

Designing a Community for Alumnae and Faculty on the Vassar Campus 1909-1924

ALUMANAE BUILDING

An exhibition commemorating the centennial anniversary of the opening of the Alumnae House at Vassar College

Vassar College Art Library

May 27 - July 26, 2024

FROM LANG 2

Settling the Rock Lot:

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Beginnings

Toward the end of 1909, members of the Vassar Alumnae Association, meeting in the parlors of the Women's University Club on Madison Square in New York, discussed the need for an Alumnae House in Poughkeepsie. They hoped such a house would "serve as a headquarters for Vassar graduates who feel they do not wish to impose on the hospitality of the college but who would like to feel they are staying in a place associated with Vassar and the alumnae." When presented with the idea the following year, President James Monroe Taylor suggested a building that would serve both the needs of visiting alumnae and a growing need for affordable faculty dwellings on campus, particularly for faculty who were still living with students in Main Building and the dormitories.² The site considered for the new housing was the ground bordering the west side of Raymond Avenue between Fulton and College Avenues, which contained a large shale outcropping and had been referred to as the "rock lot" since it was purchased by the College around 1900 from the prominent Poughkeepsie attorney, John E. Mack.³ The lot's shale mound formed a promontory which offered visitors, after a short climb, an accessible view of the campus to the southeast and the Catskills to the west. The outcropping was at the time featured as the first stop on Professor George Burbank Shattuck's student tours of local geological sites.⁴ The site was "convenient to other faculty residences and the street railway,"which ran along Raymond Avenue and connected the college to the center of Poughkeepsie."5

¹ "Alumnae Bulletin," Vassar Miscellany 39, 3 (December 1, 1909): 169.

² "When the proposition of a house for the alumnae was first made to Dr. Taylor, he counseled the erection of one building to serve as headquarters for the alumnae and as an apartment house for the faculty." Katherine V. C. Stebbins, "Alumnae House," *Vassar Quarterly*, 3, 3 (May 1, 1918): 190.

³ "Arlington Evolution: The Historic Development of Raymond and Collegeview Avenues," *Unscrewed* 17, 7 (November 1, 1987): 2. "Mack launched President Roosevelt on his political career by nominating him for state senator in 1910, and later for the presidency in 1932 and 1936." "Mack Eulogized in Court as 'Most Eminent Member' of the Dutchess Bar Association," *Poughkeepsie Journal* (Monday, February 24, 1958): 1. Mack resided just east of the Rock Lot at 110 Fulton Avenue, and would eventually be appointed by Governor Roosevelt to the New York State Supreme Court.

⁴ George Burbank Shattuck, *Geological Rambles Near Vassar College* (Poughkeepsie: Vassar College Press, 1907), 88-89.

⁵James Monroe Taylor, "The Vassar Campus, A History," Vassar Quarterly 3, 1 (July 1, 1916): 190.



SHALE LEDGE AT VASSAR COLLEGE

The College began moving forward on plans to develop this property in 1911, when it extended a new main sewer line from the coal yard near the power house behind Main Building to Josselyn Hall, and then to the northwest corner of Raymond and College Avenues.⁶

By the time Henry Noble MacCracken assumed the College Presidency at the beginning of the 1915 spring term, an alumnae house was high on the College's own agenda. On March 27, 1915, MacCracken mentioned it first among the College's capital priorities in his call for a one million dollar endowment to address educational needs. On October 10th of that year, in an address following a torchlight procession at the College's 50th anniversary ceremony, MacCracken revealed that "the trustees had finally decided to build new quarters for the faculty, provided some alumnae might be found who would give an Alumnae House" as well. "And some alumnae have been found," he announced: "A house for the use of all alumnae

⁶ "This main sewer is large enough to take care of all the buildings now in use and any buildings that may be erected on the grounds, including the desired faculty house on the rock lot at the corner of Raymond and College Avenues." "The Opening of the College," *Vassar Miscellany* 41,1 (Nov. 1, 1911): 47.

⁷ "Vassar needs new buildings, I know. She needs an Alumnae House; she needs a new physics and psychology laboratory; she needs better accommodations for the music department and for zoology. For all of these things we hope. But my call to you to signalize your fiftieth anniversary as a college is for \$1,000,000 for educational endowment." "Fiftieth Anniversary Fund," *Vassar Miscellany* 44, 7 (April 23, 1915): 494.





Queene Ferry Coonley, VC 1896

NEW HALL FOR VASSAR ON 50TH ANNIVERSARY

Three Alumnae to Erect Building to Cost Several Hundred Thousand Dollars.

Special to The New York Times.

POUGHKEEPSIE, N. Y., Oct. 10.— Two thousand visitors here for the celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of Vassar College, which began this afternoon, were told that Dr. Henry Noble MacCracken, President of the cellege, would make the formal announcement tomorrow that \$00,000 was to be presented to the college as a foundation for a \$150,000 fund to build an alumnae hall.

and their friends is to be given to Vassar College." The next day the New York Times reported that \$60,000 had been presented by Queene Ferry Coonley of Chicago (VC 1896) and her sister, Blanche Ferry Hooker of Greenwich, Connecticut (VC 1894) as a foundation for a \$150,000 fund to build an alumnae hall. The article also sheds light on the fact that the proposal of President Taylor for a single building that would accommodate both alumnae guests and new housing for faculty was still in play. On the same day, in an address to the Vassar Alumnae Association at their annual business meeting, MacCracken linked the proposed building to the million dollar educational endowment:

I consider this Faculty-Alumnae House an essential part of the educational endowment, since it gives residence to some fifty of the faculty, and the living conditions there would be so much improved over what they have at present, it should really be counted as part of their salary while resident teachers here on the ground. I look upon it in that way. I look upon these sitting rooms and living rooms as an increase in educational offices of the plant. I look upon the building as a whole as a great increase in educational efficiency. The mere fact that we can now house parents when they come to see their children is in itself, a great advance.¹⁰

⁸ Stebbins, 189.

