



THE BELCHER REFINERY BUILDING: A LOST ST. LOUIS LANDMARK

by Lynn Josse

When Landmarks Association began research on the industrial district north of Laclede's Landing in 2000, few people realized the significance of the twelve-story brick building at Ashley and Lewis Streets (just across the street from the Ashley Street power plant). Its most notable features when viewed from the south were a bright blue paint job and the "Fresh" sign written across the building to signify a long-term past owner. These superficial changes, along with a series of early 20th-century additions, effectively diverted attention away from the fact that this was at one time renowned as the tallest building in St. Louis, constructed in 1881 for what was once the nation's largest sugar refinery.

As Landmarks' National Register district nomination took shape in 2001, the Belcher Refinery building emerged as a star property in a significant industrial district. Work on the draft nomination was nearly completed when live news reports from the site broadcast images of the refinery in flames, the victim of a fire set by vagrants who

could not be kept out of the poorly secured building. Although the twelve-story refining section was essentially untouched by the fire, the five-story filtering house was damaged beyond repair. Developers who wanted to save and reuse the remaining sections of the building were rebuffed by the City, which completed demolition in the fall of 2001.

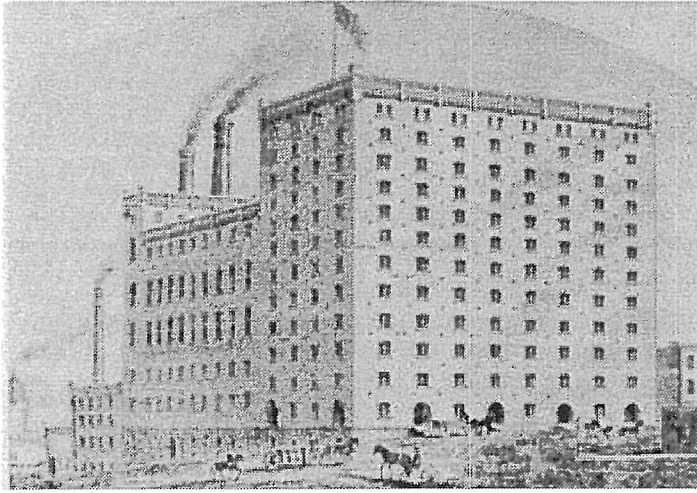
Belcher Sugar Refining Company

Founded in 1840 and reorganized in 1855, the Belcher Sugar Refining Company was said to be the nation's largest sugar refinery. Its first presence in the North Riverfront area came in 1844 after a serious flood destroyed its facilities farther south. The new location was on relatively high ground but still very close to the river. It was also convenient to downtown and a large north side workforce, and was well-positioned to take advantage of new rail lines as they grew along the riverfront.

By about 1871, over 300 employees produced products with an annual value of over four million dollars. A decade later, employment had doubled. A company secretary recalled that "the levee from Biddle to Walnut



Photograph of the Belcher Refinery from the southeast From the North Broadway Industrial Area Survey - Phase 1 1989



Drawing of the Belcher Refinery, Date and artist unknown.

streets, a distance of one mile, was literally covered with hogsheads and barrels of sugar from our refinery, while barge loads of crude sugar from New Orleans, Cuba and the Manilla Islands crowded the wharves, to the exclusion of other freight.” In addition to refinery buildings, the eight-block complex included a cooperage, coal sheds, a bone black building, storage, and packing facilities.

Although it was one of the city’s largest employers, the refinery was perhaps not as well-known as one of its byproducts: the famous “Belcher water,” offered to the public at no cost. This service was originally the result of a mistake: In Belcher’s quest to find a purer substitute for the muddy Mississippi water the company was forced to use in the refining process, a 2,200 foot well was drilled between 1849 and 1854. When the mineral content of the water turned out to be unsuitable for refining, Belcher opened the well to the public. In an 1871 account, an observer noted that the fountain was surrounded by a lively crowd at all hours, even though the water “tastes like a mixture of salt and sulphur.” Prized for its medicinal qualities, the water was apparently served at breakfast in hotels throughout the city.

