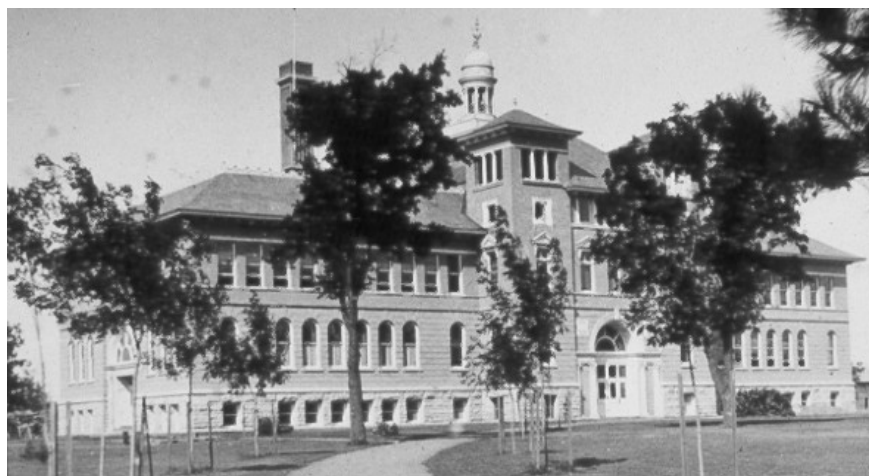


A History of Old Main

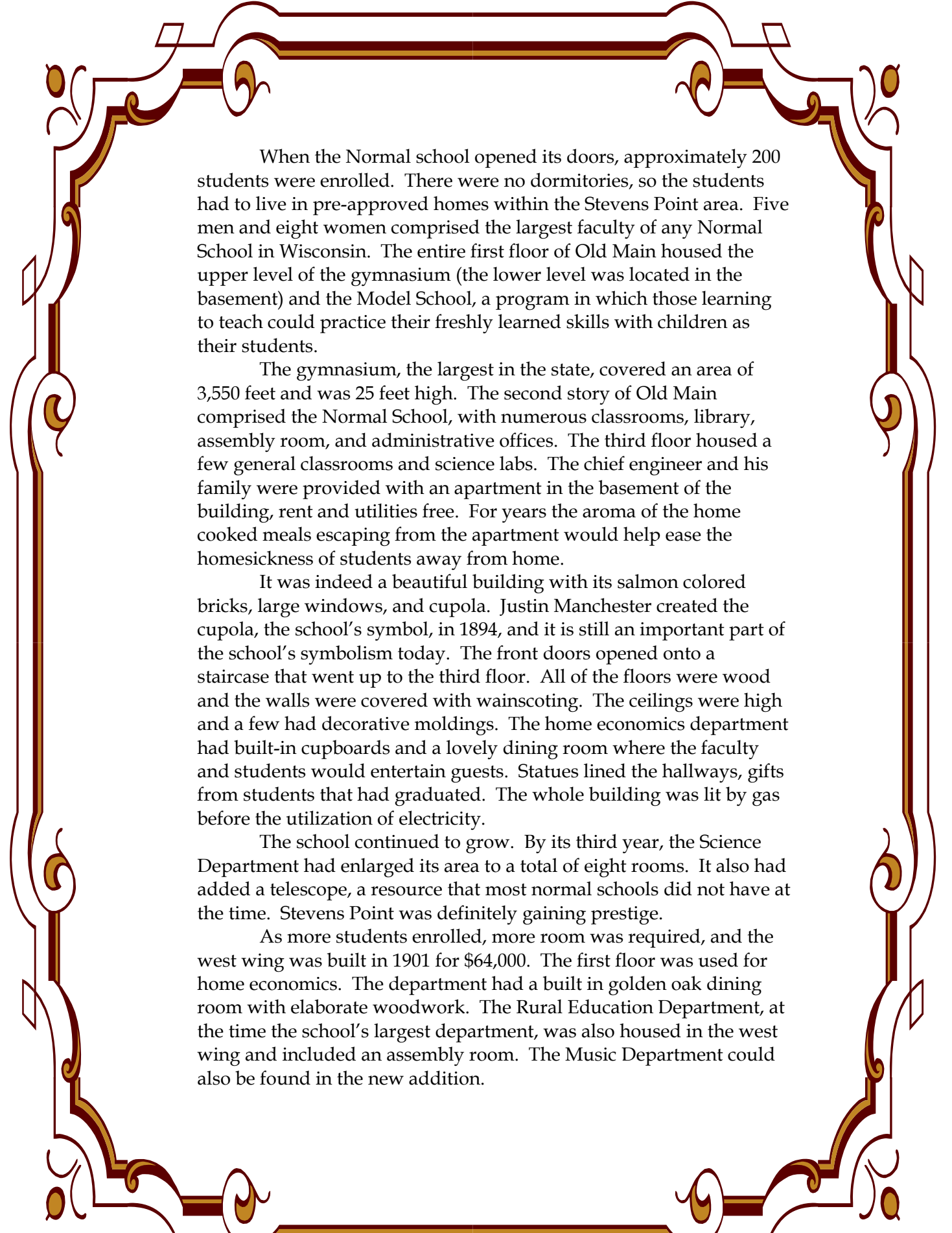
Old Main is the cornerstone of life at University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point. In its early years, it housed all of the classrooms and administrative offices; it was truly the center of campus. Now only a portion remains of the building Old Main used to be, but she still has a spark that will continue to glow as long as the campus bustles with life and learning.

