1974

The Making of the Early Bryn Mawr Campus (Parts I-II)

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Almost every day during the year 1879 Dr. Joseph Wright Taylor mounted his horse and rode from his home to the old Quaker settlement of Burlington, New Jersey. There he left his horse with a friend, took a train to Camden, hurried to the ferry crossing the Delaware, took another train to the newly developing suburban resort of Bryn Mawr, and walked to the plateau of the hill where the first two buildings of his college were under construction.

This trip probably shortened Dr. Taylor's life; the kindly thoughtful 69-year-old bachelor was already suffering from heart disease. But he was in a hurry to see the shaping of the college where he hoped for the cultivation of a “very high degree of refinement of heart, mind and manners.”

Education was much on the minds of Quakers of this period: judging from a Bryn Mawr College President's Report a decade or so after Dr. Taylor was actively overseeing the construction of his college, an idea was growing in the bustling, lusty late nineteenth century that the education of women could change society for the better.

Erected women, so Bryn Mawr's first president, James E. Rhoads, M.D. wrote in 1891 would “tend to elevate standards of taste, give nobleness to social aims, and promote living for the highest ends.” Bryn Mawr's first dean, Martha Carey Thomas, had yet another idea. Women's education should be equal to that of men, she thought, “because men and women are to live and work together as comrades and dear friends and married friends and lovers.”

The beginning of an institution is the time when the toughest questions must be asked and answered, and for a college's success, the answer must be practiced and nourished by the generosity of those who shared its ideals.

It takes an extraordinary client as well as an extraordinary designer to achieve the thoughtful making of spaces. Dr. Taylor was such a client. He visited the new women's colleges and actively planned his college's administration building, later called Taylor Hall, as well as Bryn Mawr's first residence, cottage No. 1, or Merion Hall. He asked for construction estimates and contracted with firms supplying lumber, brick and other building materials. His interest in his college reached into practical as well as conceptual aspects of the new institution with a characteristic attention to detail — an attention which his architect, Addison Hutton, occasionally found irritating.

Addison Hutton, like Dr. Taylor a Quaker, was much involved in the search for a site as well as the construction to stand upon it. Friends though they were, he must have sometimes felt that Dr. Taylor usurped his function. In November 1879, Hutton wrote his brother from Paris: “As to our friend Dr. Taylor, thy pride should be one of ‘masterly inactivity’ unless he gives B. & H. the order for window frames to be made according to the drawings I have prepared...”

Again, after Dr. Taylor's death in 1880, Hutton wrote the College's trustees, “I have received your request of the 5th inst., but cannot give a complete report in reply for the reason that Dr. Taylor made some of his contracts and most of his payments without my knowledge...”

Dr. Taylor gave Addison Hutton “first instructions as to Bryn Mawr College” on July 2, 1878. We don't know what these instructions were, but we do know that Dr. Taylor's great friend Francis T. King, who was first president of the Board of Trustees, articulated the College's first image. King wrote Hutton in June 1879:

> There is one point upon which I have a great desire. Elevations for the buildings which will be in keeping with our profession as a Church — with the ideas of the depot with the object of the foundation. I would like to see in the appearance of this group of buildings a perfect expression of these three points combined: There is a certain style of “Quaker lady dress” which I often see in Phila. but which tells the whole story — she has her sash bonnet — her plain dress — her kid gloves — her plain shoes — but they are made to harmonize with the expression of her face which is both intellectual and holy — so may Taylor College look down from its beautiful site upon the passing world and we feel them say ‘tis right.

One can read into the granite austerity of Taylor Hall, with its highly articulated silhouette, this “Quaker lady” architecture. The campus architecture was to be mellowed and softened and made more evocatively decorative with the finials and crenellations of Cope & Stewardson, the College's second generation of architects.

Architectural expression was not the only area in which Francis King had influence. He also shared a responsibility for the “beautiful site” Dr. Taylor thought the new college should be near Haverford so that “professors, library, observatory, meeting house and even gas and water could be shared by the hospitals.” Dr. Rhoads later wrote. Dr. Rhoads thought that the College should be near Philadelphia “where the benefit of professors and library and scientific aid could be had, also some social help.”
The Making of the Early Campus

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Influences, and yet quite apart from Haverford College, as I think this would tend to the more untrammelled and vigorous growth of both institutions.