The Wonder of St. Louis

The company continued to expand through the early 1880s. Its final building, begun in 1881 and completed in 1883, was later called “the first tall building the City ever knew.” At 132 feet, the refining portion of the building was supported by 24 oak posts with an average thickness of 22 inches. Foundation walls were 44 inches thick. The unusual height of the facility was dictated by the technology, which relied on gravity and water pressure. The lower filtering house section, at 110 feet tall, used cast iron columns and wrought iron beams. (This is the section that was destroyed in the fire of 2001.) The final section was a boiler house on the south end of the complex.

Within just a few years of completion, the building was sold with the rest of the Belcher property to the American Sugar Refining Company. With a virtual monopoly on the nation’s sugar industry, the company shut down the new facility and the rest of the Belcher plant. The loss of employment in the sugar and related industries was lamented for more than a decade. In the meantime, the Belcher buildings were deserted and eventually sold off. Most had been replaced by the early 20th century, as new uses (particularly power generation and storage) thrived in the district. The tall refinery, however, found new life with a series of cold storage companies – one of which constructed a large addition over the top of the boiler house.

One hundred and twenty years after it was begun, the tall refinery was again vacant. Reuse for most purposes was difficult to contemplate because of environmental issues and the intimidating blind wall facing south to the downtown skyline. Landmarks Association pursued National Register designation, funded by the City of St. Louis’ Community Development Block Grant funds, to facilitate rehabilitation.

The situation changed rapidly, however, when a summer fire caught the slow-burning cork insulation in the original filtering house and ignited a major blaze. Holes were knocked in the walls of the filtering house and addition to extinguish the smoldering materials, but the twelve-story refinery section, structurally separate from the other portions, was virtually untouched. Despite the efforts of developers with an independent engineering report and the resources to buy the building, the City quickly condemned the entire building and eventually completed demolition.

The refinery was more than the only remnant of the Belcher sugar empire and one of St. Louis’ most significant early tall buildings – it was also an anchor in what can still be a thriving mixed-use district. With National Register listing still projected for early 2003, the area has seen an increase in interest by both developers and speculators. Trigen remains a key player in the area with its ongoing commitment to the Ashley Street Power Plant; new uses are indicated by plans to convert the former Laclede Power Plant into a trailhead facility for the Riverfront Trail. One of the most potentially interesting candidates for adaptive use remains the former Belcher Bath House on Ashley Street. Built over the old artesian well, the 1894 bath house (designed by Stewart, McClure & Mullgardt) was reported to still emit a sulphurous odor in a 1980s survey of the district. If the famous well is found intact within, it could be that one last remnant of the Belcher Sugar Company still exists.

PHIL COTTON NOW FAIA

The American Institute of Architects has elevated St. Louis architect and longtime preservationist W. Philip Cotton Jr. to its prestigious College of Fellows, an honor awarded to members who have made contributions of national significance to the profession. Phil was cited in particular for his contributions to historic preservation going back to the 1960s, including his 1966 National Historic Landmark nomination for the Wainwright Building, his efforts to save the Old Post Office and the Lafayette Square historic district. In 1970, he edited *One Hundred Historic Buildings in St. Louis County*, the first publication by the county's Historic Buildings Commission. More recently, Phil was responsible for the startling restoration of the Mark Twain Boyhood Home in Hannibal, which made thousands of postcards and souvenir ashtrays obsolete. Since 1989 he has supervised restoration of the unrivaled collection of historic pavilions in Tower Grove Park, culminating in the painstaking renovation of the 1885 Piper Plant House, which has become the park's elegant library and offices.

