

Stephanie Perna

A Narrative History of the University's First Building

Many university buildings have storied pasts, but the first building on the campus of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign has a convoluted history, beginning with issues in its construction and ending in disaster, quite literally. Additionally, this building is quite difficult to track down for one reason: its name. The University's first building never even had an official name, with the building garnering seven main nicknames, as well as variations on a few of the names. The only way to truly decipher this building's past is to begin with the idea behind its conception and go through the history of what actually happened, prior to its destruction in 1881.

Though the building was first used 1867, the reason behind its construction dates back to January of 1859, when Reverend Jonathan C. Stoughton, a New England native, came to Champaign looking to establish a second Clark Seminary. Stoughton, along with his company of J.E. Babcock, Mr. Hodgerson, and George Harvey, had previously established the Clark Seminary in Aurora, Illinois, and sought to more seminaries around Illinois. Many speculate that Stoughton was attempting to use this as a for-profit business, a claim which is supported by his purchase of 193.9 acres of land on 2 July 1860- most of which was to be sold as town plots, while leaving a mere 8 acres to establish the actual Clark Seminary. This new building, now officially called "the Seminary," was to cost between \$60,000 and \$80,000, and was meant to bridge the gap between Champaign and Urbana; it was supposed to be an identical copy of the Seminary in Aurora, complete with a similar stone foundation and brick exterior. The true issues

began, though, with the original time frame set for the building's construction of 1 August 1860 and 15 November 1862.

With the addition of a fence and some furnishings, the buildings cost was set to be closer to \$80,000 (or, \$2,063,780 today). Even with the proposed building being set to almost exceed its original budget, construction of the Seminary was in full swing. That is, until the Civil War. With the country in turmoil, finances were becoming increasingly scarce, and the future of the Seminary was quickly becoming hazy. Construction was officially delayed until the next season. In order to save what looked to be a sinking ship, the Seminary and its site were part of a proposal to establish a state agricultural and mechanical university. Things were looking up again for the Seminary, now dubbed the "Urbana-Champaign Institute building," as it was to be transferred to the state for \$24,000, with the additional funds to go towards acquiring more land.

Despite the proposal for the new state university to be set in Champaign, there was an entire battle between other towns in Illinois to have the university established elsewhere. It was then that the building took on the name of "the Elephant" or "the White Elephant" by those who opposed the site for the university. This derogatory term was used to explain something whose cost far outweighs its usefulness. These people (called the "ring"), in addition to slandering the building, accused Champaign county of corruption, yet they could not fight Champaign's advantage: the "Elephant." What better place to establish a university than in a town that already has a building which would be ready for use. It should be noted that, at this point, the exterior of the Elephant was finished, but the interior was empty and, as bad as this may seem, it was argued that this left a certain flexibility open for the building's design. Much to the chagrin of the

“ring,” it was the “Elephant” they were so quick to put down that ended up winning Champaign the university, in the end.

During this massive legal battle worthy of its own courtroom drama, Stoughton and Babcock proposed they sell the building for \$30,000. Before the two men could complete a sale of the shell of a building, the university’s location was finalized in 1867. As a result, Champaign county could actually donate the building to the state, because it was technically never handed over to the state. Since the university had an official site and the “Elephant” an official owner, the interior was *finally* completed for a total of \$120,000 (today, \$3,095,670.96) with 181 rooms. Upon the university’s opening in 1867, the building, called the University building, had classrooms, a chapel, a clubroom, dormitories for roughly 130 students, and more. The building stood where the current “Beckman quad” is today.

The University, as it turns out, was on a huge trajectory, and was gaining students quickly, students who took to calling the University building the “Elephant,” but with less derogatory connotations. With the number of new students rising quickly, the state rushed to meet the increasing demands of the students. Construction began on a brand new building named new University Hall, leading to renaming the University building “old University Hall” or the “Old Main building.” During the next 10 years (between 1870 and 1880), the usage of Old Main kept shifting as the university tried to accommodate students amidst the construction of various new buildings on campus, until it was simply the Dormitory building. In that decade, the building was used as a building for “lady students,” as a chemistry lab, and as an extra source of classrooms, all while housing a fluctuating number of students.

In 1880, the building, now known as the Dormitory Building, with housing as its sole purpose, was still declining in its use. One fateful day- 19 April 1880- a series of storms that is speculated to have been a tornado rocked through campus and, at approximately 1am, the west wall collapsed. The dorms were quickly evacuated, and the roof of the building was soon torn off. The building was eventually deemed “unfit for use” and, since the university could not afford a complete overhaul of the building, the “Elephant” finally fell in the spring of 1881. The building was replaced by Illinois Field, a baseball diamond that lasted for nearly 100 years (until the 1980’s), with whatever trace of the building that once stood gone.