Near the railroad, also. Perhaps accessibility was what particularly recommended the final site selection, after considerations of health and proximity to Haverford and Philadelphia.

In any case, Edith Finch, M. Carey Thomas' biographer, credits Francis King with having deterred Dr. Taylor from locating the College either too far from Haverford or so closely within that college's orbit that Bryn Mawr would become its annex. Francis King wrote Dr. Taylor in January 1878: "I do not believe a better site than the one we saw at Bryn Mawr could be found, if all the houses can be had and the road closed."

The road to be closed was Lombard (sometimes spelled Lombard), which ran from Morris, crossed Merion, and continued through what is now the campus before turning right past Taylor Hall to Gulph Road. Francis King would of course only have been speaking of closing the Merion to Gulph segment of Lombard — the Morris to Merion segment was not closed till 1963, when the College was engaged upon the great building decade of the sixties.

Land assembly for the College was piecemeal. The original purchase was of 13 lots, 11 of them belonging to the Pennsylvania Railroad. This original campus, 32 acres between Merion, Roberts, Gulph and Yarow roads, was a small piece of what was called in 1850 the Thomas Humphries Tract — part of the 2500 acres originally deeded in 1802 by William Penn to Edward Pritchard and Co. of Herefordshire.

After Dr. Taylor's death, the charter of the new institution was granted in the name of the "Trustees of Bryn Mawr College." In 1882, the trustees approved Calvert Vaux's campus plan.

Vaux had been first Andrew Jackson Downing's partner and then Frederick Law Olmsted's from 1857 to 1872. He and Olmsted were co-designers of New York's Central Park, Brooklyn's Prospect Park, the Chicago South Parks and the first segment of the park system of Buffalo. Vaux, according to Charles E. Beveridge, associate editor of the Olmsted Papers, "seems to have used the same approach (to Bryn Mawr's campus) that he and Olmsted had, used designing parks: he 'planted out' the surrounding territory by a heavy belt of trees on the outer boundary of the campus."

As well as planning the campus, Vaux also stressed the need for a decision about a principal gateway to the College. The year before the College's opening in 1885, Vaux wrote Dr. Rhoads that the design of the gateway should be emphasized in relation to the design for the main entrance "which ought to be settled on soon, although it may not be expedient to execute it at once."

According to the November 11, 1884 Committee report "Vaux & Co. suggest that these gateways (the two being worked on by Addison Hutton) be alike in general design, that at Lombard being subsidiary to that at the main entrance" — the corner of Merion and Yarow.

But with the opening of the College in 1885, the role of Bryn Mawr's first generation of designers was coming to an end. About the time that Dr. Rhoads wrote Dean M. Carey Thomas that Bryn Mawr was in serious financial difficulties, and ironically also about the time that Addison Hutton wrote his brother that he expected business to be slim in 1886 and therefore could not guarantee his brother employment throughout the year, the Building Committee of the Board of Trustees began considering erection of another residence hall.

It was unpleasant to keep disfiguring the campus, and finding a suitable "Lady in charge" wasn't easy, but renting space for residents was too costly. "It is suggested," the minutes of November 12 1885 report, "that from the plans of Merion Hall and our own experiences we should draw up an outline of the rooms wanted, a general plan of the building, and then get some Architect to complete the sketch plans, for which he shall be paid a definite sum. Then, when the plan and estimate are accepted, that some young architect be obtained to give any supervision which may be required."?

Economy was an absolute necessity, but as Addison Hutton had never considered himself overpaid — in fact, he had complained privately of the small amount of remuneration he received for his services — economy does not seem to be the chief reason why the College turned to other architects at this time. Nor does M. Carey Thomas seem to have been the determining factor. But turn to other architects the College did.