⁹ "The college authorities plan to build two wings on the new hall, which are to contain apartments for the unmarried members of the faculty. The hall will be erected on Rock Lot, opposite the college." "New Hall for Vassar on 50th Anniversary," *New York Times* (Monday October 11, 1915): 4.

¹⁰ "Contemporary Notes," Vassar Quarterly, 1:1 February 1, 1916: 55

By the beginning of the spring term of 1916 the firm of Hunt and Hunt had been selected by the Trustees to design the new project.¹¹











Joseph Howland Hunt

The Architects

The firm was led by two brothers, Richard Howland Hunt (1861-1932) and Joseph Howland Hunt (1870-1924), who had followed their father, the illustrious beaux-arts architect and "Dean of American Architecture" Richard Morris Hunt (1827–1895), into the profession. Their father's brother was the American realist artist William Morris Hunt (1824-1879), who studied with the Barbizon painters Jean-François Millet and Thomas Couture and would exert a widespread influence on American art. While both the father and uncle had been brought to Europe by their widowed mother to study art, settling in Rome, Richard Morris Hunt soon changed his attention from painting to architecture, and studied in the ateliers of two established European architects, Samuel Darier of Geneva, and Hector Martin Lefuel in Paris. In 1843 Richard passed his examinations to enter into the École National Supérieur des Beaux-arts in Paris, and became the first American to be admitted there. Ten years later the precocious American was asked by his mentor Lefuel, who had been placed in charge of completing the Louvre Palace, to design the Pavillon de la Bibliothèque across from the Palais Royale and to supervise the Louvre project in its entirety. Richard Morris Hunt worked on the project for three years, and upon returning to the United States in 1856 he helped Thomas Ustick Walter renovate the north and south wings of the United States Capitol to expand the Senate and House chambers. In 1857 Hunt returned to New York to set up his own practice. One of his first important commissions in the city was the 10th Street Studio Building, where he took up residence himself and formed his own architectural atelier. There he trained a raft of famous architects, including Frank Furness, Charles D. Gambrill, George B. Post, Henry Van Brunt, and William P. Ware. At the same time, Hunt became one of the founding members of the American Institute of Architects, and had a profound influence on the establishment of architecture as a profession in the United States. In 1861 he married the daughter of a wealthy New York shipping magnate, Catherine Howland, and at the end of an

¹¹ "The firm Hunt and Hunt of New York City has been chosen to draw up plans for the new Alumnae Hall. Mr. Hunt came up to college recently to look over the site proposed for the building." *Vassar Miscellany Weekly* 1, 15 (January 21, 1916): 3.

extended European tour that year his oldest son, Richard Howland Hunt, was born in Paris. In 1870 Richard and Catherine's second son was born, Joseph Howland Hunt. Soon after the family's return to New York in 1862, Richard Morris Hunt's failed campaign to erect a massive beaux-arts "Scholars' Gate" to serve as a portal to the south entrance of Central Park collided with Olmsted and Vaux's plans for the park, whose Victorian tastes tended toward Gothic revival. Nonetheless, their very public argument in the New York press brought Hunt recognition as a promoter of the arts. This would eventually influence his being named the American Judge and Fine Arts Commissioner for the Paris International Exposition of 1867, and to lead many important public projects in his later career.

Among these public projects, two are outstanding. Foremost, and one of the structures the architect is most known for, is his design for the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty, a ten-story beaux-arts building specifically erected to support Frédérick-Auguste Bartholdi's colossus and France's gift to the United States to celebrate the American centennial in 1876. Bartholdi was a younger graduate of the architecture program of the École National Supérieur des Beaux-Arts, and Hunt's reputation and connections in both France and the United States helped him earn this commission, which he completed in 1886. Hunt's oldest son, Richard Howland Hunt, then a young architect of 25, assisted his father as a draftsman on the project, and became an associate in the firm a year later. The son would also finish and implement the design his father had sketched for the Fifth Avenue entrance hall and facade of the Metropolitan Museum of Art after his father's death in 1895.





The Great Hall, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1907

The Armory Show, 1913

The Hunt Brothers, Richard H. and Joseph H., were each schooled in the university architecture programs founded by their father's former student, William P. Ware, at M.I.T. and Columbia University respectively. They also attended their father's alma mater, the École National Supérieur des Beaux-arts, in Paris. Besides Richard Howland Hunt's design of the entry hall and front facade of the Metropolitan Museum (1902), the plans of which he drew out in detail personally from his father's brief sketch, the elder son's early important New York commissions included a Lenox Hill mansion for Margaret Shepherd (1900), the current home of the Lotos Club, known for its members' art exhibitions where Impressionist painters were first introduced to the American public. With younger brother Joseph entering the business as a partner in 1901, the firm was re-incorporated as Hunt & Hunt, Architects. Both brothers then designed the massive First Precinct Police Station (1910-11), now the New York City Police Museum, two large townhouses for the Vanderbilts,

known as the "Marble Twins," on Fifth Avenue near 52nd Street (1905), and the 69th Regiment Armory, located on Lexington Avenue between 25th and 26th streets (1906). The exhibition that took place in that building's indoor parade ground five years later, now simply called the "Armory Show," was the site of the introduction of modern art into the United States and perhaps the most important single exhibition in the history of American art. The brothers must have been gratified to know that their building was the portal of such an infusion of the arts into American consciousness, reminiscent of the great art exhibitions of the Paris International Exposition which their father had orchestrated in 1867, and in keeping with his interest in promoting all the arts through architecture.