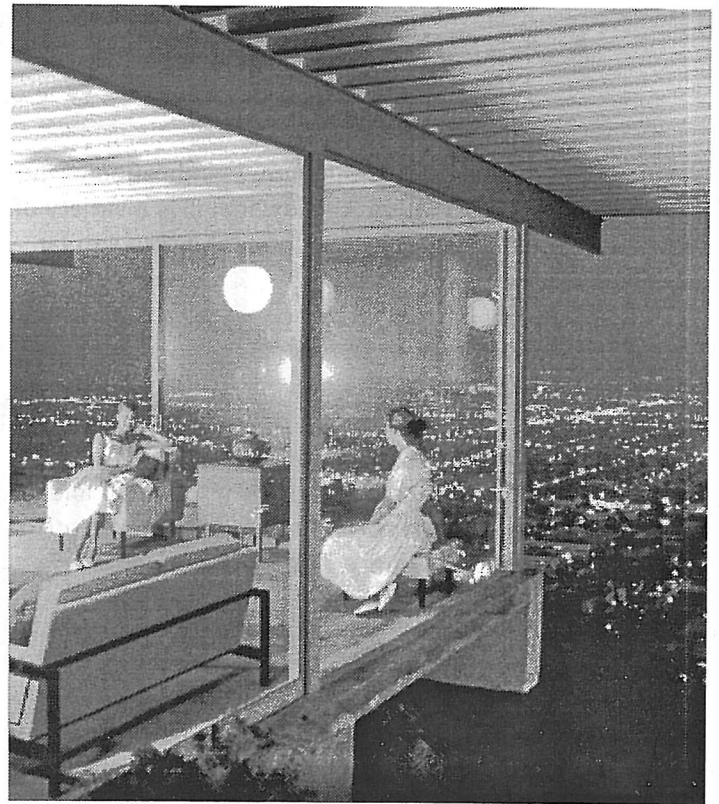


Image: Julius Shulman, 1960, *Case Study House #22*
Los Angeles, 1959, architect: Pierre Koenig

JULIUS SHULMAN AT SHELDON GALLERIES

The Sheldon Art Galleries presents *Julius Shulman: California Modernism - Photographs of Domestic Architecture 1923 - 1960*, through August 24, 2002 in the Bernoudy Gallery of Architecture. Note that the Sheldon has new gallery hours beginning June 1: Tuesdays, 9 a.m. - 8 p.m., Wednesdays, 9 a.m. - 5 p.m., Saturdays, 10 a.m. - 2 p.m. and one hour prior to each Sheldon concert and during intermission.

A master at capturing the light and space of California's innovative, modernist architecture constructed from the 1920s to the 1960s, Julius Shulman has captured the excitement of homes designed by eminent architectural pioneers like Pierre Koenig, Richard Neutra, Charles and Ray Eames, and Frank Lloyd Wright. His carefully crafted images in both black-and-white and color are true collaborations between the photographer and the architecture. Shulman understood implicitly the way in which these spaces should be rendered, and the resulting images remain monuments in architectural photography.

Born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1910, Shulman became interested in photography at an early age, but began his career as an architectural photographer after encouragement from architect Richard Neutra, whose Kun

house he had photographed in the mid-1930s. Shulman's career spans over six decades and his images are among the best known of the genre.

This exhibition focuses on domestic architecture created in California by Modernist architects who brought inside and outside together in their open designs of glass and light. While the images are dynamic celebrations of architectural form, the spaces Shulman photographed retain their human quality through his attention to domestic detail. Figures often people the environments, and the large welcoming spaces are enhanced through sensitive compositions and camera placement.

The exhibition features 29 photographs, some of them large-scale, and includes a selection from the important Case Study House Program commissioned by *Arts and Architecture* magazine in the late 1950s and early 60s. This exhibition is organized by The Sheldon Art Galleries, St. Louis.

The Sheldon Art Galleries is a nonprofit gallery, which hosts five spaces permanently devoted to photography, architectural history, the history of jazz, and children's art. The Sheldon actively supports the work of St. Louis artists in all mediums and features a dedicated gallery with museum-quality exhibits by St. Louis artists, past and present.

A USEFUL PUBLICATION: *HISTORIC ILLINOIS*

Historic Illinois, the 16-page bimonthly publication of the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency, includes a variety of articles on preservation topics that often relate to similar interests in Missouri.

To read more about it, go to the web at <http://www.state.il.us/HPA/Departments/publications.htm>

You can subscribe for \$10 a year or \$17 for two years. This also includes a full-color annual wall calendar and at least one special report, similar to the federal preservation briefs. Write: Historic Illinois, Illinois Historic Preservation Agency, 1 Old State Capitol Plaza, Springfield, IL 63701-1507, or phone 217-524-6045, or e-mail shanta_thoele@ihpa.state.il.us

You may be wondering what happened to Missouri's comparable publication, *Preservation Issues*, which hasn't been published in some years. Given Missouri's current budgetary concerns, it's not likely that another issue will be mailed out anytime soon. Now that the Historic Preservation Office is part of the newly created Outreach and Assistance Center of the Department of Natural Resources, however, considerable effort is being put into trying to get more information up on the Missouri Preservation Office website (which is pretty good already): <http://www.dnr.state.mo.us/shpo/index.html>.