A competition between Peabody and Stearns of Boston and the Philadelphia architects Walter Cope, Joseph Wilson and George F. Pearson was considered. The competition idea fell through, perhaps because the prize offered was too small: first $250, then $350 after Peabody and Stearns apparently demurred. When Peabody and Stearns still refused to participate, the minutes tell us somewhat cryptically that "it was then decided that in view of the present position of the subject it was best to make an arrangement with Walter Cope and John Stewardson for general drawings, details and specifications."

Addison Hutton soon heard of this new arrangement. Having already told his brother that he expected a lean year, he must have been particularly upset to find Bryn Mawr planning to build without him. He wrote Dr. Rhoads in January 1886: "Has the architect chosen for the work by Dr. Taylor so conducted himself as to warrant his dismissal by the Trustees chosen for Dr. Taylor?..." His story reveals that two days after this letter, Dr. Rhoads called him on. But what the two said to each other remains a secret.

The letter of hurt dismay was sent exactly 18 days after the Trustees' sub-committee had made an agreement with Cope & Stewardson to do all the work for the new residence hall, later named Radnor, for the sum of $1000. Thus the second generation of campus architects arrived on the scene. 

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THE EARLY CAMPUS

THE MAKING OF
(PART II)

by MICHELLE OSBORN

Bryn Mawr's first architecture is epitomized by the monochromatic high Victorian administration and classroom building named Taylor Hall after the College's founder. This "Quaker lady" architecture soon gave way to the equally monochromatic but more evocatively romantic "Collegiate Gothic" of Cope & Stewardson. Along with the landscape architecture firm of Frederick Law Olmsted, Cope & Stewardson established the prevailing character of Bryn Mawr's campus. The result, as architectural historian George E. Thomas said in a lecture on campus this Fall, is "one of the region's handsomest architectural ensembles."

The heraldic lions guarding the Pembroke arch entrance to the campus are a symbol of Miss Thomas' era. They were erected in 1895, the year after she was appointed president. The lions hold shields bearing owls, the token of Athena, the Greek goddess of wisdom and Bryn Mawr's "gracious inspiration" and "guiding star," according to the traditional College hymn.

Miss Thomas was Bryn Mawr's myth-maker, at once linking the College to an established and erudite European past and setting the stage for a proud future. The "Collegiate Gothic" style developed by the second generation of campus architects perfectly expressed Miss Thomas' aspirations in appropriate architectural metaphors.

As historian George Tatum comments in his book Penn's Great Town, "in turning to the late English Gothic, Cope & Stewardson had in mind Oxford and Cambridge from which the tradition of higher education in the United States was thought of as having been derived. Especially to those familiar with the great English universities, the appeal of ivy-covered cloisters, battlemented towers, and oriel windows was understandably great. . . ."

The development of Collegiate Gothic can be traced in Radnor (1887), Denbigh (1891), Pembroke East and West (1894), Rockefeller (1904) and Thomas Library (1904-07, except the West Wing, which financial problems delayed till 1940).

Cope & Stewardson's work at Bryn Mawr struck a responsive chord in the academic world. The firm was asked to do major designs for Princeton University, Washington University in St. Louis, and the University of Pennsylvania; Collegiate Gothic became a symbol of academia.

The young partnership had a swift rise and early tragedy: John Stewardson died in an ice-skating accident in 1896. Walter Cope died at the age of 42 in 1902, reportedly of apoplexy.

Pembroke Hall marks the apogee of the firm's work at Bryn Mawr. An undated letter from the then still dean M. Carey Thomas, written in late 1892 or 1893, spells out what made the Pembroke's architecturally important to the larger design of the campus:

A new hall in the double form proposed and placed on the proposed site will accommodate 120 students without taking away our space for exercise and cise and it will in the opinion of our architects add to the effect of the spaciousness of our grounds; instead of obstructing our view, it will in their opinion be the greatest architectural improvement presented, for it will set the front to the campus, and make the most of the available space, for with the erection of Denbigh in 1891, Vaux's conception was violated. Stress was thereafter placed on framing the perimeter of the College rather than upon a small central quadrangle.