When Hunt and Hunt were chosen as the architects for the Vassar project in January of 1916, Richard Howland Hunt traveled up the Hudson from New York to inspect the site. The program still called for a "Faculty and Alumnae House" in a single shared structure at this point, with Hooker and Coonley contributing funding for the "alumnae wing." Both donors were appointed to the building committee, along with John E. Adriance, Frank R. Chambers, and President MacCracken. A second housing advisory committee was convened of members of the faculty, which included German Professor Marian P. Whitney, the physicist Frederick Albert Saunders, and Fanny Bordon of the Library, in order to insure faculty housing needs were met. The original building program specified "a large dining room for faculty, alumnae, and guests, and a general lounge." The alumnae wing of the building was slated to "provide sixteen bedrooms with appropriate baths for the use of alumnae and guests, and the main portion of the building, apartments for forty-five members of the faculty." ¹²

Dreaming Through the War

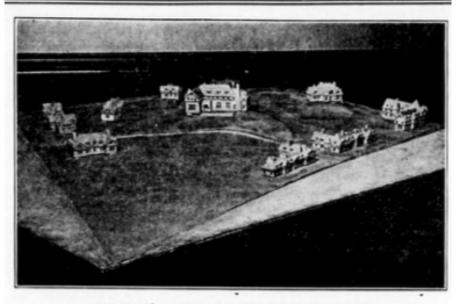
As was the case with Main Building, John Renwick's original building for Matthew Vassar's college that had been delayed by war, so too was the plan for the faculty and alumnae house, the securing of funding and the retention of the architects notwithstanding. Because of the First World War there was a *de-facto* moratorium on new construction caused by a shortage of labor and skyrocketing materials costs. However, the war did buy the planners some time to reimagine their project and creatively reconsider how the needs of the alumnae meshed with the college's faculty housing requirements. Soon the program for a single building was superseded by a plan for a large multi-structure development. Between 1916 and 1921 a number of plans were elaborated by Hunt and Hunt and the building committee, as faculty worked closely with the architects on the program. On October 3, 1917 the *Miscellany News* printed on its front page a photograph of an architects' model showing nine separate structures on the Rock Lot, in addition to a stand-alone Alumnae House, with a caption indicating that the plan had been approved, but that construction would have to be delayed, citing uncertainty in the minds of the donors about the size of the Alumnae House itself and "the inadvisability of building at this time." Presumably wartime inflation was behind the reconsiderations over the size of the alumnae portion of the program and the delay in general.

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¹² "The Faculty and Alumnae House," Vassar Quarterly 1, 1 (February 1, 1916): 48-49.

¹³ *Miscellany News* 92:2 (October 3, 1917): 1.

OCTOBER 3, 1917

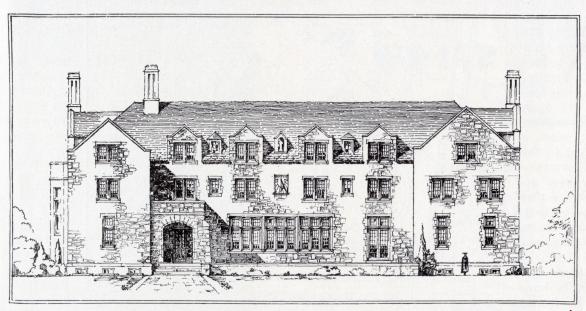


ARCHITECT'S MODEL FOR THE FACULTY HOUSES

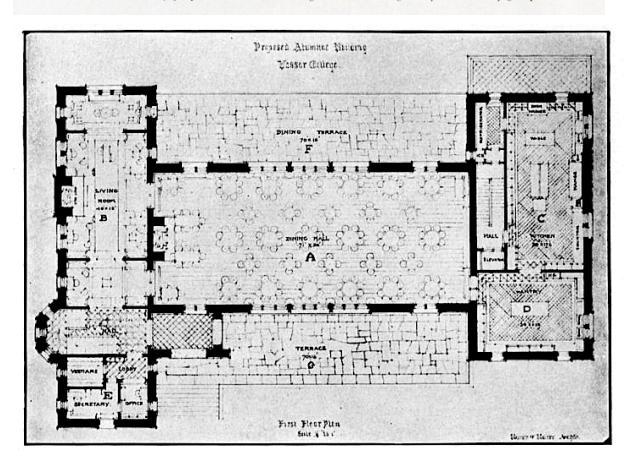
Two years later Alice D. Snyder, who was simultaneously an assistant professor in the English department and an employee of Hunt and Hunt, published in the October 1919 issue of House Beautiful, an important early twentieth-century architectural journal, another photograph of the model depicting ten separate cottages and multi-apartment structures on the site, in addition to the alumnae house occupying the rock-lot summit. The faculty houses and apartment buildings were situated around the periphery of the property, along with a new service building, with a large sloping grassy area between these and the alumnae house on the hill above. The article states that the collection of buildings "form an extension of the strip" now called 'professors' row,' adjacent to the College along Raymond Avenue," and that "the intervention of an avenue between the end of the row and this lot makes it possible to develop the latter quite independently, and the scheme is to have the group resemble part of an English village." The elevations and floor plans of Hunt & Hunt portrayed in the article support this description with their half-timber tudor revival facades, oriel bays, high stone chimneys and mullioned, leaded windows. Snyder expends considerable ink explaining the unique "ideal" that structures the plan, based on the College's early history: "For ever since the day when instructors, professors, and even professors' families lived, nearly all of them, in the original Main building, and the students only had to run down the corridors from their rooms to find themselves in real homes, with kitchens and children and all the adjuncts that dormitories ordinarily do without, there has been a strong community feeling on the part of both students and teachers."15

¹⁴ Alice D Snyder, "Vassar's Faculty Homes – Present and Future," *House Beautiful* 46, 4 (October 1919): 228.

