APPENDIX D. WELLS: ARTIST

After the murals were completed, President Draper recommended that the artist be appointed professor on a full time basis: "Dean Ricker informs me that the work of Professors Wells in the department of architecture equips that department more completely than any other similar department in the country, and that the latter is without peer as a worker and a teacher in industrial and decorative art." ¹

Newton Alonzo Wells (1852-1923): Biographical Notes

Bachelor of Painting, 1877, Master of Painting, 1880, Syracuse University. Studied under Bouguereau, Laurens and Benjamin-Constant, at Académie Julian, Paris.

Taught drawing at Union College, 1877-79, and at Syracuse University, 1879-89; Dean, School of Arts, Western Reserve University, 1899-90. Prof. of History and Practice of Painting, 1899-1903, and Prof. of Architectural Decoration, 1903-19, University of Illinois.

Murals in Altgeld Hall, University Auditorium (later removed), Sangamon County Courthouse, Springfield, and Colonial Theatre, Boston; designed Soldiers' Monument, Tuscola, mosaic panel before entrance to Ricker library, and portraits of Burrill, Draper and Ricker.

Exhibitor in Paris Salon, 1896-98, Columbian Exposition, 1893; member of professional associations, and writer of several articles of art: on color, Psychological Bulletin, VII (June, 1910); on mural painting, Brush and Pencil, VI (1900); on color in architecture, Inland Architect (1909).

¹ 20th Report (1900), 258. Biographical material in "Faculty Record," 1912; Baker, 309.
1896

June 20, Draper to Wells. "Since receiving your letter the other day I have been thinking of you in relation to the decorative work to be done in our new library building. The building has just been commenced... I know of no one who can do it as you can, and I should be glad to have you do it. I send you today some blueprints and a communication from Prof. White..." [We presume that Draper and Wells had met in the course of their professional activities in New York State.]

1897

Apr. 18, Wells to Draper. Will enter competition; is studying Romanesque style.

May 3, Draper to Wells. Urges him to quickly send sketches on. "You certainly labor under great disadvantage in competition with others who have opportunity to see the building... You will have strong competition from Chicago, but that fact ought not to discomfit you." [Draper proves to be a staunch supporter.]

May 14, Wells sends "Explanatory" letter to Ricker and White.

June 9, Trustees order all artists' plans rejected.

June 26, Wells sends Ricker and White "revised proposition."

c. July 9, Wells' original proposal for the murals was probably sent to architects on this date.

July 19, Ricker and White suggest that Wells see building and have personal interview before entering into final agreement.

July 26, Wells to Draper. Will go to Champaign the following week; is grateful for "your good offices for me with the committee."

1 Information culled from letters and documents in University Archives, University Architect's Office and Trustees' Reports.
Aug. 5, Wells in Champaign and working on the rotunda decorations.

Sept. 21, Committee announces that Wells is winner of competition.

c. Dec. 31, Wells sends New Year's greeting to Draper and informs him of his intention to return to Paris.

1898

May 26, Draper anticipating Wells' coming in the Fall.

c. May, Wells tells Draper of his Salon success.

June 7, Draper glad to hear of Wells' commission.

Oct. 11, Draper to Mrs. Wells in Syracuse. "I have not heard from Mr. Wells since the middle of August. . . . I should be glad to be advised of what you know as to his movements. Our people became very much attached to your husband and son last winter and there are many inquiries as to when Mr. Wells will return."

1899

Mar. 26, Chicago Sunday Tribune illustrated feature story on Wells' murals.

1900

Mar. 13, unveiling of the four murals in the Library Building.

Wells: Mural Techniques

The custom of nineteenth-century American muralists had been to work on large canvases in the studio, then remove them from the stretchers and have them permanently installed. That procedure

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1Wells, Brush and Pencil, 231-36; King, 78.
was followed by Melchers and McEwen at the Chicago Exposition; but other painters applied their pigment directly to the plaster surfaces—an arduous enterprise. William Morris Hunt wished to create an authentic fresco by painting directly on the walls of the Albany State Capitol but unfortunately the walls were not of fresh plaster, but stone, and dampness, poor construction, tottering pillars and a leaky roof contributed to the destruction of his murals just one year later.