The university’s first building, shaped by religion, war, and politics, had a fairly short-lived career. Still, the impact that its existence had on the University, as well as Champaign-Urbana, cannot be refuted. Though it is not the sole reason, the “Elephant” helped bring the University of Illinois to fruition, and there would be no 150th anniversary to celebrate without it.

All of the building’s nicknames: Clark Seminary (or, “the seminary” or, the “Seminary building”), the Urbana-Champaign Institute building, the Urbana and Champaign male and female institute, the Elephant, the White Elephant, the Champaign Elephant, University Building (later, Old University Building), Old Main Building, and finally, the Dormitory Building

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“Old Main”/[Old] University Building/ “The Elephant”

1. Image from Archives (exterior-main entrance)

- a. <http://archives.library.illinois.edu/archon/index.php?p=digitallibrary/digitalcontent&id=9039>



b.

2. Image from Archives (exterior-pathway)

- a. <http://archives.library.illinois.edu/archon/?p=digitallibrary/digitalcontent&id=4361>



b.

3. Image from Archives (Exterior- side view)

- a. <http://archives.library.illinois.edu/archon/index.php?p=digitallibrary/digitalcontent&id=4421>



b.

4. Image from Archives - Old University Building with storm damage

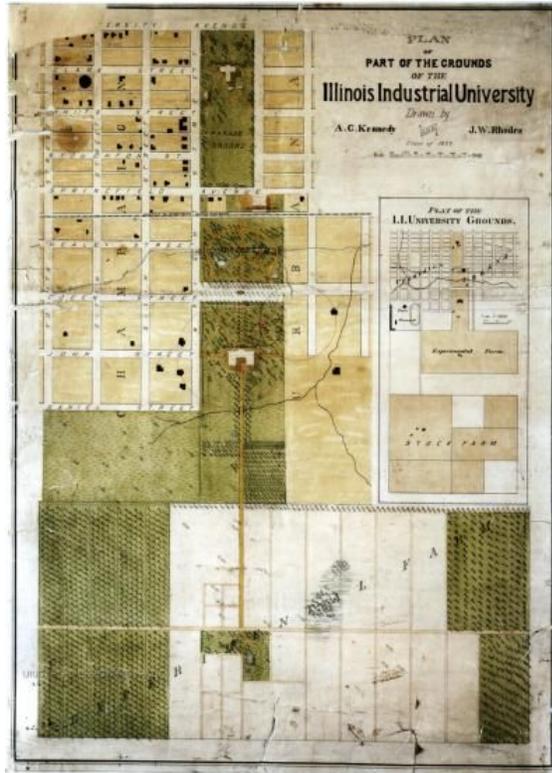
- a. <http://archives.library.illinois.edu/archon/index.php?p=digitallibrary/digitalcontent&id=7821>



b.

5. Image from Archives - Part of the Grounds of the Illinois Industrial University

- a. <http://archives.library.illinois.edu/archon/index.php?p=digitallibrary/digitalcontent&id=4423>



b.

6. Image (Interior) - Men studying in Education and Social Sciences Library Reading Room, Old Main Building

- a. <http://archives.library.illinois.edu/archon/index.php?p=digitallibrary/digitalcontent&id=6207>



b.

**7. Image (Interior) - Women studying in Education and Social Sciences Library
Reading Room, Old Main Building**

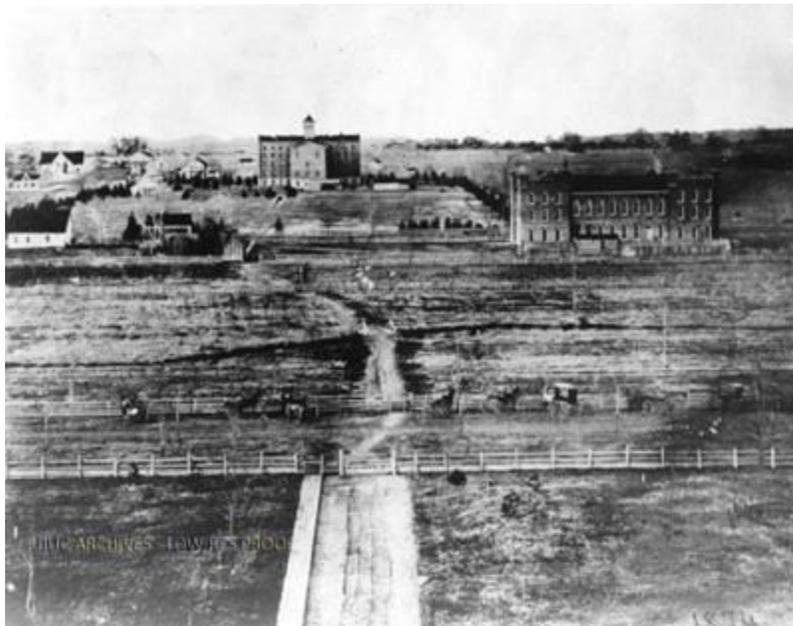
- a. <http://archives.library.illinois.edu/archon/index.php?p=digitallibrary/digitalcontent&id=6205>



b.