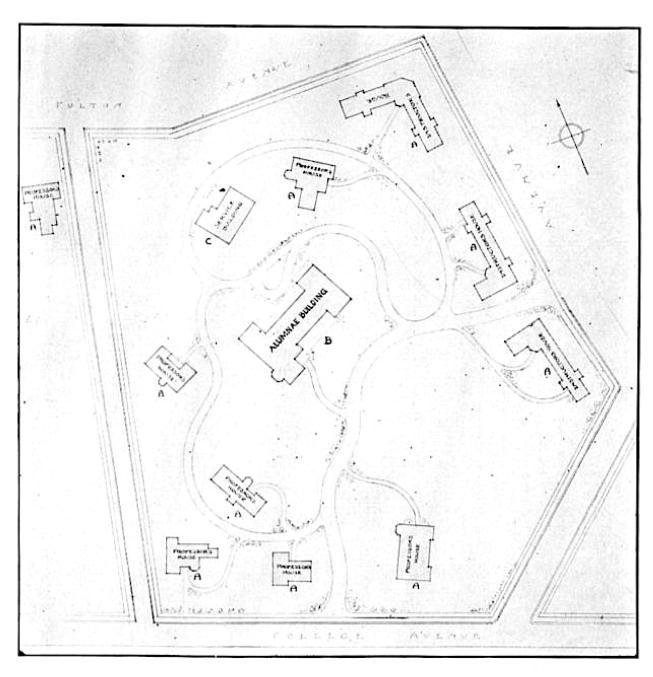
¹⁵ Snyder, 227.



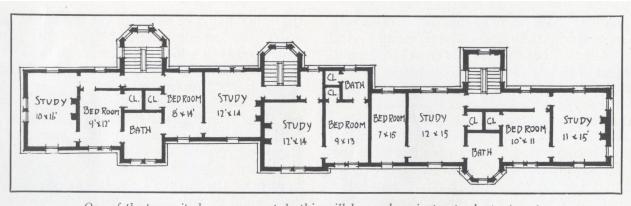
South elevation of proposed Alumnæ Building at Vassar College—to form centre of group.



A—Dining Hall, B—Living Room, C—Kitchen, D—Pantry, E—Secretary's Office, F—Dining Terrace, G—Terrace,



A-Professor's and Instructor's Houses. B-Alumnae Building. C-Service Building.



One of the ten-suite houses suggested; this will be used as instructors' apartments.

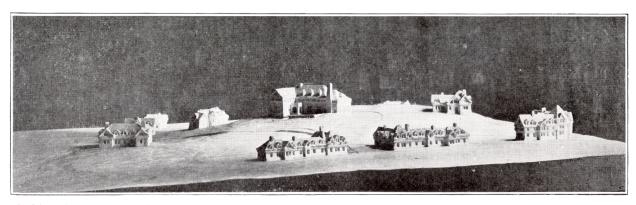
The plan was to provide privacy without remoteness to the "seventy or eighty of the faculty members living in student dormitories," and to maintain the community feeling that began with practically all students and faculty living under one roof. Snyder makes it clear that all of the faculty still living in the dormitories are women, although some number of the female, and all of the male faculty, have made other arrangements, having found homes either in town or along professors' row on Raymond Avenue. This implies a gender-based living hierarchy not wholly determined by academic rank, provoked by the inadvisability of having unmarried male faculty living among female students. This annoyed female faculty of all ranks. Rank itself is indeed a feature of the new plan, however, with stand-alone cottages being, in some cases, made to order for senior faculty while instructors and assistant professors would occupy the new multi-suite apartment buildings. Although the cottages have kitchenettes, even faculty dwelling in them were expected to join those dwelling in the three apartment buildings to dine in common with one another and with alumnae in the alumnae house dining-hall. The new plan therefore addresses gender inequity, allows female junior faculty to continue to be "of the college," without living with constant interruptions, and provides for more housing for growing numbers of senior faculty in the individual cottages. The project has a further democratizing objective in making housing for all faculty more affordable: "In developing the lot the ideal is to be simplicity and economy, as the purpose of the whole scheme would be frustrated if the rental value of the cottages were not kept proportionate to college salaries." Moreover, by vacating space in the dormitories the plan would allow for a growth of the tuition-paying student population by a substantial number. Additionally, the plan would strengthen ties between the alumnae and the college, where alumnae would have a greater physical presence on campus and thus be able to participate in the college's planning processes as both a moral and financial force in a good-faith relationship with the college administration. According to Katherine Stebbins, writing for the Vassar Quarterly in the Spring of 1918:

This universal desire became the keynote of Mrs. Hooker's and Mrs. Coonley's plan for our Alumnae House. Such a building, they planned, would serve as a club and central bureau for obtaining all necessary college information and as a rendez-vous where groups of alumnae might meet for conference over association affairs. It would be calculated to fill a definite place in the college community and ought to prove a valuable link between faculty, students and the alumnae

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¹⁶ Snyder, 228.

themselves. More important, however, would be its possibilities as a factor in building up the power and scope of the Alumnae Association under its new constitution and with its new executive secretary. If, as would happen, the alumnae knew that there was a house —a moderate priced inn—set apart for their special use and convenience, many more would visit the college—and visit it they must as often as possible, if the Alumnae Association is to be a continuously developing force in upholding the idealistic side of Vassar and a source of supply for its rapidly increasing material needs. This they consider a most important point—when alumnae see for themselves the needs of Vassar they will be prompted to supply these needs far more quickly than if they had but read of them in the President's report. It is the old story, "seeing is believing." ¹⁷



Architects' models, showing "rock-lot" scheme, designed primarily for women teachers now living in dormitories.

