The Hill Builder: Brinton B. Davis and Western Kentucky University by Jonathan Jeffrey

(Editor’s Note: This year WKU celebrates a century of educational pursuit. In recognition of this signal achievement, the Landmark Association here re-publishes an article from a 1995 issue of the Filson Club History Quarterly. The buildings mentioned in this article and those pictured were all designed by Louisville architect Brinton B. Davis. His influence on WKU’s campus was recognized in the mid-1980s when these buildings were placed on the National Register of Historic Places as the Brinton B. Davis Thematic Scheme.)

In February 1931, a Bowling Green newspaper dubbed Louisville architect Brinton Beauregard Davis the “Hill Builder” for his untiring efforts as the architect for Western Kentucky State Teachers College. With the exception of two major projects, Davis designed all the college’s hilltop structures from 1909 to 1937, including nine major buildings, a swimming pool, and a stadium. A capable negotiator and an extraordinary architect, Davis maintained this twenty-eight year tenure by creating beautiful structures and by nurturing the trust of the school’s president, Henry Hardin Cherry.

When Davis accepted work at Western, he joined the ranks of capable architects who realized the unique professional opportunity that campus planning offered. One scholar has noted: “If, as alleged, architecture is frozen music, then the college is his battle hymn against expedience and mediocrity.” Thomas Jefferson, recognizing the time-honored concept of colleges as communities within themselves, spent his final years designing the University of Virginia as a memorial “academical village.” The concept of the campus as a city in microcosm provides an excellent opportunity to examine the ways in which a school’s leadership and its relationship with architectural firms influence the development and architecture of a campus. For example, the architect Ralph Adams Cram was credited with introducing “Collegiate Gothic” architecture to the United States with his work at Princeton University, Rice University, and West Point. Cass Gilbert left his architectonic signature at the University of Minnesota, and the team of J.M. White and Charles A. Platt designed the University of Illinois campus. These and other architects saw their practices garner new commissions in the early years of the twentieth century as leaders of expanding campuses sought out firms with experience in developing educational facilities.

The study of campus planning has concentrated almost exclusively on architectural history and the master architects who designed buildings for major universities. Few scholars have looked at the dynamics of the relationships between architects and the leaders of the institutions for which they worked. Western Kentucky University’s early campus development provides a unique opportunity to examine how Davis and Cherry interacted when planning the campus from 1909 to 1937, as the institution grew from normal school origins to a degree-granting college. Few architects have enjoyed as long a tenure with a client, and even fewer have dealt with so paternalistic a president as Cherry.

How Cherry and Davis met is unclear, but it may have occurred when Davis was in Bowling Green supervising the construction of the new city hall in 1907; the pair also had common friends in Louisville’s Commercial Club. When Western retained Davis, he was officially an employee of the school’s board of regents, but he knew that Cherry was the
**Architectural Details**

- The forty-second annual Epsilon Sigma Alpha (Alpha Theta Chapter) Antique Show and Sale will take place at the Knights of Columbus Hall (911 Searcy Way) on September 8-10, 2006. All proceeds from the sale go to philanthropic projects in the Bowling Green area.

- Those having architectural salvage that you would like to give to a non-profit organization as a tax deductible donation should contact the Habitat for Humanity ReStore located at 2323 Nashville Road. The ReStore is open from 9 am to 5 p.m. on Fridays and Saturdays. Contact ReStore manager, Dewey Satterfield, for details, 901-0150.

- On Saturday, August 16, from 10:00 am to 3:00 pm, Joe Rosson, host of PBS’s Treasures in Your Attic, will be at the Kentucky Museum on WKU’s campus. He’ll be on hand to appraise your porcelain, glass and ceramics. There is a $5 admission charge, which covers the cost of the first two items appraised; additional items are $5 each. If you would like to be first in line for this event, you can have “Breakfast with Joe” at 9:00 am for only $10. For details call Timothy Mullin at 745-6261.

