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

(EDITORS' 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 125 from various parts of Warren County.

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

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It is the rare architect who does not hope in his heart to design a great building and for whom the quest is not a quiet, meditative process. Architects talk about little else to their peers; they seem obsessed with the aesthetic implication of their designs in word and print.

Sharing this hope, Davis told a group of colleagues that the “best architecture brings us inspiration...a feeling of immense glory and worthwhileness of things that occur only in the presence of something very great indeed.” Davis felt the responsibility echoed by a colleague who noted that investing “an educational institution with an architectural form is...a serious matter for it should mean building for all time, in like manner as churches and as houses of state are conceived and undertaken.” Given the opportunity to design one building but a “city in microcosm” at Bowling Green, Davis left an indelible signature; he became the “Builder.”

With a $150,000 appropriation from the General Assembly in 1908, two years after the creation of Western Kentucky State Normal School, its board of regents purchased the 162-acre site of the abandoned Pleasant J. Potter College for Young Ladies on Vinegar Hill in Bowling Green. The hill, south of the city, rose 232 feet above the level of the Barren River and was “covered with cedar thickets, dense underbrush, vines, and rocks; an abandoned rock quarry and a lime kiln told of previous commercial usage.” A few months later, Davis and Henry Wright, an architect from the George Kessler Company of St. Louis—which had designed Kansas City’s master plan—met and walked Western’s new property. That afternoon they discussed with the board of regents “ideas as to buildings and landscaping.” The board nominated and unanimously selected Davis as the school’s architect and Wright as the landscape architect. Wright served as a consultant for Western until the mid-1930s. Because his office was located outside the state, Wright did not enjoy the close association with Western that Davis later described.

Davis’s first assignment included submitting rough sketches for twelve buildings to Wright, who supervised the drafting of the master plan for $1,500. The plan included “sites for buildings immediate and future, and driveways, walks, plantations, [and] elevations.” In designing the buildings for the plan, Davis employed a number of architectural styles and building materials, creating a polychromatic effect rather than establishing a set pattern that would be duplicated across the campus.

Most college campuses have a central building, typically an administration building, which is surrounded by smaller, less attractive buildings. Western’s master plan featured an enormous administration building. The other campus structures enclosed the hill leaving a large green in the center, an atypical formation as most campuses are based on rectilinear configurations. Davis and Wright chose this arrangement to allow each campus building to dominate its area of the hill’s perimeter. The green preserved part of the promontory’s rugged terrain, appeasing Cherry’s desire to retain the hill’s natural beauty.

On 25 August 1909 Davis signed a contract to design the school’s administration building. The board instructed Davis to incorporate administrative offices, three classrooms, and a 1,600-seat auditorium for chapel services. Cherry viewed daily chapel meetings as a bonding experience for the students, particularly as enrollments rose; thus a commodious meeting hall was of paramount importance. Cherry also wanted the building to reflect the institution’s promising future. Agreeing, Davis chose a Classic Revival style that hinted of the Erechtheion temple on the Acropolis with its stately portico, classic ornamentation, and handsome location atop Vinegar Hill. The structure’s classical prototype reflected the growing trend to substitute the asymmetrical massing and gaudy ornamentation of Victorian Eclectic architecture with a more austere and restrained ornamentation. Davis, a proponent of this shift, called Athens “the first place of good architecture and all that is great, good and judicious in architecture.”

Davis had hoped that the building would be faced with the white dolomite limestone, known in trade circles as Bowling Green limestone, found in abundance in Warren County. "The white of its column" Davis wrote to Cherry. The contractor’s mistakes did not implicate Davis, however, and Cherry quickly squelched a rumor implying that he was partially responsible.

Davis’s architectural brilliance was derived from his belief that “to be a great architect and for whom the quest is not a concern, you must have been intensely loyal to you...and your general development of the plant on the hill. They believe implicitly in you, your character, and efficiency. I have personally regarded any criticism of you as a thing almost personal and resented any attempt to make an attack on you. My interest has not simply been formal because I believe in you and your ability.”

Davis’s conciliatory words displayed his confidence in Davis and his desire to keep the architect on his team.

Davis’s “brilliant design of the administration building was a bastion of knowledge to top the city’s highest hill. A student, who first saw the campus in 1919, thought the administration “was the biggest building in the world.” For students coming from farms on the Barrens or near the Knobs, this majestic structure towered. It also created the aura that Cherry envisioned for Western, as he was “concerned with the biggest, the highest, the most, the best, the most worthwhile, and the most beautiful.”

The pride manifested in the new building was apparent at its dedication on 5 May 1911 as thousands toured it. The student paper praised the school’s new building eloquently, citing its “gleaming white column” and the “open doors” that beckoned students to enter and “conquer ignorance.” After delivering a “masterly address,” Davis presented a beautifully framed portrait of Dr. Cherry to the school. “This grateful tribute to the worth of President Cherry,” loaded the school paper, “gave Captain Davis a place in the hearts of the students that no other act could have given him.” The portrait was the first of many gifts that Davis presented to Cherry. Whether these gifts were strictly tokens of gratitude is questionable, as Davis was counting a major client. Cherry was particularly appreciative of the weekends which Davis arranged at the New Century Hotel at Dawson Springs, a structure designed by Davis and Paduch archtect, A.L. Lassiter.