Little wonder that the planning for this "English village" for faculty and alumnae on the edge of campus was anticipated with excitement, well beyond what campus building plans commonly inspire: "The project has become a matter of enthusiasm, and there is real eagerness for ground to be broken." Finally, this long-term fellowship among faculty and their former students who were now "of the world," would meld into a wider sense of community between the college and the adjacent neighborhood: "It is sure to be welcomed by Vassar's village neighbors; for in recent years there has developed on the part of the college and Arlington a wholesome interest in co-operative community improvements, and such a group of cottages as this, standing on land almost adjoining the little settlement, is sure to mean an increase in this friendliness and to be an inspiration to those who are trying so earnestly to beautify the whole neighborhood." The cooperative community improvements referred to included "Lincoln Center," Vassar's settlement house on Church Street, through which the progressive applications of science to homemaking, employment skills, and early childhood development introduced by Ellen Swallow Richards (VC 1870) and Julia Lathrop (VC 1880), and gradually incorporated under President MacCracken into the curriculum through Vassar's euthenics program, were made available to Poughkeepsie residents.²⁰

¹⁷ Stebbins, 190.

¹⁸ Snyder, 228

¹⁹ Snyder, 228

²⁰ "Our Work at Lincoln Center," *Miscellany News* 1, 11 (March 20, 1917): 3.

Mrs. Williams and Progress

The Vassar Discellany Dews

(PUBLISHED SEMI-WEEKLY)

Vol. III

POUGHKEEPSIE, N. Y., NOVEMBER 14, 1918

Prof. H. E. Millie Vassar College No. 13

PEACE, PARADES, PAGEANTS,—PREXY

Peace Prevails

Classes were suspended and Vassar gave itself up to rejoicing when the official news of the signing of the armistice was received. From the first informal demonstrations in the icy dawn on Monday morning, through the appearance of ice cream with chocolate sauce for dessert Tuesday night, joy reigned supreme.

The Start

It was 3:30 A. M. Monday by a very cold watch and pitch dark. The confusion belied the shouts of "Peace! Peace!" First came a helter skelter ace through the corridors of all the halls. Then a crowd assembled under

Dou seem to be glad about something. If you're glad about the same thing that I'm glad about, I know that you are not half so glad as I am.—President WacCracken.

"WE ARE SEVEN" (From the Christian Association)

Do you realize the far reaching significance of the United War Workers' Campaign? It means that where before there were seven separate organizations each working by itself there is now one great organization united in working for one end. It means that the difference in great which have

DO YOU APPROVE?

In view of the fact that there is at present no prospect of having any concerts by outside artists here at college this winter, it has been proposed that three evening musicals be given under the auspices of the Students' Association. It is possible to secure excellent

Prexy Returns

Word reached the campus during the Chapel exercises Tuesday that President MacCracken was on his way back from the leave of absence which had been granted following his serious illness in September. A royal welcome greeted him as he drew up in a taxi outside Taylor Gate. The students crowded around with torches, singing cheering ,and jumping up and down with wild enthusiasm. Then in a triumphal procession they marched with him to his house and serenaded him. In return he told how glad he is to be back at college to work—and to play. Then he spoke of the significance of the great holiday here at Vassar and

With the signing of the Armistice on November 11, 1918, the campus celebrated with a suspension of classes. A spontaneous assembly of the entire college community formed on the library lawn as the day dawned and news of peace spread. Students sang and paraded jubilantly, and many members of the faculty gave speeches about democracy, peace, and hope for the future, including President MacCracken, who by coincidence had returned to campus after convalescing from an illness that morning, and who "spoke of the significance of the great holiday here at Vassar and expressed his pleasure that our celebration had taken so intelligent a form." In the evening he opened the President's House to the community for a celebratory reception, and spoke further about the need for everyone to turn their attention to "doing relief work and setting things to right" in war-torn Europe.

Over the next year, Vassar was again able to turn its attention to its building plans, and on October 25, 1919 the *Miscellany News* announced:

The burning question is settled: namely, the Alumnae House and the Faculty House are things of today and not dreams for the future any longer. The Alumnae House has been settled upon for some time, and its generous donors last year doubled their gift because, at present building prices, the original sum was inadequate. But an utterly unexpected gift has come now from Mrs. James H.

²¹ "Prexy Returns," Miscellany News, 3, 13 (November 14, 1918).

Williams, Class of 1870. in the shape of \$100,000 for the erection of a Faculty Hall which is to bear her name.²²