- If you are interested in purchasing a large downtown property that is eligible for the 20% federal and the 20% state tax credits as well as the Bowling Green tax moratorium and the Historic Preservation Board’s paint project, you can contact Larry Osborne with Crye Leike Realty about the Fountain Square Church downtown (the old State Theater).

- On August 26th at 8:30 am, Jonathan Jeffrey will talk about Bowling Green limestone at the L&N Depot. Sponsored by the Friends of the L&N Depot. Congratulations to the Friends on getting funding for the new engine for the rail park.

- A new photograph book issued by Arcadia Publishing will feature images of Warren County and Bowling Green. The book will be available September 10. This publisher also published Bowling Green in Vintage Postcards and Images of America: Bowling Green. This book has 80 images from Bowling Green and approximately 1.25 from various parts of Warren County.

- Put the Kentucky State Historic Preservation Conference on your calendar for September 28-30 in Covington. Registration fee is $139. We’d like to see a good contingent from Bowling Green in attendance.

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**Brinton B. Davis’s Bowling Green Legacy**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1907</td>
<td>Bowling Green City Hall</td>
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<td>1910</td>
<td>Administration Building (Van Meter)</td>
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<td>1924</td>
<td>Perry Snell Hall (Razed)</td>
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<tr>
<td>1927</td>
<td>Heating Plant</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Stadium Library Building (Gordon Wilson Hall)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Home Economics Building (Razed) Bowling Green Armory</td>
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<td>1928</td>
<td>Manual Arts Building (Industrial Arts) Whitestone Hall (Schneider Hall)</td>
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<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td>Health Building (Helm Library)</td>
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<tr>
<td>1931</td>
<td>The President’s Home (Craig Alumni Center) Swimming Pool (Razed)</td>
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<tr>
<td>1935</td>
<td>Kentucky Building (Opened 1939) Pioneer Log House (behind KY Blvd)</td>
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<td>1937</td>
<td>Cherry Hall</td>
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Established reputation, he removed to Louisville in 1902 where he remained until his death fifty years later. His successful architectural practice won commissions for a number of Louisville landmarks, including the Jefferson County Armory (now Louisville Gardens), the Inter-Southern Building (Kentucky Home Mutual Building), the Watterson and Kentucky hotels, Parr’s Rest (a retirement home), and the interior remodeling of the Jefferson County Courthouse. Of his many projects, perhaps none was more dear to him than his work at Western as he took “a patriotic interest in the development of the site.” Here he was given the artistic license to create beauty couched in function. One of America’s renowned architectural critics has attempted to explain the typical architect’s dream:
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campus buildings. Thus committees composed of members of academic departments and administrators supplied Davis with a building "wish list." At a formal meeting, the list was presented to Davis who subsequently prepared working drawings based on the site, budget restraints, and the desires of the committee. This arrangement forced Davis—a man of few words—to work with an academic committee, an awkward combination at best.

The library project required close consultation with Margie Holm, the school's competent librarian. Having thoroughly researched the latest trends in library construction, she approached Davis with a long list of recommendations and specifications. The situation rivaled Davis's appreciation of working for men. Upon moving his practice to Louisville, he avoided the design of private residences, claiming: "if you build houses, you have to deal with the fair sex, and darn it to hell, it makes me please 'em!" After the library's initial drawings were completed, a number of faculty members petitioned Cherry for a small ground floor theater, which Davis incorporated with a minimal loss of stock space.

Several logistical problems were overcome in order to construct the new library. The chief obstacle was Cobell Hall which sat on the site specified on the master plan for the library. Erected as a residence for Potter College's president, the building housed Western's music and domestic science departments. Demonstrating his ingenuity and saving Western thousands of dollars in materials, Davis had the residence razed and used its salvaged materials to construct the new home economics building. The other obstacle was Amst M. Stickles, a formidable history professor, who feared that the new building would desecrate the Civil War fortification in the center of campus. Davis's father had served as a captain under P.G.T. Beauregard (thus Davis's middle name) during the Civil War, so Davis worked with Wright to accommodate Stickles's concerns by reorienting the building and pulling it closer to the edge of the hill, giving it a distinctive vertical thrust.