The architectural innovation was articulated by 1892-93. Bryn Mawr's first president Dr. James Rhoads wrote in the President's Report in connection with the purchase of a key 9.55 acre plot of land on the western side of Yarmouth Street that "the present plan" was to erect "buildings on the outside of our boundaries, leaving open the attractive view toward the western hills and sunset, and the inside quadrangles and lawn free for golf, tennis, walks and other amusements of the students . . . ."

Property values had been rising steeply in Bryn Mawr, and the land in question was to be subdivided to build "small dwelling houses." Dr. Rhoads commented on the desirability of such development, for "at present we are surrounded on all sides by large houses and spacious grounds, making the neighborhood safe and pleasant in every respect for the students." Two friends of the College came to the rescue and offered to pay the interest on the purchase money for this important property.
Ownership of this land enabled the College to close Yarrow Street, formerly the western border of the campus, and thus Vaux's plan was made obsolete. Soon after Miss Thomas became president in 1894, she asked the great landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted to visit the campus, in June 1895, with his stepson and nephew John C. Olmsted, he did, and soon the Philadelphia Press reported that the "athletic fever" among students was such that plans for new athletic grounds were being made by F.L. Olmsted.

To abate the "athletic fever," Olmsted planned a circular bicycle track with four laps to the mile and, within that, a large space for tennis, basketball and other sports, so arranged that it could be "flooded in wintertime to provide a skating pond." According to Miss Thomas, Olmsted recommended "very urgently the construction of a carriage road connecting the College campus with this athletic field and with the lower part of the grounds." Expense precluded building the road and bicycle track, and the flooding project ran into trouble. The skating pond didn't hold water, and the project was scrapped.

Olmsted proposed ennobling the main entrance to the College by means of a College Square which marked the new termination of Yarrow Street at the mouth of the enlarged campus. This plan was never carried out and the definition of a principal gateway remains ambiguous, made even more so by architect Louis Kahn's contemporary Gothic Erckman Hall, built in the '60s.

Location of this building parallel to Pembroke Hall, underlining the new expanded perimeter of the campus, tipped the "main entrance" balance in favor of Pembroke arch.

Although Miss Thomas used to credit both Olmsted and Cope & Stewardson for the placement of the buildings on the campus grounds, the chronology seems to indicate that the principal concept had been settled on before Olmsted came to the campus. His plan ratified and refined the basic guiding idea rather than initiating it. "Irregularity" and "opening up vistas" were themes of the detailed Olmsted planting plan. It is an interesting irony that although both Vaux and Olmsted wiped out in their plans the formal double row of trees known in part as Senior Row, this row, residual evidence of the location of Lombard Street on the campus, has persisted.

Although hoop-rolling and other long-established traditions make it unlikely that Senior Row will ever be toppled in the interests of historical purity, landscape architect Stevenson Fletcher, recently appointed as consultant to the College, has plans to restore the campus to the English informal landscape Olmsted intended.

The activity generated by Miss Thomas' presidency, the expansion of the campus, and the growth of the College transformed the campus at the same time that the once fertile farm country of Bryn Mawr was being rapidly suburbanized.

The hills and brooks, meadows and rising knolls, the "fine outlook over a rich and cultivated landscape" for the "fair young scholars" which the Boston Transcript recorded in 1887 gradually gave way to macadamized roads and networks of gutter, sewer, gas and water connections. Miss Thomas carefully recorded each modernizing step. Her interest in the College's environment was proprietary and intense.

It seems fitting to leave her deciding with the students just where to locate the stone walk leading from Taylor Hall to the Owl Gate (the College's theoretical main entrance at Rockefeller Hall). "After much consultation together," wrote Helen Thomas Flexner in her 1908 Characterization of the campus, the students "petitioned Miss Thomas ... asking that it might run in a certain direction skirting, but no means disturbing, a group of favorite Japanese cherry trees whose shower of pink blossoms looks so particularly pleasing in the spring time against the grey stone."

Miss Thomas must have been rather irritated that the students would think her thick-skinned insofar as Bryn Mawr's beauty was concerned, for it is recorded that she was "greatly displeased with the students for supposing that such a sacrifice could ever have been contemplated."