The article also indicates that the gift had been given during the summer, and that Hunt and Hunt had already drawn up new plans for the rock lot. Even with the additional money from Hooker and Coonley for the Alumnae House, and the new gift from Williams for the faculty apartment building, the reality of building costs it seems had reduced the number of structures on the lot from ten to two, with no plan for the college to build any of the independent cottages for senior faculty and their families. Everyone, however, was eager to finally move ahead. Harriet Trumbull Williams, the donor, had enrolled in Vassar College in 1866 and graduated four years later. Her maternal uncle, Alexander Williams Randall, was an abolitionist who had been a friend of Abraham Lincoln and who was Governor of Wisconsin from 1858 to 1861. After moving to New York Harriet married James Harvey Williams in 1876. James was the founder and owner of a prosperous drop-forge factory in Brooklyn, who was known in labor circles for building an innovative bath-house for his workers to cool themselves from their forge-work during the hot summer months. He also established a mutual aid society for his employees as a private, cooperative health benefit. He died in 1905, leaving his wife a large fortune. After her husband's death, Harriet turned to philanthropy. This included purchasing a mansion on the New Haven green for the Yale University Press in memory of her son Earl, a Yale graduate of 1910 who had died unexpectedly in 1918. The house was given to the Press in 1919, the same year as her gift of the faculty house to Vassar. In her letter announcing the gift to the Secretary to the Board of Trustees, she stated, "I have long wished to contribute to the welfare of women. No group of professional workers seem to be more worthy of recognition through increased comfort in living conditions than those who have faithfully served Vassar College as professors and instructors."²³ Before she died in 1923 Williams also gave a building on Richards Street in Brooklyn to the Bethel Ship Seaman's Branch of the Brooklyn Y.M.C.A. "to commemorate the humanitarian ideals of her husband."²⁴ During the summer of 1919, with the war now over and the Williams gift in hand, the Hunt brothers were able to readily turn one of their previous plans for the faculty apartment buildings, so carefully conceived after years of discussion by the faculty advisory committee, into a plan which was approved by an Executive Committee of the Board of Trustees even before the gift was announced in October. Although Harriet Williams had hoped that construction could be completed in the spring of 1920, the fiftieth anniversary of her class year, lingering conditions from the war made that impossible.

²² "Building Plans," Miscellany News 4, 9 (October 25, 1919): 1.

²³ "The New Faculty House: Williams Hall," Vassar Quarterly, 5, 1 (November 1, 1919): 59.

²⁴ "Obituaries: Harriet T. Williams," *The Standard Union* (Sunday, February 25, 1923): 10. See also the article: "Mrs. Williams Upholds Industrial Justice," *Miscellany News*, 5, 56 (June 15. 1921): 3.



Williams Hall Ground Breaking Ceremony, April 14, 1921.

At noon on Thursday April 14, 1921 a ground breaking ceremony, at which the *Poughkeepsie Eagle News* reported "the whole college was present," took place along College Avenue with Mrs. Williams herself wielding the golden spade which had been used in ceremonies for every building since Matthew Vassar had used it for Main Building, with President MacCracken and Dean Ella McCaleb (VC 1878), giving speeches. Photographers documented the celebration, which resembled a suffrage rally. This is not coincidental, since Mrs. Williams had spoken of the building as a progressive step, providing female faculty with equitable independent living opportunities on campus. Moreover, the Nineteenth Amendment had been ratified on August 26 of the previous summer before classes had started in the Fall, and there had been little opportunity to celebrate the victory that had been so hard-fought by so many in the community. This included President MacCracken, who had campaigned across New York for the cause before many a similar assembly. In her speech at the dedication, Williams reminisced about her college days, extolling the progressivism of her graduating class: "I heard a student say that my class is fifty years behind the times, but we have always felt fifty years ahead." a first part of the progressivism of her graduating class: "I heard a student say that my class is fifty years behind the times, but we have always felt fifty years ahead." a first part of the progressivism of her graduating class: "I heard a student say that my class is fifty years behind the times, but we have always felt fifty years ahead." a first part of the progressivism of her graduating class: "I heard a student say that my class is fifty years behind the times, but we have always felt fifty years ahead."

²⁵ "Ground Broken at College for Williams Hall," *Poughkeepsie Eagle News* (April, 15, 1921): 5.

²⁶ "Ground Broken," 5.



Williams' Hall, the new Faculty House. A corner of the Alumnae House can be seen in the background to the left



Alumnae House Soon After Completion, 1924

Alumnae House

With construction started on Williams Hall, a second ground breaking ceremony took place on Monday, June 20, 1921 for the second building to be erected on the rock lot, the Alumnae House itself. The ceremony took place at 5:00 p.m. on the final day of alumnae week on campus, with Blanche Ferry Hooker and Queene Ferry Coonley wielding the golden spade.²⁷ Construction, however, would not begin until July of the following year, as the Building Committee negotiated construction contracts for what was a complex design anchored on the crest of an exceedingly difficult building site. The final design accommodates a larger living room than the plan discussed by Katherine Stebbins in 1918, apparent in the larger footprint for the southern wing of the structure. The pantry in the original plan at the fore of the northern wing became a snug or private dining area adjoining the main dining room, destined to become popular with students, faculty, and occasional town residents. Eventually the room was dubbed the "Pub," and was decorated with murals of campus life in 1947 by Anne Cleveland (VC '37). Gone from the later plan is the service building or "maids' cottage," a casualty of the changing times, which would have housed twelve servants. Remaining for alumnae visitors and their guests were a library, a cloak room, and suites with private baths, as well as individual sleeping rooms sharing public bathrooms on the third floor.

One week before the ground breaking ceremony, Louise Lawrence Meigs (VC 1891), a member of the family with whom MacCracken had been negotiating over the foundation of Sarah Lawrence College (named after Louise's mother), had met with Queene Ferry Coonley, who informed her about the progress of the Alumnae House project. Meigs then told Coonley that she and the sister of her deceased roommate Hester Oakley Ward (VC 1891), the artist Violet Oakley, had been discussing the possibility of Oakley doing a mural at Vassar on the subject of "Woman" since 1911, when Louise was president of the Alumnae Association. Oakley was a Philadelphia muralist who had taken over the painting of the Pennsylvania State House from Edwin Austin Abbey, and the founder of two female artists' colonies. Coonley had fortuitously heard Oakley recently speak in Washington, noting, "I feel that she had caught the flame and our case is in good hands."28 The flame Coonley referred to was the wider feminist animating principle, referred to as the "living flame" by Emmeline Pankurst, and echoed by Edna St. Vincent Millay (VC 1917) in her poem eulogizing the famous Vassar suffragist Inez Milholland (VC 1909).²⁹ Two weeks later Oakley submitted to Meigs by letter an informal contract for a mural whose subject would be the "Woman of the Apocalypse clothed with the Sun," based on a sketch Oakley had done several years earlier, and stipulating that her commission be \$10,500.30 After a European tour with her companion, Edith Emerson, Oakley began working on the commission in the Fall of 1923. She had decided the work would be better represented by a

²⁷ "The Program," Vassar Quarterly 6:4 (August 1, 1921): 304.