Converting an old rock quarry on the southern fringe of the campus into an athletic stadium was Cherry's next dream. The abandoned quarry had been reopened during the construction of the administration building and the girls' dormitory; ground limestone from the site was used in making concrete. The excavations had left an unsightly cliff on the hill's south side, and the campus paper criticized the area as so ugly and unkempt that it had "for years... been on eyesore to the students of Western." Davis accepted the challenge of the cliff in 1926 and created a theater affording a panoramic view of the rolling Kentucky countryside. He crowned his masterpiece with a lovely colonnade that still attracts the eyes of visitors to the hill. Built of reinforced concrete, the stadium seated four thousand with showers, lockers, and bathrooms located under it. Athletic teams used the stadium until 1968 when the N.L. Smith Stadium was completed. Again the master plan proved its worth. The plan had delineated certain areas of the campus for specific activities. Several years later, the physical education building was constructed adjacent to the stadium.

Davis's next project involved on the school's residential section, designing a desperately needed girls' dormitory for the western slope of the hill in 1928. It contained eighty-five double rooms, a dining room, the school's infirmary, a study hall, a recreation hall, and "a room furnished with a victrola. Constructed in the Georgian style with Bowling Green limestone, the building was known for years as Whistlerome Hall or White Hall. As with most of his designs, Davis served as an advisor for the dormitory's interior decorations, which were quite elaborate. His recommendations on flooring, light fixtures, furniture, and occasionally landscaping went unquestioned. Furnished with twin beds, dresser, and a study table and chairs, the campus paper bragged that the rooms were "all that a girl could wish."

The dormitory project demonstrated the tension so prevalent between architects and clients. Davis always worked with Cherry to make changes in plans prior to construction, but he resented having to accept substitutes that might or might not meet the specifications he had prepared. Unfortunately, Cherry never completely understood Davis's unwavering stand on this issue. He did not seem to comprehend the liability architects accept when designing structures. When Cherry permitted interior roofing materials to be used in the new girls' dormitory, Davis curtly reminded him: "I think it best in future work to have a definite specification on materials and not permit alternates—this is the only safe and sane method to adopt." Davis, concerned with public safety as well as beauty, always worked under this tension when dealing with Cherry.

Despite their differences, Davis and Cherry by 1930 had established a level of confidence in each other's abilities that rarely develops between architects and clients because most of these relationships terminate when projects are completed. In a Western homecoming address, Davis acknowledged Cherry's "vision" as the driving force behind the "marvelous improvement in the surroundings and buildings" at Western. In turn, Cherry wrote enthusiastically about Davis's work. In recommending him as the architect for Lexington's new post office, Cherry praised him enthusiastically: "His work...merits the closest endorsement of not only the Board of Regents, the faculty and others, but the citizenship of this entire section. I really believe he is one of the finest architects in America."

After reading an article extolling the virtues of Western's campus, Cherry wrote that if it had met the author, "I would have made him speak personally of the best architect in America."

