I. PHENOMENAL GROWTH

Appropriations and Status

In the "flattest, plainest, most monotonous section of Illinois"¹ the two rural communities of Champaign and Urbana offered the new state University--on condition that it be located in Urbana--970 acres of farmland, $100,000 in county bonds, a building worth $75,500 (Ill. 12), and $2000 in shrubbery and trees. Legislative investigators recommended the site, reporting that the countryside was unsurpassed "for the beauty of the landscape, the richness and variety of its soil... [and] groves of fine timber and streams of pure water." At best,

¹ Allan Nevins, Illinois (Urbana, 1917), 41.
the description was an exaggeration. Possibly the Committee's vision had been blurred by too many quail dinners, oyster suppers and light refreshments graciously furnished by Twin-City promoters, yet it must be recognized that the building and the sizeable tract of land were realistic inducements. The prairie was, after all, an appropriate place to locate an agricultural school, and on March 2, 1868, the Illinois Industrial University opened—in Urbana.  

Because the appellation "Industrial" was resented by some graduates and misunderstood by the public, the institution was renamed the University of Illinois in 1885; the change created an uproar and some charged the academicians with "robbing the people of a labor school, un-American pandering to a false pride." But derision turned to respect as evidence of accomplishment and scholarship was manifested. At first, seventy-seven students and four faculty members had 1,092 books and just one building; the figures were virtually the same for some twenty-five years, but then, in 1895-96, we find 855 students, eighty-four faculty members, some 28,000 volumes, and nine buildings. And the income had multiplied over eight times to $594,938.


2 Illini Years: A Picture History of the University of Illinois 1868-1950 (Urbana, 1950), 6.

3 Nevins, 359.
The question that might be asked is what caused such phenomenal growth?

Two knowledgeable men of differing political views assumed their prestigious public offices at about the same time: John Peter Altgeld was inaugurated Governor in January of 1893, and Andrew Sloan Draper formally installed as University President, November 1894. They were forty-six years old, both lawyers and administrators, not scholars; neither was a political newcomer. So purposefully did they work, that we can trace the University's transformation from a small school to an influential educational power to their tenure.

A pattern of increased state appropriations was established from that time on. Although the legislators had not been disposed to give money for the "professors" to spend, Altgeld manipulated and forced greater financial support each year. Profoundly motivated by the democratic idea that all deserving students have equal opportunities for a good education, Altgeld was almost always available to aid the young school. Years later, President Draper wrote that the Governor "stood by the University in the hour of her first great growth and of her imperative need; he exerted the powers of his great office in her behalf to

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1 Altgeld knew what it meant to struggle for an education. Brought to America as an infant by impoverished and illiterate German parents, he had little opportunity for formal schooling; he worked as an unskilled laborer, as school teacher, and ultimately was able to study law.
the very limits; and while all the friends of that University, now
grown great, may dissent with some of his opinions, no one of
them is at liberty to speak unkindly of him. "  

Altgeld's concern did not remain only at the political-financial
level, but as we shall soon see, moved into the arena of architectural
choice as well. With the most honorable of intentions, involvement
bordered on interference.

The Campus

Aesthetic concerns were of little consequence to those charged
with establishing the new school and the campus developed without a
uniform style or cohesive plan. From its very beginnings the Uni-
versity's architecture had been in the mainstream of mid-nineteenth
century building practice, that of deliberately borrowing and reviving
traditional schemes to effect--much of the time--grandiose structures
that are best described as genuinely eclectic. In order to place the
original library building designed by Nathan C. Ricker and James
M. White in 1896, in its historical context, it seems appropriate to
detail briefly Illinois' earlier campus growth, as follows:

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1 Andrew Sloan Draper, "Governor Altgeld and the University of
Illinois," Alumni Quarterly, VII (April, 1913), 82. His account is so
relevant and interesting, that a long excerpt is in Appendix A.

2 Existing earlier buildings are identified in an aerial view of the
campus (Ill. 124).
(III. 12) Rising above a bleak and dusty prairie dotted with farm houses, the Illinois Industrial University inherited an abandoned seminary building from the Urbana-Champaign Institute in 1867. The founders thought it "beautiful in its architectural proportions and very imposing in its appearance," but unfortunately, a fierce windstorm wrecked the historic edifice in 1880.