²⁸ Bailey Van Hook, Violet Oakley: An Artist's Life (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1916), 248.

²⁹ "For if one goes to prison a Suffragette one comes out a living flame." F. W. Pethick Lawrence quoting Emmeline Pankurst, "Newcastle Prisoners Released: The Story of Their Ordeal in Prison," *Votes for Women* 3, 86 (October 29, 1909): 67; *Take up the Song: Commemorating the Centennial Anniversary of Edna St. Vincent Millay's Pulitzer Prize for Poetry, ed. Thomas Hill* (Poughkeepsie: Vassar College Libraries, 2023), 28.

³⁰ Van Hook, 248.

triptych panel painting in the manner of an altarpiece, rather than a mural, and would be called "The Great Wonder." She and Louise Meigs agreed that the painting would be dedicated to Oakley's sister and Meigs' Vassar roommate Hester, who had died in 1905 of Scarlet Fever. Oakley consulted Joseph Howland Hunt on the eventual placement of the triptych, and persuasively got Hunt, Hooker and Coonley to agree to allow her to decorate the Alumnae House living room in the style of an Italian Renaissance great hall, with appropriate furnishings, as a total work of art.³¹



Violet Oakley. Architectural Study for the Alumnae House Living Room, 1924

Part of this work included the decoration of the living room ceiling in colors matching the triptych, for which Oakley would provide stencils, and which was executed by Oakley's assistants Edith Emerson and Caroline Haywood over a period of two months, with Edith designing the scaffolding. As part of this

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³¹ Van Hook, 267.

Gesamtkunstwerk Oakley and Meigs also together designed, costumed, scripted, and choreographed an elaborate pageant for the opening ceremony of the building, which took place on June 8, 1924. Oakley had been designing historical pageants since 1907, and by all accounts this ceremony was exceptional. As Oakley's biograper, Bailey Van Hook tells us:

A Shakespearean blessing was sung, followed by a procession into the hall by the major players, trumpeters, torch bearers, the "Chronicler," the daughters of the donors, Hester Oakley Meigs (Louise's daughter), and the president of the college, Henry Noble MacCracken. Two torch-bearers lit a fire in the fireplace and then lit two seven-tiered candlesticks. The "Chronicler," Sydney Thompson, '12, read a poem written by Caroline Wilson Link '19. Blanche Hooker's daughter Adelaide presented the deed of gift for the house at the feet of President MacCracken. Blanche's sister, Queene Coonley's daughter Elizabeth, offered a scroll listing the other gifts, and Hester presented two keys, one symbolic of the outer door of the house, the other of the inner meaning of the triptych. She then unlocked the house. One observer spoke of the "emotional response of quiet intensity that marked the climax of the ceremony." After an informal reception, there was a reading from the illuminated vellum book that Oakley had presented for the occasion. . . . The unveiling must have been an emotional event, given that the panel was dedicated to her beloved sister. She [Violet] related that people gasped with delight at the sight of it. The triptych had been locked for the ceremony "much to everyone's excitement and impatience." She described the ceremony as altogether "so beautiful and so significant that I almost broke down . . . Little Hester [age nineteen] . . . reached up and unlocked the great, gold Doors-unfolding them reverently, and stepping down and back with her arms still unconsciously outstretched-coming to Earth, as it were, as a bird quietly descends."32

The triptych itself still commands the space of the living room, and few who have stayed at Alumnae House will forget it. The central panel depicts the woman described in *Revelations* 12, clothed with the sun with the moon at her feet, holding aloft the "man-child who will rule all nations." Oakley regarded herself a prophet as well as an artist, and the painting caught perfectly the spirit of the times: a time, after the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment and following the horrors of the Great War, of hope for humanity rising from an apocalypse. This was a hope conceived and fostered especially by women, in their association with peace and natality, that their new political gains would have the potential to transform the peoples of all nations into a humanely-governed world. "The Great Wonder" would therefore have a pragmatic value in the educational setting of the college, where inward intellectual cultivation coupled with progressive historical change would make a new home of the world for women to the benefit of all. Oakley explains the meaning of her allegorical painting in a brochure that accompanied the unveiling:

May it serve to lift up Every-Woman who contemplates it, with inner vision, and ponders its message with inner judgment, nerving her to bring to light–without Fear–the child of her innermost yearning, and to raise it up above the reach of the ignorance and envy of the Beast; letting it be caught up from her own strong hands to even higher planes of Truth and Truth's interpreting.³³

³² Van Hook, p. 270.

³³ Van Hook, 269.

