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# UA77/1 Campus Planning: The Wright Approach

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## **Campus Planning: The Wright Approach**

"The management of the Western Normal has tried to look ahead for a few hundred years and has earnestly attempted to make a beginning that will permit future development," proclaimed the school's biennial report in 1912. Purchasing the old Potter College building, the Cabell residence, and 169 acres for \$95,048.91 in February 1909, the Board of Regents immediately sought expertise in planning their new campus. Without a doubt, the hiring of landscape architect Henry Wright allowed the young institution to carve out of the rugged, wooded hilltop an inspiring place for learning. Thus began a working friendship which President Henry H. Cherry and Henry Wright sustained throughout their careers, ending only upon Wright's death in 1936.

Depicting Wright as "an artist in land," a colleague credited Wright for the advancement of their profession, stating "more than any other single man he changed design from a paper study later to be placed on land, to a concept which land and soil and trees and vegetation were integral with the structures." When Western first employed Wright, he was with the firm of George E. Kessler & Co. of St. Louis, Missouri. Described as independent, courageous and free of ambition and egoism, Wright formed his own firm by 1912. Prior to February 1927, he moved to New York City where he practiced and "fired the imagination of younger men" by teaching at Columbia. As a town planner, he created the model communities of Sunnyside Gardens (New York, 1924), Radburn (Fair Lawn, New Jersey 1928), and Chatham Village (Pittsburgh, 1930). Surely he could be selective in his projects and command top commissions, yet his love of the Western campus is evident throughout his 27 years of correspondence with President Cherry.

The two men did not meet when Cherry visited the firm in March 1909. Wright's first letter to Cherry set down the conditions and cost of employing Wright for this "interesting and important" project. Prior to his first campus visit, Wright requested a topographical map and survey on April 6, 1909, showing he had no idea of the challenge ahead of him: "Unless your property is very rough a survey which will permit of platting of 5 ft. contours with reasonable accuracy will be sufficient."

In his June 1909 letter to President Cherry, Wright intimated that his work would require 3-4 weeks once he received necessary information. Obviously he has already caught a sense of the urgency of Cherry's vision. Constantly throughout the years, Cherry's letters to Wright resonate with the word "anxious", yet testify to Cherry's unwillingness to initiate any phase of the excavating, clearing or construction without Wright's agreement that the location was consistent with the campus plan.

Cherry recognized Wright's effective, efficient and practical use of resources. Knowing the financial limitation of the growing school, Wright often made his campus visits as a part of a larger trip in order to eliminate the need to reimburse him for travel expenses. Students, forming sledge-hammer, axe, pick, hoe, rake, hatchet, pruning and rock-piling companies, helped prepare their campus on Beautifying Days. Rock excavated from camping building sites was used for various projects, reducing drayage costs.

From the locations of walkways to the selection of shrubbery, no detail escaped Wright's attention. Cherry provided Wright with summaries of the work and information concerning relevant state appropriations funding. Cherry states his complete confidence in Wright as a professional and as a man in 1922 letters of recommendation to Nebraska and Alabama. In his letter to the State Normal School in Troy, Ala., Cherry wrote: "Wright has charge of our landscape architecture and the general program and plant as well as the regulation of the

walks, road building, grading, construction, location of building and other things....He is honest to the last inch."

After Wright's death in 1936, Cherry wrote to the landscape architect's son: "the history of our institution would not be complete if your Father's work should be overlooked." In the December 1936 Teachers College Heights, Cherry challenged the alumni: "The campus, beautiful as it is in summer or winter, is only a symbol of spirit of Western, a spirit found everywhere among those who have known these buildings and walks and trees...This lovely hilltop exists for you; its future will depend upon your devotion to the ideals that have developed the campus from a wilderness into a thing of beauty."

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Additional information regarding Henry Wright:

UA2 Board of Regents File, Box 1, Folder 13, Dec. 21, 1927 meeting

UA3.1 Henry Hardin Cherry's Papers Box 1 Folder 31 correspondence with Henry Wright

These and other sources are available in the Harrison-Baird Reading Room in the Kentucky Building.