Wells' technique was still different, and seems to have been efficient; he did not paint on canvas in a studio, nor did he apply paint to stone, but because of the huge size of each of the library walls—about twelve by forty feet—Wells put the canvas up into place and then painted directly on it:

When these enlarged panels [see p. 50] were finally completed to my satisfaction, I pinned over them a stout parchment tracing-paper, through which the drawing was perfectly visible, and painted upon this with oil-colors, diluted in spirits of turpentine, which causes the pigment to dry flat and with the suggestive effect of finished work. This procedure saved the labor of tracing and transferring for the color studies, and permitted as many trials at the color-scheming as was desirable to reach a satisfactory result without the danger of injuring the scale drawing. The color schemes do not require to be worked out in detail; only the broad masses with their relative intensities and tonal values are necessary or desirable at this stage.

When all of this work had been accomplished, occupying a period of six months, I was ready to attack the walls themselves. These were prepared by first giving them two coats of white lead in oil. As soon as this was dry, the surface was covered with a cement made of white lead, with just enough oil, varnish, and turpentine to make it workable with a stiff brush. Upon this freshly covered surface was stretched a plain and unprepared canvas and
nailed all around the edges. It was then rolled down until completely imbedded in the white lead, and then immediately covered with a coat of the same, diluted with oil and turpentine. This required a full month to dry hard in an artificially heated atmosphere, after which the surfaces were covered with a coat of preparation made of lead, Spanish whiting, oil and turpentine. When this had become perfectly hard, the surfaces were rubbed down with fine sandpaper, and were ready for the pictures.

While the walls were in process of drying, I busied myself with the preparation of the full-sized working cartoons. These were drawn upon manila paper with charcoal, or, I should have said, traced, because they were drawn by the aid of a stereopticon, a lantern-slide having been made from each of the large scale drawings. These scale drawings had been previously laid out in squares equivalent to feet upon the wall surface, and it was only necessary to enlarge the drawing until these squares were one foot square; then pin up the paper upon the screen and trace the drawing, squares, and all. With line and chalk the wall was also laid out in foot squares when it was only necessary to apply the cartoon to its proper place upon the squares, and then transfer the drawing by means of sliding under it, when its upper edge had been secured in place with small tacks, a large sheet of transfer-paper inserted underneath, and then going over the lines with a hard blunt point. This saved the trouble of prickling the outlines and then pouncing them by the old method. The transfer-paper I made myself by spreading upon a large sheet of manila paper a mixture of lampblack and mutton tallow, stirred together while the tallow was hot, and spread upon the paper with a rag while the mixture was still warm. One such transfer-paper served for all the panels.

After the outlines were in place I was ready to attack with the color. For this work I used the oil-colors put up in tubes of quadruple size; with the exception of zinc-white, which I bought in bulk. Instead of thinning and tempering my colors with turpentine, I used a medium made by dissolving white wax in petroleum—ordinary kerosene—over a hot-water bath. Enough wax should be added to make a jelly when cold. Of this medium I added about one part to two parts of pigment when mixing my colors on the palette. It has the double advantage of drying slowly and allowing perfect deliberation in the work, and it does not change color or darken at all that I can discover during the drying process. This, and the fact that the dried color readily softens by the application of a little turpentine to its surface, makes it easy to join the work of each succeeding day, or after any lapse of time, without a break or visible "lap." The wax
has also the additional advantage of producing a perfectly flat and lusterless surface, with a delicate and aerial bloom, like that of real fresco; and not the least of its good qualities is its preserving influence upon the color, protecting it from the contact of coal-gas, the bête noire of decorators in our climate.

Decorative pictures of smaller dimensions might be executed to greater advantage upon prepared canvas in the studio, perhaps, but wall spaces of the size and shape of those in the library—about twelve by forty feet—could not be thus handled.