Besides their professional respect for each other, they developed a strong friendship. On several occasions Cherry used Davis as a chapel speaker, something the president liked to spring on guests to the hill. Davis warned Cherry prior to a 1932 visit, "The depression has somewhat cramped my style, so do not book me for a talk." Generally, however, he acquiesced to Cherry's requests. The president reciprocated by writing reference letters lauding the architect's abilities to Davis's prospective clients. Their relationship was particularly poignant in 1931 when Cherry was arrested in Louisville for drunken driving. Featured on the front pages of Kentucky's leading newspapers, the incident was a tremendous embarrassment to Cherry. How Davis assisted the president in this matter is unclear, but Cherry thanks him for his "very constructive and sympathetic interest... during my recent experience. He added, "I just want to know how deeply I value you and your friendship and how warm my heart is with real gratitude for the privilege of having a friend like you."
In 1929 Cherry entrusted Davis with one of his most cherished dreams. He expressed his desire to construct a building to house the treasures of the Commonwealth, a building "that one can walk through...and almost know Kentucky." He appropriately christened it the Kentucky Building. A growing Kentuckiana collection, initiated by several history professors and maintained by the library staff, would be the building's first collection. Davis created a redbrick, Georgian-style building with hips and wings to reflect Kentucky's Virginia heritage. This project presented a challenge to Davis because Cherry was constantly approaching suppliers and contractors with requests to donate their services or offer significant discounts on materials. Although Davis wrote stringent specifications of the building, these were frequently violated. When pressed to adhere to the plans for the Kentucky Building in the summer of 1930, Davis adamantly refused: "I fear we will lose the character and atmosphere of the old Kentucky home of ante-bellum time and finally arrive at a very pretentious structure having the appearance of a mansion or palace. Davis, fearing that skylights would disturb the line of the building's roof, also objected to Cherry's request for the use of natural lighting. Cherry deferred to Davis' professional judgment: 'I am hearing on every hand many, many fine things about the plans and specifications and the material companies who have been brought in touch with them are speaking enthusiasm. This is a very great building, a real interest in the Kentucky Building and a real appreciation for you and the work you have done.'

Davis's capitation to enlarge the building was the addition of a large pedimented portico, a culmination of his pure Georgian design. Construction began in 1930, was halted in 1934 because of a lack of funds, and was completed in 1939 as a Works Progress Administration Subvention, successor to the Public Works Administration. Davis, who had been working on a large dormitory project that was to be built in modules, hoped to complete that project, but Cherry had other ideas: "The next item of capital improvements," Cherry wrote, "should be a magnificent recitation building...We are really in need of a centralized recitation building."

After obtaining more information about federal subvention, the board engaged Davis to design a large classroom building and supply the myriad plans and reports required by the attendant government agencies. Unfortunately, the new building was not included in the Public Works Administration's list of approved projects, but Davis insisted that his three percent commission was due. Cherry and the board argued that payment had been made contingent on the application's approval. Throughout 1934 Davis and Cherry exchanged terse letters with Davis reminding Cherry that "loyalty to you, Doctor, has been an article of faith with me for the past quarter of a century." The project had required Davis to hire nine draftsmen who worked on two shifts for fifty-six days. "It was necessary to give my undivided attention to the work on an average of fifteen hours a day," Davis wrote Cherry, and "I am sure you appreciate the efficient manner in which the work was executed."

Despite Davis's ardent appeals the board refused payment, forcing him to file suit in Jefferson County Circuit Court in 1935. When the board decided to re-submit the application to the Public Works Administration, it authorized Cherry to engage Davis again. Financially strapped, Davis dropped the suit and agreed to a mere one percent commission, which would be paid even if the project was not approved. With Davis's capable assistance the application was approved in 1935.

In order to build Cherry Hall, Potters College's old recitation hall, which Western had used since moving to the hilltop, was razed. To accommodate displaced classes, temporary partitions creating makeshift classrooms were erected in the Kentucky Building. The new recitation building, Cherry Hall, was a beauty and a bargain. A consulting firm contracted by Western in 1947 called Cherry Hall "the best planned, best constructed and best located adequate classroom building in any of the state colleges or the university." Analyzing the building's construction costs, the firm noted: "It was built at a cost of more than $500,000, at a time when building costs were less than hal...as at present." The excellent materials and construction of the building probably could be duplicated today only at prohibitive prices. Local townsfolk initiated a campaign to assure that the building would be constructed of Bowling Green limestone, but this effort was defeated when PWA authorities determined that stockpiled Indiana limestone was cheaper. The building housed most of the college's academic departments and contained fifty classrooms, sixteen completely equipped laboratories, and sixty offices as well as a bookstore and post office. The building's classic form and temple front befit its location atop College Heights; with cupola the building soared to ninety-three feet. Two life-size, bas-relief panels depicting "The Arts" and "The Sciences" accented the building's classical form.