Certainly this optimistic idea of inwardly-contemplated virtue empowering women to raise up all humanity as the offspring of their own labors was the "flame" observed in Oakley by Coonley. It had caused her to labor so long with her sister to provide a campus base for their fellow alumnae to foster the moral and material nurturing of their beloved college. It was also present in Harriet Williams' desire to see those unmarried female academics, who devoted themselves so unselfishly to their students, lead lives in which they could enjoy the peace and privacy that would make true community possible. This was also the spirit that inspired Henry Noble MacCracken, from the time he assumed office, to "speak in prophetic strains of the possibilities of the Alumnae House" to throngs of assembled alumnae.³⁴

Final Touches

Sadly, Joseph Howland Hunt, who had been the lead architect on the Vassar projects from the beginning, died suddenly at the age of 54 on October 11, 1924, only four months after Oakley's ceremonial opening of Alumnae House. Harriet Trumbull Williams also died, before the opening, on February 23, 1923. Although the main structure of Williams Hall was completed and occupied by May of 1922, two "wings," which were actually free-standing three-story structures, were added in the spring of 1925 to form a front courtyard at each end of the long central building. As for the Alumnae House, before it could be occupied it had to be furnished with furniture, bedding, books, linen, china, silver, drapery, etc., a task orchestrated by an Alumnae House furnishing committee chaired by the college's *de-facto* interior decorator, the architect Ruth Maxon Adams (VC 1904). Great numbers of alumnae donated gifts, and individual classes raised money for individual rooms, which earned the building the sobriquet, "The House of a Thousand Gifts." Before long, faculty, alumnae, and students were using the Alumnae House and its dining facilities frequently for meetings and private excursions. As for Williams Hall, faculty were soon having "Faculty at Home" days in their apartments when students were encouraged to visit, listed each week in the *Miscellany News*. The attitude of the faculty living there might best be represented by a response printed in the *Vassar Quarterly* by Amy Louise Reed (VC 1892), who was a Professor of English and former Librarian of the College:

I have done more reading this winter than for some years past, so delightful it is "to have a little house! To own the hearth and stool and all!" Yes, in Williams I breathe more quietly, more slowly, and therefore more deeply. I accomplish more with less effort. Heartily do I wish we might house not only all the faculty but all the students in a "cottage system" where every dweller might have

³⁴ "Contemporary Notes," Vassar Quarterly 3:2 (February 1, 1918): 140.

³⁵ See *The Book of the Alumnae House: House of a Thousand Gifts* (New York: D.C. McMurtrie, 1925). As an architect, Ruth Adams, who designed the present interior of the Aula in Ely Hall, extended Hunt and Hunt's yet unbuilt design elements for the "English Village" into the Poughkeepsie neighborhood by designing another Tudor revival half-timber house for two faculty members, Edith Fahnestock and Rose Peebles, at 129 College Avenue in 1916. See Nicholas Adams, "Ruth Maxon Adams, 1833-1970," *Vassar Campus History*, https://vassarcampushistory.vassarspaces.net/ruth-maxon-adams/

rest unto her soul through the possession of two rooms, one half of a bath-room and porch, one kitchenette and a fireplace.³⁶

As for the rock lot, after Williams Hall and Alumnae House were completed and inhabited, the landscape itself drew the attention of campus planners, including the illustrious landscape architect Beatrix Farrand, who was employed by the college from 1925 to 1928.³⁷ In 1926 a second faculty apartment building, Kendrick Hall, was being considered, and although Farrand recommended that it be placed on the corner of Raymond and College next to Williams Hall, suggesting an interior faculty garden and rock garden, MacCracken instead supported the donor's wishes that it be situated directly across Raymond from the Main Gate of the college. 38 During this time, when the botanist Edith Roberts was developing a dramatically innovative undergraduate landscape architecture program based on native plantings, the area on the northeast corner of the greensward on the rock lot along Raymond Avenue was treated as part of a campus laboratory for students taking horticultural classes, as indicated on a campus map of 1928 by Rosalind Howe. 39 A bit later the college hired the Olmsted firm to design walkways, automobile circulation, and parking areas on campus. The firm assigned one of their partners, Percival Gallagher, who offered two designs for the Alumnae House drive. The first, rejected because it was regarded as too costly, involved a retaining wall supporting a curved, climbing lane circling the south side of the hill and leading up to the front of the Alumnae House from College Avenue. The second design for the lot called for a direct axial driveway from the corner of Raymond and College up to the Alumnae House at the top of the hill, which also met with opposition because it would have spoiled the tranquility of the green park surrounding the hill and disturbed faculty living in Williams. 40 Over subsequent years the park retained much of the contemplative, restorative ambiance inspired by what Alice D. Snyder had spoken of as the lot's "natural beauty" that "belonged to the Vassar tradition." ⁴¹ To it were drawn students, faculty, and members of the wider community. Although not the pastoral setting of the idealized "English village" that campus dreamers had once envisioned, for many decades the lawn and its rocky scenery served as a commons between college and town and a valued recreational resource for local children, *flaneurs*, dog-walkers, stroller-pushers, bench-sitters, readers, and in recent years, shoppers visiting a weekly farmer's market.

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³⁶ "Where to Live: A Symposium by the Faculty," Vassar Quarterly 8, 4 (August 1, 1923):181.

³⁷ See Yvonne Elet & Virginia Duncan. "Beatrix Farrand and Campus Landscape at Vassar: Pedagogy and Practice, 1925-29," *Studies in the History of Gardens & Designed Landscapes* 39, 2 (2018): 105-136.

³⁸ Elet & Duncan, 116.

³⁹ Rosalind Howe, artist. *An Anachronistic Map of Vassar Female College and its Environs, 1861-1928*) Poughkeepsie: Vassar Co-operative Bookshop, 1928).

⁴⁰Yvonne Elet and Caleb P. Mitchell, The Campus Green: The Olmsted Firm's Designs for Vassar College, exhibition brochure, Vassar Art Library, April 11-June 6, 2022. https://vassarcampushistory.vassarspaces.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/The-Campus-Green_The-Olmsted-Firms-De signs-for-Vassar-College_exhibition-brochure_FINAL.pdf

⁴¹ "It is not without a few pangs that the college has considered 'settling' this area. Its rugged mounds, rising in the centre of the lot to a height of twenty or thirty feet, have long been defended from demolition at the hands of the stone-crushers and other prosaic souls, as a bit of scenery that belonged to the Vassar tradition. Stebbins, 228.

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Thomas E. Hill



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