own space throughout the campus.

The library on the first floor, built in 1914 was one of the first major department of the university to exit the Academic Building and relocate to its current Cushing Library location in 1930 (Schultz, 2010). The Architecture Building, built in 1962, was incorporated into the Langford Architecture Center in 1978. The center includes three buildings, one of which contains an auditorium (Langford Architecture Building, n.d.). The next major move was the



Education Department in 1969, as it was transformed by Earl Rudder from Department to College (Vision and History, n.d.). This coincided with tremendous growth in the university, as the addition of women, students of color, and the growing need for quality higher education throughout Texas boosted numbers. The 1980's saw not only a strong emphasis on renovating the Academic Building, but also the introduction of Psychology, English, and Mathematics with their own buildings. The fledged departments all found success in their new environments, but the consequence for the Academic Building was the attention migrated with them or as J. Savely summarizes;

“It used to be huge and now they have all moved out to bigger and better buildings, as they should. A lot of our rooms are run down and just recently they put in new computer systems and smart boards, but we've had just chalkboards. I know it gets overlooked a lot, most of the supplies we have the Sociology Department has invested in. The school definitely doesn't maintain the building or the equipment in it very well”. (J. Savely, personal communication, March 25, 2014).

Traditions – “There's a Spirit can ne'er be told...”

While much of the Academic Building's identity is nestled in its physicality and iconic oxidized brass dome, there is a deeper, more symbolic, purpose to its meaning at Texas A&M University. The Academic Building bestows an important focal point on the psyche of Aggies and represents a nest from which many Texas A&M University traditions were nurtured. Carry a deeper meaning for students, faculty, parents, and alumni, the locations of the Liberty Bell, Century Tree, Sullivan Ross statue, and '78 mosaic are not coincidental, and their proximity to and in the Academic Building has intertwined their iconography to the history and landscape of the Academic Building. Both Silver Taps and Muster, commemorating Aggies who have passed, link the Academic Building to the memories of those who have been lost –many taken much before their time. Each brick holds significance for family and friends. The Century Tree reminds Aggies who were engaged under its branches of their beginning and the statue of Sully brings hope of success to many students during exam time who place pennies at his feet. For the building to lose its place as a beginning, a nest, or an end and to fall into disrepair diminishes the importance of these memories. Aggies hold tradition at their core, but this needs a source from which to flow...and this is the Academic Building.



A Building without a Name

Although almost all the buildings at Texas A&M University have a name, such as Harrington, the Academic Building has remained independent of such ties. There is no stated reason of this, however, two suppositions can be made. Either the Academic Building has remained nameless due to its standing as the first building on campus and, therefore, who would be so grand beyond all others that the building is named after them, or a name has been withheld from the Academic Building because it is in constant change. For example, if it had been named Harrington, that name would now no longer synergize with the building's use because the College of Education moved. It would be highly disruptive to the Aggie traditions to have so much history redefined by each enthused cohort attempting to impart prestigious significance to their founders.

The present: How is the building today?

In 2014, the Academic Building now houses four departments spread throughout its four floors: Hispanic Studies, English Language Institute, which moved in as recently as 2013, International Studies, and the Department of Sociology. Although the façade and rotunda of the Academic Building are aesthetically pleasing and iconic to the identity of Texas A&M. The classrooms and offices which extend beyond the rotunda are less so, or as Jenny states “It went from being this big deal on campus and now it’s just...the rotunda is pretty, but the fourth floor is sad and decrepit. The third floor is fine because the Sociology Department maintains it.”

Recent years have seen little written of the hundred year history of the Academic Building from within the University. The University newspaper, the Battalion or the Batt as it is now known, published four articles in 2014. Two articles “Possible Academic Building renaming draws student ire” (Canales, 2014) and “Rick Perry Building comes at too high a cost” (Editorial Board, 2014) discussed the possible renaming of the Academic Building to the Rick Perry building, which Rick Perry later declined and the Board of Regents rejected, and two discuss the Academic Building turning one-hundred. In the article “In its 100th year, Academic Building gets celebration Friday” (Schuetze, 2014) mentions a celebration run by the College of Liberal Arts and does not mention any larger event hosted by the Traditions Council or another University wide organization. The articles serve to remind students of the history of the replica Liberty Bell and the class of 1978’s gift seal. The second article “100



years young” (Docherty, 2014) highlights the Academic Building as the “center pules of campus” (Docherty, 2014) and includes the significance of the Academic Building “well-designed places lift the human spirit...in so doing they establish life-long memories” (Docherty, 2014). The articles mainly notes the purpose and history of Sliver Taps.

The future: Who will answer the call?

Beyond the romanticism that is attached to the Academic Building because it was the first building on campus and allows us to reminisce to the old days of Texas. Beyond the traditions that were born from its bricks and mortar, and beyond the departments nested there before flying to bespoke buildings of their own. The Academic Building has sadly moved to the background of Aggieland and has become a victim of the very history it shelters. Progress is inevitable and the building no longer serves the purpose it was erected for and has become a mishmash of rapidly expanding departments. Renovations took place in 1986, 1993, and 1997, which one could assume would calendar the next renovation for circa 2007. No renovation post 1997 has taken place, except an exterior cleaning in 2014.

2014 marked the 100 year anniversary of the Academic Building with little recognition of its centennial from the University, except two short articles in the University newspaper. Further cementing the Academic Building’s movement from the foreground to the background.

As an analogy, the Academic Building has become like the Phoenix, reborn of fire and held as iconic, but left in the past to be romanticized as something more than its original form. Maybe it is the way of things, or maybe, just like a home, we will always return in times of need.



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