

Fading into Darkness

As a campus tour filled with prospective students made its way up Langdon Street, high school senior Joseph Ortaliza stopped dead in his tracks at the sight of Science Hall and reiterated a thought shared by many at UW-Madison, saying, “Why is there a dungeon in the middle of a college campus?”

Others in the group began to peruse the building with wide eyes and dropped jaws. As time passed by, the setting sun only added to the mystique surrounding Science Hall as the building’s gothic shadow slowly stretched over the UW-Madison campus.

Known for its towering presence, Science Hall has been a source of mystery for students and visitors alike. Though many are aware of its presence on campus, few are knowledgeable about its history despite the fact that Science Hall celebrated its 125 year anniversary only a year ago.

Science Hall was completed in 1887 on the very same foundation of the original Science Hall which burned down in 1884. Designed to be the first completely fireproof building at UW-Madison, the construction of Science Hall did not proceed without controversy.

In 1885, the Legislature appropriated a total of \$190,000 for a group of four buildings intended to replace the original Science Hall. Constant changes in planning designed to increase fire resistance were so costly and difficult that the budget set aside for the reconstruction of Science Hall was used long before it was completed or furnished.

When the regents applied to the Legislature for further funds, they were met by an investigative committee tasked with the job of asking difficult and revealing questions before approving the funds needed to finish the construction. The bipartisan committee elicited testimony from witnesses such as regents Paul and Keyes, President Bascom, and Professor Allan Darst Conover in an effort to find out what had been done with the \$261,000 invested in Science Hall.

After asking the regents for a plan detailing the different uses of the money, it became clear that the regents failed to construct a building within the financial restrictions first established by the Legislature. The final estimated cost for Science Hall ran up to \$285,000.

The building itself is characterized by a massive central tower, which is accompanied by two smaller towers. Round arches distinguish outer doors, windows, and the interior hallways. While large iron and steel beams provide framework for the building’s central section and its interior floors, the outside is highlighted by dark red brick that rises from a foundation of lightly colored rhyolite. The numerous turrets, arches, and a steeply-pitched roof all contribute towards Science Hall’s heavy gothic design.

There is, however, certainly more to Science Hall than just its architecture. Having been a previous home to the medical school, anatomy, anthropology, biology, botany, chemistry,

geology, geography, physics, zoology, and all UW sciences except astronomy and pharmacy, Science Hall has a rich academic tradition. Today the building is home to the Robinson Map Library, the Geography Department, the Nelson Institute for Environmental Studies and the Land Tenure Center.

Over the course of its 125 year existence, Science Hall has developed a reputation for being haunted. During its reconstruction, a man was killed and several others were maimed when a lift fell from the third floor. Complete with a morgue in the basement, underground tunnels, a cadaver laboratory, and an attic that serves as a home to bats, Science Hall has all the components needed for a horror film. In fact, French Professor Samuel Roger's mystery novel, "Don't Look Behind You," was set in Science Hall.

One of the most iconic features of Science Hall was the body chute used to transport cadavers dissected in anatomy classes before the 1960s. Arthur Hove, UW special assistant emeritus and author of *The University of Wisconsin: A Pictorial History*, described the newfound use for the chute saying, "In the 1970s, kids would climb up there at night and then slide down for fun. Back then you had to make due with what you had." According to Jim Feldman's book, *The Buildings of the University of Wisconsin*, the entrance to the chute was eventually sealed, but as recently as 1974 geography students were still finding body parts in the attic.

With an office in the second floor Geography Library in Science Hall, UW Madison Librarian Thomas Tews has first-hand experience with the rumors surrounding Science Hall. In an interview with the *Badger Herald*, Tews described his thoughts on the hauntings, saying, "When you are alone at night it is dark, the building creaks, the water pipes make noise, and there is sometimes a bat flying around, but it is an old building. What do you expect?"

Despite his dismissal of the potential hauntings, Tews did mention numerous reports of beakers inexplicably falling one by one off shelves. Tews also recalled the discovery of human leg bones in a wall that was being torn down in the building. Even for those skeptical of ghosts, signs of strange activity hide behind each corner of Science Hall.

Although lore is abound in the more than 125 year old building, most students walk by completely unaware of the history that it holds. Just a stroll from some of the most important buildings on campus such as Memorial Union, College Library, and Bascom Hall, Science Hall basks in obscurity at the bottom of Bascom Hill.

UW Madison student Brady Dangelser described his impression of Science Hall, saying, "I am not sure what it is even used for, but its definitely one of those buildings that you recognize right away." Dangelser continued on, saying, "You hear rumors about Science Hall all the time. It just adds to the history."

Throughout its lifespan, Science Hall has served as a home to numerous academic departments on campus. Its unique architecture only accents the grand nature of the building. As time has

passed, however, the many responsibilities of Science Hall have been replaced by stories of ghosts and paranormal activity. Today the building still stands after generations of students have moved through UW-Madison.

For the majority of students, faculty, and future Badgers such as Ortaliza, limited experience with Science Hall allows imaginations to run wild and legends of hauntings to persist for years to come. Feldman summed up the ever-present myths concerning Science Hall, saying, “Haunted it was, haunted it remains.”