LANDMARKS ASSOCIATION ADDS TO RECORD OF OUTSTANDING RESEARCH

In the past year, the staff of Landmarks Association of St. Louis has seen the following properties listed on the National Register of Historic Places:

- Powell Symphony Hall
- former Mississippi Valley Trust Building, 4th & Pine
- Tower Grove Heights District
- A district in Carondelet centering around St. Boniface
- The Eastman-Kodak Building
- Kulage House
- West Pine/Laclede District in the Central West End

In addition, the following nominations have been written and are awaiting approval at state or national level:

- Missouri Pacific Headquarters Building
- former City Club, later Hotel Alverne
- Paul Brown Building
- Wright/Arcade Building

- Taylor/Olive Building
- North riverfront district, including Ashley Street Power Plant
- Century/Syndicate Trust Building

This list represents a remarkable achievement in terms of historical scholarship, not to mention steering the perilous shoals of politics and bureaucracy.

SWEKOSKY COLLECTION GETS WEBSITE EXHIBIT

The remarkable photo collection assembled by William G. Swekosky can now be sampled on a website created by the Missouri Historical Society. To access it, go to the Society's Collections page <http://www.mohistory.org/Collections.html#>, and click on the link under the photo for "The Swekosky Collection." Dr. Swekosky was a dentist who made a hobby of studying the history of buildings in St. Louis, at a time – 1930 to 1964 – when many were being demolished. He became a standard source for newspaper reporters and even sent out his own press releases about historic buildings slated to come down. The collection includes notes on the histories of individual properties as well as snapshots the doctor took himself and many fine older photographs of St. Louis scenes that he acquired from other sources. After Swekosky's death the collection was cared for by Sister Dionysia at the Notre Dame Convent on Ripa in Lemay, but last year the School Sisters of Notre Dame gave the whole collection to the Missouri Historical Society. The collection is open to researchers at the Photographs and Prints Department, 225 South Skinker Blvd., from 2 to 5, Tuesday through Friday and by appointment: phone 314-746-4511.

THE NINETEENTH CENTURY ARCHITECTURAL HERITAGE OF ST. LOUIS UNIVERSITY (cont.)

by David J. Simmons

THE ITALIANATE CAMPUS

A tower rising 80 feet above the roofline crowned this magnificent church. Its design was a revision of the smaller design shown by J. C. Wild in 1841. That one had an octagonal configuration on a stepped base, with Corinthian columns supporting an entablature and dome topped by a cast iron lantern with cross. The revised tower accommodated bells, an observation deck, and a four-faced clock. Its square belfry on a square base featured large louvered openings flanked by pairs of pilasters. Located at the top of the belfry was the observation deck with balustrade and the octagonal clock section

