

The History and Renovation of Oberlin's Peters Hall

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The decade of the 1880s witnessed profound changes in the economic fortunes of Oberlin College, as its student body doubled and its endowment tripled. The architectural dimension of change was also spectacular. The campus was virtually rebuilt from scratch as the college moved beyond early wood and brick to enter its modern stone age. A faculty spokesman proudly announced, "Oberlin College has reached now a new era. The pioneer stage has passed. The true university life has begun. . . Massive and commodious edifices of freestone will look out across green-shaven lawns, and graceful towers will rise above the elms. With the buildings already erected, or at once to be erected, Oberlin will take her place unchallenged among university towns famous for scholastic charms."

Of the five big new sandstone buildings that rose from 1884 to 1887, each of them named for its prosperous donor, Peters Hall (1886) is the oldest survivor, though its survival has been a near thing. Built to replace Tappan Hall (1836) as the college's main classroom building, Peters, like most of the other new buildings, came from the drawing boards of the Akron architectural firm, Weary & Kramer, who called themselves "specialists in court house, jail and prison architecture." Though clearly informed by the mood of Richardsonian Romanesque then flourishing in American public architecture, Weary and Kramer described Peters' details as approximately Gothic, "somewhat domesticated and Americanized." Frank Weary told the college that "perfection in this world is acknowledged to be impossible, but in the case of your Recitation Hall we feel that we have approached nearer to it than is usual in the history of architectural development." Oberlin carried the elation a step further. Its dedication brochure for the building reported that "this spacious hall [is] pronounced by competent judges the most perfect college building in the United States."

In an era dependent on private philanthropy for major campus expansion, Oberlin's leaders — trustees, faculty and administrators — proved to be remarkably skillful in trading on their college's perfectionist moral reform heritage to coax money from sympathetic moguls. As the biographer of Oberlin's Lucy Stone has put it, "Many men who knew riches were there for the earning believed also that man and society were infinitely perfectable. The American myth, even when it is materialistic, is idealistic." Captain Alva Bradley and Richard Peters were two such men. Bradley was a boyhood friend of Oberlin president James Fairchild, their families having migrated from western New England to Brownhelm township in the Western Reserve back in 1817. While Fairchild devoted his life to higher education, Bradley had been lured by the adventure and opportunities of Great Lakes shipping and became a rich Cleveland steamship owner. In 1885 he responded to Fairchild's plea for \$20,000 to finance the beginning of Peters' construction. When Bradley died as the walls were rising, the college dispatched Professor William Frost to Manistee, Michigan, to plead its case to Richard Peters. Peters had attended Oberlin briefly in the 1850s before going on to make his fortune in Michigan timber. He promptly promised \$50,000 to finish the building on the understanding that it would be named for him. Professor Frost wired his triumph back to Oberlin: "With God all things are possible. The pine forests are His. Arthur Tappan still lives. Captain Bradley's work completed."

At Peters' dedication in January 1887, the main speaker predicted that "fire and cyclone and earthquake excepted, [Peters] will still be standing and doing good service when the twentieth century shall strike its midnight hour." For the next 75 years the building served as the physical, educational and social center of Oberlin's learning enterprise. Although its classrooms were largely vacated and recycled for administrative purposes in the early 1960s, Peters' spacious, sunny central atrium remains one of Oberlin's most arresting indoor spaces, and the building's rugged structure is fundamentally sound. Three times in its long career its future has been shadowed by thoughts of demolition. In 1911 consulting architect Cass Gilbert recommended levelling it to make room for new buildings of his own. In the early 1970s campus planners put Peters again at risk of disappearance, until architectural consultant Arthur Drexler told Oberlin's president, "There is little to recommend a college concerned with the humanities if it substitutes 'improvement' as a euphemism for the vandalization of its own history." Finally in 1993 President S. Frederick Starr orchestrated a campaign to prevent the building from being closed as a firetrap. The college has now retained the Cleveland firm of van Dijk, Pace, Westlake Partners to plan a comprehensive renovation of the building's working space and a restoration of its atrium. A campaign to raise funds for this project from nostalgic alumni and other friends is now under way.