The university was located in Stevens Point because the residents of the city were concerned about higher education. Stevens Point had to compete with other cities in northern Wisconsin for the chance to have a school within its boundaries. Wausau was the biggest competitor. Then on July 21 after much hope and much effort, it was announced that Stevens Point had won; the city would get its desired school. The whole town celebrated. With \$50,000 collected from residents, and \$25,000 granted by the state's treasury, construction began on Old Main.

Old Main opened on September 17, 1894, and looked similar to what the outer facade looks like today. Designed by Dwight H. Perkins of Perkins and Selby of Chicago in the Renaissance Revival Style, Old Main was constructed on three acres of land purchased from E.D. Brown for \$6,000. The Stevens Point Normal School was the sixth State Normal School and the first in the northern half of the state. The railroad made the campus accessible and higher learning available to those who could not afford to travel to other parts of the state.



Old Main in 1898



When the Normal school opened its doors, approximately 200 students were enrolled. There were no dormitories, so the students had to live in pre-approved homes within the Stevens Point area. Five men and eight women comprised the largest faculty of any Normal School in Wisconsin. The entire first floor of Old Main housed the upper level of the gymnasium (the lower level was located in the basement) and the Model School, a program in which those learning to teach could practice their freshly learned skills with children as their students.

The gymnasium, the largest in the state, covered an area of 3,550 feet and was 25 feet high. The second story of Old Main comprised the Normal School, with numerous classrooms, library, assembly room, and administrative offices. The third floor housed a few general classrooms and science labs. The chief engineer and his family were provided with an apartment in the basement of the building, rent and utilities free. For years the aroma of the home cooked meals escaping from the apartment would help ease the homesickness of students away from home.

It was indeed a beautiful building with its salmon colored bricks, large windows, and cupola. Justin Manchester created the cupola, the school's symbol, in 1894, and it is still an important part of the school's symbolism today. The front doors opened onto a staircase that went up to the third floor. All of the floors were wood and the walls were covered with wainscoting. The ceilings were high and a few had decorative moldings. The home economics department had built-in cupboards and a lovely dining room where the faculty and students would entertain guests. Statues lined the hallways, gifts from students that had graduated. The whole building was lit by gas before the utilization of electricity.

The school continued to grow. By its third year, the Science Department had enlarged its area to a total of eight rooms. It also had added a telescope, a resource that most normal schools did not have at the time. Stevens Point was definitely gaining prestige.

As more students enrolled, more room was required, and the west wing was built in 1901 for \$64,000. The first floor was used for home economics. The department had a built in golden oak dining room with elaborate woodwork. The Rural Education Department, at the time the school's largest department, was also housed in the west wing and included an assembly room. The Music Department could also be found in the new addition.



Old Main with
the West Wing
Addition

As the need for more space increased, the east wing was built in 1914; the same year construction began on Nelson Hall. The total cost was \$76,000 and it was an almost exact replica of the west wing. The wing had finished oak woodwork, high wainscoting and beamed ceilings, and housed the relocated Home Economics Department. That was not the end of the remodeling, though. In 1917 the basement was remodeled. The library facilities were improved in 1924 and 1930. New heating and lighting were added in 1954. The gymnasium was moved to the Communication Arts Building and the vacated space was converted into classrooms.

In the 1970s, the third floor was closed off for safety reasons and condemned. One year later, the Bureau of Facilities Management declared Old Main obsolete. However, Old Main's spirit was still alive in 1976 when the building was placed on the National Register of Historic Places.

In January 1979, the ninth president of the university, Lee Sherman Dreyfus, took the oath of office as Wisconsin's 40th Governor on the front steps. Also in 1979, after a fight to save the historic building, the ivy-clad Old Main underwent a \$2 million renovation to modernize the interior and to remove the east and west wings.

At the time, Old Main's floorboards squeaked from generations of students walking on them. The skylights, dormers and vents leaked with age. Occasionally, a bat or bird that inhabited the deserted third floor would be seen flying through the hallways. Countless remodeling projects had created oddities like two doors next to each other that opened up into the same room, or with room 140 across from 117.

The "New" modernized Old Main was formally rededicated in October of 1980. That building is a shell of the original structure. While the exterior looks similar to what had originally stood, the interior has lost a good deal of its historical charm. The Founders Room, constructed in 1980, was refurbished by the Historical Preservation Committee 20 years later in order to try to preserve a small piece of Old Main's timeless elegance.