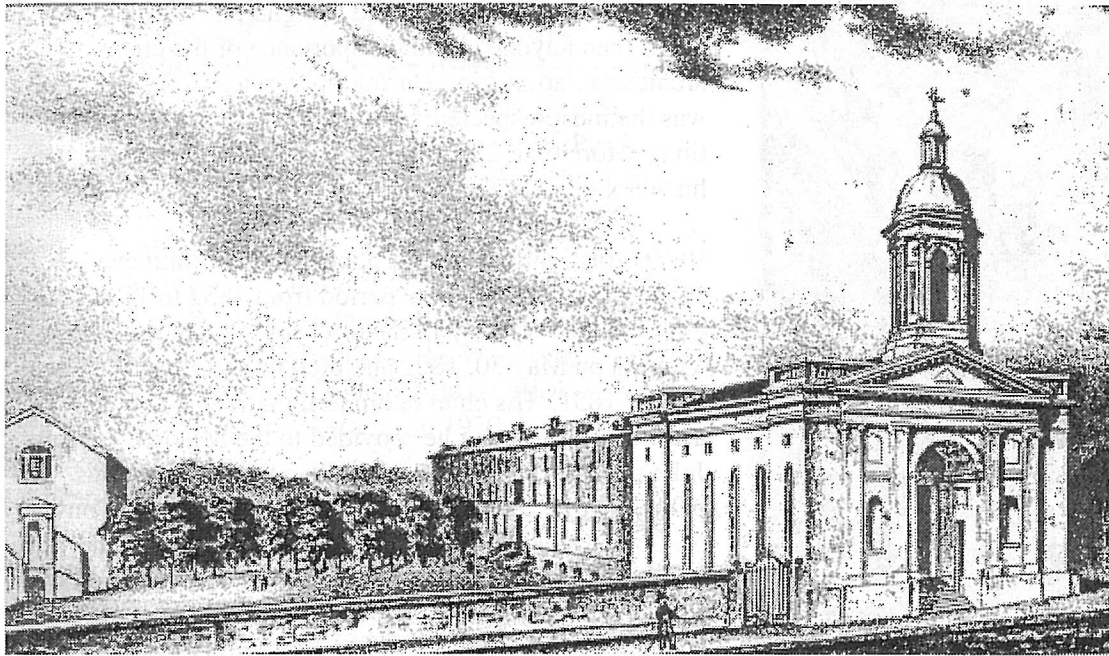


Image of the revised design presented by J. C. Wild in 1841.

crowned by a somewhat shallower dome but a taller cast iron lantern, which was thought to imitate the Choragic monument of Lysicrates in Athens.

Six bays with three tiers of windows adorned the south wall of the church, the center four bays being slightly recessed. Basement windows were partially below grade in light wells. The second tier of windows consisted of four sections, round at the top, and two stories high. An upper tier employed rectangular shaped windows. No photographs or diagrams of the north wall have been discovered.



Image from the title page of the Catalogue of Officers and Students, 1854 - 55

The church auditorium plan adopted the form of a modified Roman basilica with Greek ornamentation. Seating fifteen hundred people, it measured 64 feet by 96 feet. Its semicircular apse was composed of six Corinthian columns supporting a half dome enriched with rosettes in octagonal coffers. A five-foot high circular platform supported the main altar, behind which were three large paintings depicting the crucifixion of Christ and two doors providing access to the rear of the building. A bowed communion rail was at the front of the apse. To the right and to the left of the apse were wing areas originally designated as chapels containing side altars. Later they were used for wardrobe and sacristy rooms.

In the nave of the church, a series of Corinthian columns on tall pedestals rose 24 feet to support a broad entablature. Balconies marked by ornamental fronts were suspended from the columns, while a second balcony was inserted between the entablature and the ceiling vault. The pilasters supporting this space were fronted by carved caryatid-like religious figures, recalling for some observers the Incantada of Thessalonica. The church designated the side areas of this second balcony as private chapels for use by the Jesuit community. Later these areas were enclosed, although the rear part of the second balcony remained open. Over the main entrance to this impressive room was placed a loft for the choir and organ. The barrel vaulted ceiling was decorated with a coffering pattern of octagons and crosses and rose 40 feet above the floor.

The finished basement consisted of eight rooms, with the largest space being 64 feet square. St. Francis Xavier's



Etching of the Interior of the Church of St. Francis Xavier, on the Italianate Campus of St. Louis University, St. Louis, MO,

boys free parish school utilized these facilities between 1843 and 1846.

Ground was broken for the new church on March 23, 1840. Thirteen months later the cornerstone was laid on April 12, 1841. Father Verheyden supervised construction until 1844. In the beginning he estimated the cost to be \$40,000. Both costs and construction time rose far beyond original expectations. Although the congregation celebrated their first mass in the new edifice on Easter Sunday 1843, finishing touches were not complete until 1849. Consecration followed on February 2, 1849.

By the start of 1848, the sum of \$72,285 had been spent on the new edifice. Much of this money was borrowed from the Maryland Jesuit Province, Jesuit friends in Belgium, and others. Parish communicants gave \$35,451, reducing the debt to \$49,891.

On May 19, 1851, the church was transferred from the Jesuit Vice Province of Missouri to St. Louis University. The University agreed to pay the remaining debt of \$38,700.