8. Image (Exterior)- Old Main Building from the South (1873)

- a. <http://archives.library.illinois.edu/archon/index.php?p=digitallibrary/digitalcontent&id=2811>



b.

9. Original Seminary in Aurora, IL



a.

Journal 1:

To use the Archives, we had to undergo a basic training program about how to use the archives. Also, the people who worked at the archives allowed us to look at the original plans from Max Abramovitz of Assembly Hall (now, the State Farm Center). This was a way to show us how to handle older, fragile documents. We were also able to look at the books on the back wall of the Archives. I was able to see copies of the Illio from the 1920's, which was really interesting to look at. This was a fascinating way to get us acclimated to the archives, while also showing us different resources that may seem a bit unconventional, but could also be useful.

Journal 2:

Through my initial research and web-surfing with Laura, we were having a hard time finding anything on the building. We've only found bits and pieces, so far, but different names keep cropping up in the archives database. This has somewhat hindered my search, but we have found *plenty* of pictures, as well as a link to a 500+ page book about the University's history. I'll have to check this out later, but the pictures can definitely be saved for later reference.

Journal 3:

After a few hours of digging through the *Catalogue of Registration: 1867-1869, 1870-1875, 1876-1880, and 1881-1885* with Laura, I'm starting to understand what happened to the building that never even had an official name. When the amount of students coming to the university increased, the Elephant fell out of use because so many other buildings were being built to keep up with admissions. This explains why, throughout the various years, the use of the building kept changing. I still have to find out if I could pin down one use... or even one *actual* name.

Journal 4:

With the revelation from my previous entry (and armed with more of the building's names), doing more internet research has been a little more clear. Laura and I have found a few helpful resources, so we've been looking through those, both together and in our own time. We've created a Google Doc to pool all of our information, which has helped me to begin to establish some semblance of a timeline for this building. It will certainly take quite a bit more digging to actually find out what happened, but it should be easier with the more information I find on the building's mysterious past.

Journal 5:

I've found a book online that has combined all of the legal documents, letters, newspaper articles, etc. that make up how the university was established, beginning with something called the Clark Seminary. I'll definitely have to look more into this later, given that I don't have time

to really get into it now. This seems like it could be an invaluable resource in actually figuring out what the heck actually happened with this building. More on this later, hopefully...

Journal 6:

I just sat down for a little over two hours and poured over those legal documents from the mid to late 1800's and I actually get what happened to get this whole thing started. The building was originally intended to be a seminary, but there was a huge legal battle to establish a state university in Champaign, so the building was (apparently) handed over to the state at some point. This one is going to require even more digging, but this book is definitely a good launching point. I still haven't had any luck with finding the building's actual name, though I'm not even sure if there is one anymore.

Journal 7:

I've been able to combine all of Laura and my research to create a basic timeline, which will most likely be the outline of my narrative. It will definitely be filled out more before I can start on my rough draft, so I'll probably have to go back to that book to see if I could squeeze anything else out of those documents that I've barely been able to decipher. Many of the documents are filled with legal jargon about the struggle for picking a location, but the building seems to have been a factor in the location of the university. Champaign certainly had the room for an industrial and agricultural university. This is something I should probably flesh out a bit more, but that should all be fixed once I have an actual rough draft going.

Stephanie Perna

James Scholar Reflection- Fall, 2016

I felt this was a very interesting and rewarding way to kick off my time as a James Scholar here at the University of Illinois. My research of the “White Elephant” was a deceptively daunting task, given the storied past of that building, but it a new experience for me. Most undergraduates do not have the opportunity to use the archives for research, so that was definitely exciting. Also, I was glad to have a partner for this project, not because of the building itself, but also due to this being my first semester on campus. It really helped to have someone to bounce information and ideas off of, and Laura was an absolute delight to recommend. Consequently, while I remain on the fence about using this work for the Undergraduate Research Symposium this upcoming semester, I am very much satisfied with the way this project went (aside for the slight mishap with the presentations).