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“21st Century Makeover”

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“21st Century Makeover,”

By Jonathan Jeffrey

A century ago, anxious students and Bowling Green citizens watched construction workers erect the first new campus building on Western’s fledgling campus. They viewed the architectural drawings for the building on exhibition in a downtown storefront, but even those carefully executed renderings belied Van Meter Hall’s grandeur. As the centenary year of Van Meter Hall’s dedication approaches, students and local citizens are once again intrigued by this venerated structure and anxious to view the results of its major alterations and additions.

As the Southern Normal School grew in cramped quarters downtown, Henry Hardin Cherry no doubt cast an envious eye on the attractive campus of the Pleasant J. Potter College for Young Ladies. The college’s hilltop site afforded a commanding view of a growing city and presented the ever-clever president with a symbolic location for his growing institution. In 1906 the state established one of its two new normal schools in Bowling Green, affording Cherry the opportunity to purchase the Potter property for construction of his own “academical village.” In a bold and progressive move, he hired architect Brinton B. Davis and landscape architect Henry Wright to develop a master plan for the new college campus. The duo presented a lovely design which included a circular arrangement of buildings around the hill’s perimeter.

The campus already boasted a significant classroom building as well as a president’s home, vestiges of the defunct Potter College. The first new building for the Western Normal School was a major administration building that would contain administrative offices, three classrooms, and a 1,600-seat auditorium for chapel services and community events. 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 Acropolis's Erechtheion temple with its stately portico, classic ornamentation, and handsome location atop College Hill.

Davis had hoped that the new building would be faced with the white oolitic limestone, known in trade circles as Bowling Green limestone and found in abundance in Warren County. However, the county's major quarry experienced labor disturbances and declared bankruptcy in 1910; it reopened in time to provide the cut-stone trimmings used throughout the building. Most of Davis's later campus designs at Western specified the white limestone. After a number of delays the Administration Building was dedicated on 5 May 1911.

Davis's brilliant design created a bastion of knowledge to top the city's highest hill. A student, who first saw the campus in 1913, thought the administration building "was the biggest building in the world." For students coming from farms on the Barrens or near the Knobs, this majestic structure towered. Pride manifested in the new building was apparent at its dedication as thousands toured the facility. The student paper praised the Administration Building, citing its gleaming white columns" and the "open doors" that beckoned students to enter and "conquer ignorance." Local residents complimented the building's attractive masonry and stone exterior throughout the construction process, but they anxiously anticipated the opportunity to view the structure's interior. They were not disappointed. In the beautifully appointed lobby, Davis included imported stone, sweeping marble staircases with wrought iron balustrades, Spanish floor tiles, classical moldings and columns, and an attractive stained glass skylight. The auditorium was the city's largest meeting space, and it impressed with its capacious wood-

paneled stage, massive brass light fixtures, heavy draperies, and the sea of theater seats. For approximately \$125,000 Davis had created the aura that Cherry envisioned for Western, as the president was “concerned with the biggest, the highest, the most, the best, the most worthwhile, and the most beautiful.”

Western officials named the new auditorium Van Meter Hall in honor of Charles Jacob Van Meter, a steamboat captain who provided one of the school’s first major monetary gifts; an auditorium at the school’s old downtown location had previously been named for Van Meter. The entire structure was christened the Administration Building. The Board of Regents officially changed the name of the building to Van Meter Hall in 1968 after a major renovation.

Just like their counterparts a century earlier, students and Bowling Green citizens are eager to view Van Meter’s additions and renovations executed by RossTarrant Architects of Lexington. What they find will impress them: cleaned and restored architectural features, bright and attractive meeting facilities, enlarged dressing rooms, improved lighting and acoustics, new seating, a dramatically enlarged stage area allowing greater utilization of the facility, better building access including handicapped entrances and an elevator, as well as the addition of patron bathrooms near the lobby. Befitting an arts facility, Van Meter will also boast several new pieces of artwork, including a major new sculpture, a second floor fresco, and the incorporation of the familiar Four Seasons sculpture grouping in the auditorium itself. One thing that remains from the old Van Meter is the unique Western experience of exiting from an evening performance and walking out into the stars. Thank goodness some things never change!

SIDEBAR: Professor Aristide Sartorio carved the Four Seasons sculpture found in the niches of the renovated Auditorium. The artist sculpted these voluptuous Art Nouveau figures

from prize Carrara marble in 1911 for an international exposition held in Turin, Italy. Warren County native and Ogden College graduate Commodore Perry Snell purchased the pieces and donated them to Western in 1930; the grouping was installed on the Ogden campus in 1931 and remained there until the late-1990s. After decades of outside exposure, the sculpture pieces have been carefully cleaned and conserved.

SIDEBAR: In February 1931, a Bowling Green newspaper dubbed Louisville architect Brinton Beauregard Davis (1862-1952) the “Hill Builder” for his untiring efforts as Western’s architect. 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. Besides his work at Western, Davis, who maintained an office in Louisville, designed buildings in eight states. Perhaps his most important work was Louisville’s InterSouthern Insurance skyscraper. In Bowling Green Davis also designed City Hall and the Denhardt Amory.