SIDEBAR: BARNETT & MATTHEWS

George I. Barnett practiced architecture in St. Louis from 1839 to 1889, a period of fifty years. As a devotee of Roman and Italian Renaissance architecture, he helped to create the American Classic style, whose influence under various names – Greek Revival, Italianate, Neoclassical – dominated the St. Louis architectural scene until the First World War. His office trained generations of architects

and clients. An accomplished designer, he understood better than anyone else the importance of the client-architect relationship. During his service to St. Louis, he was the most respected, honored, praised architect of his time. More than 250 projects have been confirmed to be his work.

By contrast, little is known about Stewart Matthews' career, which covered the period from 1832 to 1848. His gravestone at Calvary Cemetery shows that he was born in Virginia on May 30, 1802 and died in St. Louis on December 27, 1851. His chief claim to fame seems to be the architectural training he provided to the Mitchell brothers, John and Robert. Between 1832 and 1834 he and his partner, a Mr. Darst, contracted the carpentry work on the St. Louis Cathedral. Darst and Matthews erected the west wing of the main campus building at St. Louis University in 1833. Among his known works are the wings of Mullanphy Hospital 1837 and 1839, Trinity Catholic Church and Seminary in the Souldard area, 1838 (not completed), and the engine house at the Waterworks, 1839 with Alexander Lyle. During the early 1840s, Matthews and Lyle erected a large number of city residences. Matthews' last known association was with the construction of the City Hospital, 1845.

LIBRARY-HALL BUILDING

After working with Jesuits on the completion of St. Francis Xavier Church and St. Stanislaus Seminary in 1848-1849, Robert S. Mitchell was selected in 1853 to design and construct the new library-hall. He tried to convince the Jesuits to replan the downtown location with a series of modern buildings facing Washington Avenue. His plan necessitated demolition of some of the existing vernacular buildings, isolation of St. Francis Xavier Church, a permanent commitment to the current location, and the expenditure of a large sum of money. The Jesuits rejected Mitchell's campus plan.

Mitchell's plan for the new library-hall building had a front of 60 feet and extended west 130 feet. It occupied the site of the former school stables. Its cornice line cleared 72 feet. Designed in the Italianate style, this brick structure trimmed with white limestone had three stories, an unfinished cellar, and two towers fronting on Ninth Street. Six outside entrances on the first floor provided ample building access, but there was no entrance on Washington Avenue.

Both the front and south wall of this building displayed a rich architectural palette. Its three section front on the first floor contained a central main entrance framed by pilasters. Triple windows have been placed above the

entrance on the second and third floors. Three tiers of windows, each level a different design, and three cornices enriched the building's exterior facing the street areas. Windows on the first floor had curved tops and cross mullions with no architrave. Second floor windows exhibited rectangular shapes, architraves, and horizontal pediments. Round top, rich architrave, and aedicule arrangement defined the windows of the third floor. Cornices were placed between each story and at the roof line of the building.

Nine bays adorned the south wall. Decorative pilasters on the first floor framed windows two through eight. The north wall also contained nine bays with three entrances on the first floor. Assorted windows and two first-floor entrances graced the rear wall. Each tower had a rotating domed turret, with windows on all four sides of its walls.

Interior arrangement reflected the building's cultural and educational uses. Each story was 16 feet high except the top floor, which rose 32 feet. On the ground floor, a sacristy (12 feet square) and a vestibule hall (12 feet by 46 feet) with two outside entrances and a staircase occupied the front area. Behind these spaces came a chapel (54 feet by 58 feet) that could seat 300 students. An altar was placed in the center of the east partition wall. An outside entrance on the north wall enhanced the chapel's access. Six cast-iron columns supported its ceiling.

In the rear of the ground floor was the T-shaped study hall, 54 feet by 58 feet. It contained numerous study desks, each accommodating six students. Six cast-iron columns also supported the ceiling of this room. An elevated platform in the room supported the desk of the prefect of studies, and a blackboard hung on the wall. A porter's lodge in the southwest corner and a staircase room in the northwest corner, each 12 feet square, completed the arrangement.

The seven rooms on the second floor were the vestibule with front staircase, bookbindery, library, museum, two classrooms, and the rear staircase room. Of these, the library (55 feet square) was the most important. It had built-in bookcases on all four walls, six free-standing book alcoves, and a long reading table placed in the center. Between the alcoves could be found Wilhelm Blau's celestial and terrestrial globes (now at the St. Stanislaus Museum), plus the famous French six-inch telescope.

