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And Old Views

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And Old Views

Palmer Hall on the Alabama A&M University campus was demolished in March to be replaced by a new women's dormitory. At the time, Palmer was the oldest structure at A&M and the only one dating from the 1890s when the college moved to its present site north of town.

A&M began operation as a normal school in 1875 with a state appropriation of $1,000. During the 1880s the school added industrial training to its curriculum, and its enrollment grew to 300 students. Its president and founder was an ex-slave William H. Councill, who succeeded in having his school selected as the colored land grant college for Alabama after passage of the Second Morrill Act in 1890. To qualify as a land grant institution, the school had to provide agricultural education, so in the summer of 1891 the school moved outside of town and began construction of the present campus. The first two buildings, Palmer and Seay, were constructed that summer, and several structures already on the land were converted for college use. The old Green Bottom Inn was renovated for the president's home, while his office was in an old slave cabin.

Palmer Hall, named in honor of Solomon Palmer, state superintendent of education, was a three-story, frame structure erected by local contractor J.M. Hutchens at a cost of $6,500. It housed recitation rooms, the library and office on the first floor, the chapel on the second, and women's dorm rooms on the third.

In June 1896 Palmer Hall caught fire and was completely destroyed by the blaze; President Councill vowed it would be

Palmer Hall
rebuilt immediately. The new Palmer Hall, dedicated the following October, apparently was rebuilt on the same site and to much the same plan, except this time it was constructed of brick. It served the same functions on each floor as had the previous building.

Palmer Hall was a long, narrow structure slightly bent at the center point so that it formed a generous obtuse angle. The entrance was located at this exterior angle and was marked by a mansard tower. The small shed roof over the door was later replaced by a much larger, arched, brick portico which did not relate to the building. The foundation was of quarry-faced stone while the walls were brick, that on the west half being subtly varied by repeated rows of darker brick headers. Segmental brick arches topped the tall narrow windows; the third floor windows were paired and extended above the eaves giving a picturesque appearance to the hall. The steep hipped roof was covered with pressed metal sheeting. The hall was demolished because reports indicated that the foundations were not considered sound enough to justify remodeling.

Subtle variations in the two halves of the building suggest that they were erected at different times. This thesis is supported by the existence of large payments made to local craftsmen in 1899 for work on Palmer Hall, indicating that its size was doubled in 1898-99 by an addition built to the same design. Although the source of the plans remains a mystery, there are two tantalizing possibilities. First, there is more than a casual similarity between Palmer and the Huntsville city hall built in 1892 but designed three years earlier by architect H.D. Breeding. (See Winter, 1980 QUARTERLY) This suggests that Breeding could have been the architect or that his city hall design could have provided at least the inspiration. Which leads to the second possibility—S.J. Mayhew was a trustee of the college, a city alderman, and an engineer/architect. As an alderman, Mayhew would have been familiar with the plans for the city hall, and as a college trustee he was in a position to recommend building proposals. An intriguing, but inconclusive, entry in A&M's records for 1899 reveals that the school owed "S.J. Mayhew - Architect" the sum of $150.

It is commonly believed that the students and teachers built A&M's earliest structures; however, research indicates that the major buildings were erected by local contractors. The work carried out by the students included making repairs, building minor structures such as a bath house, and laying sewer pipe. When the industrial shop burned in January of 1899, the teachers agreed to construct a new one of brick, which they paid for while the students provided the labor. Many of the students were able to work their way through school in this manner, although they earned between 4¢ and 15¢ per hour. The industrial courses, such as carpentry, cabinet making, and plumbing, provided vocational training by having students learn on campus projects, which helped to maintain and improve the school's facilities at minimum expense.

Palmer Hall remained the principal campus building for many years and served a variety of functions. In the 1930s it continued on page 20