

Beginning with Old Main

Written by: Cassie Monroe and Kate Arthur // May 1, 2011 // Comments Off

Old Main was torn down in 1958.

Shortly after the University was established in 1857, plans for construction began on property located in what was then Bloomington.

The site was chosen for its proximity to the crossing of the Illinois Central and the Chicago and Alton railroads.

The first building planned was Old Main. To fund the project, Illinois State administrators secured subscriptions from various people and sold real estate. McLean County residents pledged \$70,000 of the \$150,000 needed for construction.

Ground was broken in September of 1857 and the cornerstone laid that same year, signaling that the project was ready to move forward. The situation changed within months, however, with a financial panic similar to the Great Depression. Enthusiasm for the building died down. People who had made promises to pay could not or would not provide the funding. For 16 months, nothing was done on the building.

Charles Hovey, Illinois State's first president, decided to take action. He created a building committee with the goal of seeing Old Main completed. Members of the committee signed personal financial notes and made compromises with earlier subscribers to secure funding. Hovey purchased \$30,000 of "swamp land" in Illinois, helping to create a land boom in the area.

Construction began in 1859, with the building first used for commencement in 1860. The building was completed by 1861 at a cost of \$200,000.

Old Main was 160 feet long and 100 feet wide. It reached a height of 140 feet and included a clock tower that could be seen for miles. A three-story building, it contained a large lecture hall and several classrooms. The basement held laboratories for the science department on one side, and the janitor's living quarters on the other.

The first floor had classrooms for the University's model school and offices for the education department. The 270-seat lecture hall was in the middle of the second floor with 10 classrooms around it. The third floor housed a museum, the library, Normal Hall, and rooms for the Philadelphian and Wrightonian speech societies.

In 1946 the clock tower was declared unsafe and was removed. That summer the third floor was also removed. The building fell into such a state of deterioration that it was torn down in 1958.

Taken From: <http://stories.illinoisstate.edu/2011/05/magazine/illinois-state/features/sidebars/beginning-with-old-main/>