At the top of the building was the great hall (105 feet by 55 feet), scene of band concerts, live theatre, and rhetorical utterances both religious and secular. No space on campus enjoyed more popularity than this one. Stretching across the east wall was the balcony (55 feet by 15 feet)

supported by iron columns and seating 200 people. A stage across the west wall of the room was 7 feet above the floor, 30 feet wide, and 20 feet deep, with a proscenium arch 20 feet high. A dressing room flanked the south end of the stage, and at the north end was the rear staircase room. A bandstand (15 feet wide and 12 feet deep with a height of 30 inches) occupied the space in front of the stage.

Daylight flooded the hall from seven windows on both the north and south walls. Gas chandeliers illuminated the room at night. Air circulated in the hall through a ventilator installed in the center of the ceiling. The main floor seated 800 people comfortably. Pilasters and a bracketed cornice decorated the walls.

Leon Pomerade painted the curtain backdrop for the stage, choosing to illustrate a mountain village bordering a lake. His frescoed ceiling depicted allegories of the Golden Age, the Age of Paganism, and the Birth of Christendom. So real was his Apollo, seen reining in the four chargers pulling his chariot of fire across the sky, that some people thought they saw the chariot and horses move. Frescoed on the eastern part of the ceiling was the enthroned Christ Child summoning legions of angels in martial dress descending from Heaven.

The tower spaces were reserved for photography, astronomy, and meteorology.

Under the careful guidance of Robert S. Mitchell, construction of the buildings continued from July 1853 to March 1856. Cost of the project reached \$42,925 plus Mitchell's fee of \$1,717 or four percent of the construction costs. Two years later the school spent an additional \$4,000 to finish the hall.

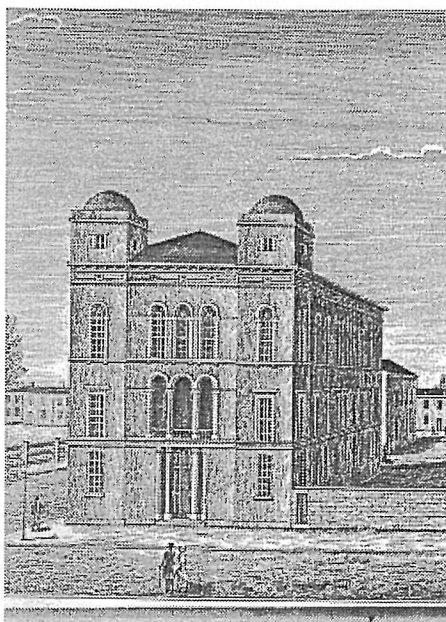
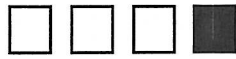


Image from the title page of the Catalogue of Officers and Students, 1854 - 55



Events Calendar



Exhibit: "Julius Shulman: California Modernism: Photographs of Domestic Architecture 1923-1960"

Through August 24, 2002

Bernoudy Gallery of Architecture, Sheldon Galleries

See article in this issue. Note that the Sheldon has new gallery hours: Tuesdays, 9 a.m. to 8 p.m., Wednesdays, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., Saturdays, 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. and one hour prior to each Sheldon concert and during intermission.

Service: Theodore Spiering: Remembering Missouri's Maestro

Sunday, July 21, 9:30 a.m.

Eliot Unitarian Chapel, 216 East Argonne, Kirkwood

Chapter member Carol Porter will lead a service celebrating the life and work of St. Louis native Theodore Bernays Spiering (1871-1925), who was an internationally known concert violinist and symphony conductor and the brother of Louis Clemens Spiering, the architect of the Sheldon Concert Hall. Theodore served for two years as concertmaster of the New York Philharmonic, recruited for the position by conductor Gustav Mahler. A man of extraordinary gifts matched only by his humility, Spiering had a varied career that included a link with Eliot Chapel. Selections from Schubert and Tartini will be played by Judy Lindquist, Martin Hasse and Sue Goldford. Eliot summer services are informal.

News Letter

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Spring issue	15 February
Summer issue	15 May
Fall issue	15 August
Winter issue	15 November

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