While the new structure created the symbol that Cherry had envisioned, unfortunately he had overreached his resources. Cherry and the board of regents had used over two-thirds of the $150,000 appropriation in 1908 to purchase the campus site; in addition, the new building had cost approximately $125,000. Despite the General Assembly’s rejection of an appeal for additional funds in 1910, Cherry and the regents had continued construction by taking a mortgage on the school property. Six years later the General Assembly assumed Western’s indebtedness and eventually refunded $20,000 which the school had already paid on the debt. As a warning and a corrective, however, the legislature passed a bill making it a criminal offense for any official of the state schools to spend more money than had been appropriated for a particular fiscal year.

From 1911 to 1925, Western’s physical plant expanded because of meager legislative appropriations for new construction. During those fifteen years, only $450,000 was appropriated for capital improvements, of which $100,000 was designated to erase Western’s indebtedness. Cherry used the remainder to build a desperately needed women’s dormitory and a Laboratory School, neither designed by Davis.

Recognizing Western’s growth in enrollment and its development into a degree-granting institution, the Kentucky General Assembly appropriated $320,000 for capital improvements in 1926, including money for a library, a central heating plant, and the remodeling of older classroom building. With private donations and additional monies from the sale of town lots and a downtown building, Cherry also planned for the development of an athletic field, a physical-education building, and general improvements to several existing structures. To fulfill his dream, Cherry wanted to retain Davis; the regents unanimously agreed.

The college’s most pressing need in 1926 was a library building. The Cedar House, built by students in 1921 as a social center, was simply inadequate to meet the needs of an expanding collection and a growing student body. The procedures used in developing and executing plans for the library were typical of Davis’s later work at Western. Cherry’s philosophy of a democratic campus demanded that the faculty, staff, and occasionally, students be allowed to voice their ideas about the essential and desirable qualities of new

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fortification in the center of campus. Davis's father had served
that the new department. Demonstrating his ingenuity and saving
working for men. Upon moving his practice to
urn off few words—to work with an academic committee, on
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Helm, building building "wish list."
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It close to the edge of the hill, giving it a distinctive
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of reinforced concrete, the stadium seated four thousand with showers, lockers, and
athletic teams used the stadium until 1968 when the new L.T. 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 in 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 Whitestone 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, lighting 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 inferior 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 earnest 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 Davis that if he 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 you 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."

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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’s staff, would be the building’s first collection. Davis created a redbrick, Georgian-style building with hyphens and wings to reflect Kentucky’s Virginia heritage. This project presented a challenge to Davis because Cherry was adamantly opposed to the construction of a “skylight roof thus ruining ample natural light and ventilation.” Accepting Davis’s advice and miraculously finding the money, Cherry had the roof built without a cover on the gymnasium’s southern exterior wall in 1931. The first public pool in Bowling Green, it was an instant success. The gym, constructed of Bowling Green limestone, was truly eclectic in style. Its most ornamental feature was the unusual turquoise and burnt-orange, terra cotta frieze encircling the structure. Portions of the frieze containing “semi-nude” athletic figures were removed in 1965 when the gym was converted into the university’s library.

The Depression years were difficult ones for Western—enrollment declined, salaries were cut, work on the Kentucky Building was halted, and Cherry was forced to adopt a “retrenchment program.” The program required “expenditure of all kinds for permanent or capital purposes must be restricted.” This meant reducing the academic programs to the essentials and creating a real interest in the Kentucky Building and a real appreciation for the work you have done.

Davis’s one capitulation to enlarging the building was the addition of a large pedimented portico, an elaboration 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 Public Administration project. Bowling Green architect James M. Ingram executed the interior. Cherry died, however, before the building was completed. Ironically, he had assured Davis during construction that he had provided for the building’s first $50,000,000, and was choosing a site for the building’s first $10,000,000, and was planning to donate his estate to the university. “I call “Neo-Calvinism.” Fortunately most of this development has occurred below the hill, although three large architectural intrusions or “monuments” of a modern nature have been squashed on this hill. After Cherry, Davis, and Harry Wright were removed from the scene, the intense vision of the hill’s development seemed to fade. Developing this vision with rigidity state appropriations demonstrated the ability of both Cherry and “one of the greatest architects in America,” the Hill Builder, Brinton B. Davis.
Rob Atnip accepts a Landmark Building Award on behalf of Service One Credit Union for their work on the Sinclair House at 422 College Heights Blvd.

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

Linda Dickerson accepts the Cultural Landscape Preservation Award.

Johne & Alisa Carmichael accept Landmark’s highest honor, the Heritage Award.

Amy McGowan accepts the HPB Commercial Award for the tremendous effort she has made at Taylor’s Chapel at 314 7th Street. Amy also received Landmark’s Steel Wool Award for the same project. With Amy are Landmark president, C.J. Johnson, and the HPB planner, Robin Ziegler.

Mayo Elmie Walker accepts the Persistent Preservationist Award from C.J. Johnson.

These not pictured are: Kim & David Jones winners of the Jean Thompson 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 902 Elm Street; and Jonathan Jeffrey who received the Ionic Column Award for Distinguished Service. Congratulations to all our winners.

Louise Gillock is shown with C.J. Johnson 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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I have enclosed $________________________ to support the Irene Moss Sumpter Preservation Endowment Fund.

Checks should be payable to:

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