In November 1937, three and a half months after Cherry's death, a $10,000 statue of him by Lorado Taft was unveiled in front of Cherry Hall. Approached about donating money for the statue, Davis offered fifty dollars and wrote caustically: "During the past 3 years I surrendered to the institution fees in the amount of $17,000, therefore I am not in position to contribute more than the amount of the enclosed check. However, he pleaded for permission to speak at the unveiling. His eloquent eulogy, filled like his buildings with classical references, expressed his tender feelings for Cherry. Davis, perhaps more than most, realized that Cherry's achievements were based more on his vision and faith than his business acumen or managerial skills. He suggested that Cherry's epitaph read: "A man who built better than he knew." After Cherry's demise, Davis severed his ties with Western. A cursory overview of his work at Western might lead scholars to surmise that his commissions were the result of one crony or the other. A closer study of the Cherry-Davis correspondence, however, indicated much more complex relationship. Cherry was motivated by a desire to create an idyllic yet functional campus that would attract students on its own merit and flourish favorably on his presidency. Davis's motivations included patriotism, professionalism, a desire to leave an architectural legacy, and a sincere wish to please a sometimes troublesome client. Despite the squabbles over Davis's fees in the mid 1930s, the two remained close and shared the ambition to fulfill Western's visionary master plan.

Since 1937 a number of buildings have been constructed at Western, but few if any match the grandeur and quality of the Davis buildings. Part of this was due to new trends in architecture which diminished the role of ornamentation and classicism, resulting in architecture that I call "Neo-Civilization." Fortunately most of this development has occurred below the hill, although three large architectural intrusions or "monuments" have been sited atop the hill. After Cherry, Davis, and Henry Wright were removed from the scene, the intense vision of the hill's development seemed to fade. Developing this vision with niggardly state appropriations demonstrated the inability of both Cherry and "one of the greatest architects in America," the Hill Builder, Brinton Davis.

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Annual Meeting Scrapbook

Rob At nip accepts a Landmark Building Award on behalf of Service One Credit Union for their work on the Sinclair House at 422 College Heights Blvd.

John & Alisa Carmichael accept Landmark's highest honor, the Heritage Award.

Amy McGowan accepts the HPB Commercial Award for her work on the Morgan Hughes House at 1405 State Street.

Linda Dickinson accepts the Cultural Landscape Preservation Award.

Eric Reed & Kenly Ames accept the HPB's Residential Award for their work on the Morgan Hughes House at 1405 State Street.

Mayr Elaine Walker accepts the Persistent Preservationist Award from C.J. Johanson.

These not pictured are: Kim & David Jones winners of the Jean Thomason Historic Home Award for their work on the L.A. Graham House at 1252 State Street; the General Services Administration for work on the Natchez Federal Building; Bill & Susan Scott for restoration efforts on the Annie & Scott Hines House at 802 Elm Street; and Jonathan Jeffrey who received the Ionic Column Award for Distinguished Service. Congratulations to all our winners.

Landmark president, C.J. Johanson, is shown with the winners of the Lamplighter Award, Eileen Stann & Joey Powell.

Louise Gillock is shown with C.J. Johanson accepting a general house award for her work on the Sam Cristal House at 618 East Main.

Bridget Alley accepts a general house award for work done on a Victorian cottage at 1309 High Street.
Perhaps you could pass this newsletter along to someone you think would be interested in supporting Landmark’s efforts in historic preservation advocacy.

I (we) want to support the Historic Preservation efforts in Bowling Green and Warren County.

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