The Mechanical Building and Drill Hall, 1872 (III. 13). Baldenments and machicolations capped many buildings of that generation. This castellated brick fortress, designed by John Mills Van Osdel, served as gymnasium, armory, materials testing and hydraulic laboratory, and in the Gallery, as setting for commencement exercises. Fire caused its destruction in 1900.

University Hall, 1873 (III. 14). Van Osdel's picturesque

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2 John Mills Van Osdel (1811-1891), the first architect to practice "in Chicago or the west," served as a member of Illinois' original Board of Trustees. Frank Randall, History of the Development of Building Construction in Chicago (Urbana, 1949), 24.
Victorian building boasted two towers, one for clocks, the other for bells. The chapel, library, art gallery, and museums of natural history, and engineering and architecture—as well as classrooms and offices—were contained in this spacious structure which was recognized as the University trademark for many years. Measures taken to secure the building by combating termites, decayed wood, crumbling of brickwork, and even bracing of the rickety towers, failed. After a ceiling collapsed in 1938, the building met its demise. The Illini Union was erected on its site.

Traffic signals were unnecessary on the campus in 1874 (Ill. 2). University Hall's high windows provided a good vantage point to photograph Green Street, Springfield Avenue, the Boneyard Creek, the original Institute Building, and the Drill Hall. The cow path is now Burdell Avenue. Cattle and pigs were kept away by fences and the campus was often so marshy that students and faculty had to wear galoshes to cross.

The Chemistry Building (1878), currently Harker Hall, was a work of Nathan C. Ricker (Ill. 15). Prominently featured were patterned shingles in its mansard roof, stone arches contrasting with the brick, and columned porticoes; it was strikingly reminiscent of the McCormick House on Rush Street, Chicago, 1873. Early-twentieth century

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1The design met with such approval by University of Arkansas planners, that they purchased the specifications and built a replica, inside and out; it still stands at Fayetteville.
remodeling (Ill. 16) altered the building's character by removing exterior staircases and columns, transforming the front entrance, and changing the roof. The old one had been destroyed by fire.

The Old Armory (1890, Ill. 17), presently called Gymnasium Annex, was another Ricker designed this building too. When erected, the new "military building" was described as "100 by 150 feet in one grand hall...ample space for company and battalion maneuvers, and for large audiences upon special occasions."  

In the Natural History Building (1892, Ill. 18), Ricker used pointed arches in the roof, and horizontal trim around the first two floors; the design is a simplified version of the Old Art Museum, Boston, 1872-75. To secure greater fire resistance, cast iron beams, columns and walls were utilized, the first such construction at the University.  

Engineering Hall, 1894 (Ill. 19). Engineering enrollment had been increasing at the rate of 25 percent each year and a new building was urgently needed. After a competition of University alumni, George M. Bullard, class of '82, was appointed architect. The contest rules stated that the "exterior design will be left to the competitors... and

1 15th Report (1890), 182.  
2 16th Report (1892), 99.  
3 Ira O. Baker and Everett E. King, A History of the College of Engineering at the University of Illinois (Urbana, 1918), 141.  
4 An interesting coincidence ought be noted: prize-winner Bullard was the brother of the President of the University's Board of Trustees, Sam Bullard, who was an architect.
that the committee expresses preference for a design with a tower, "\(^1\) but he created a simple—and undistinguished—structure of pressed brick faced with terra-cotta slabs and limestone trimming.

Almost thirty years had passed since the University of Illinois was established, and during that time apparently only minimal official attention had been given landscape and architectural design. But as the University established its reputation and the need for space became more urgent, aesthetic requirements were considered along with those of function. No architectural historian was needed to catalogue the effects of prairie windstorms, fires, termites and inferior materials, and when the time came to plan for the new library, the pragmatic Trustees had every intention of making that important building "more permanent and artistic than any other of the University group." \(^3\)

\(^1\) 17th Report (1894), 131. Draper assumed his presidency soon after the completion of Engineering Hall; the tower which the Trustees wanted, materialized with the construction of the library building three years later.


\(^3\) Illini, Mar. 14, 1900.