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# Old South Hall

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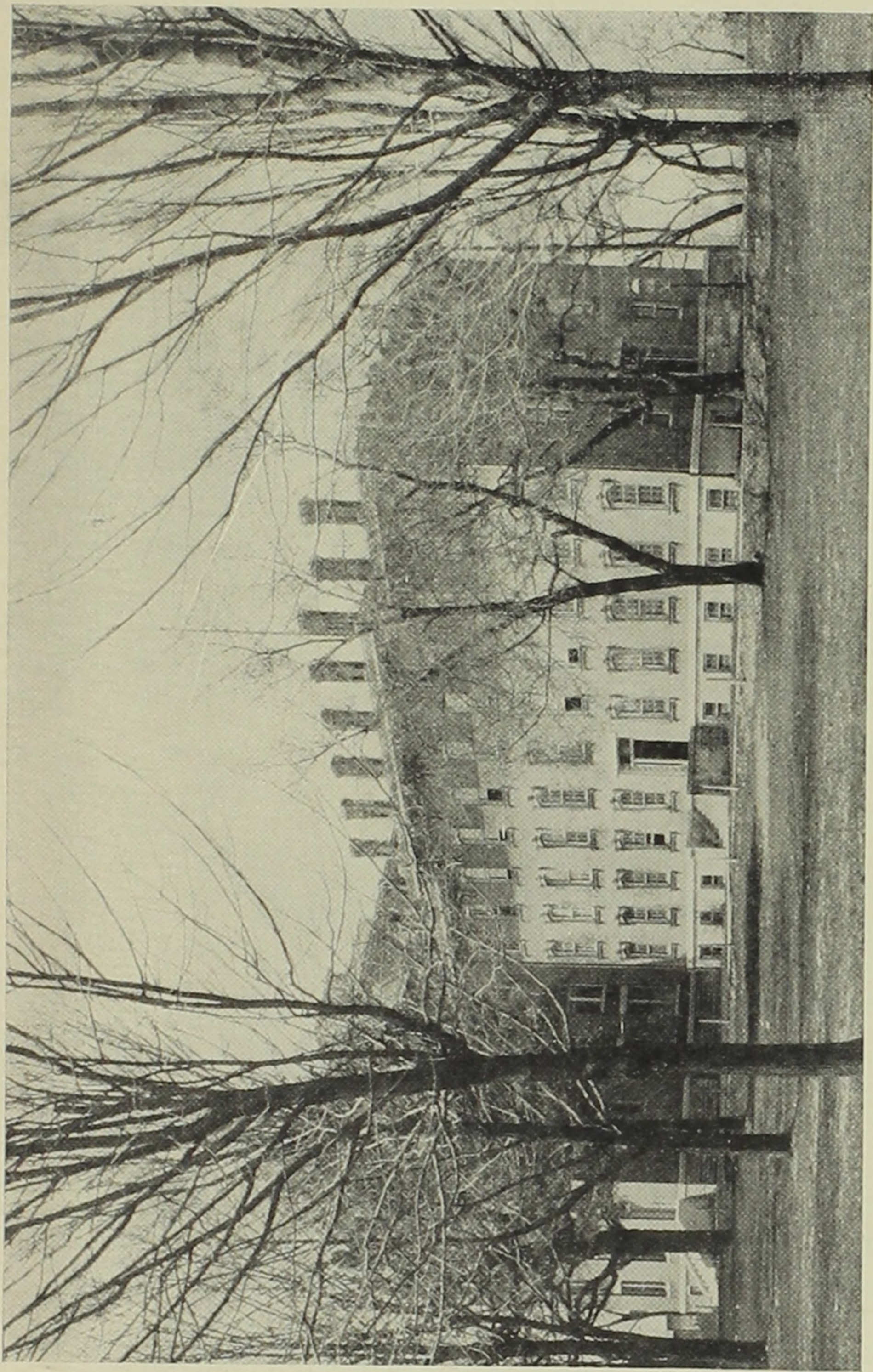
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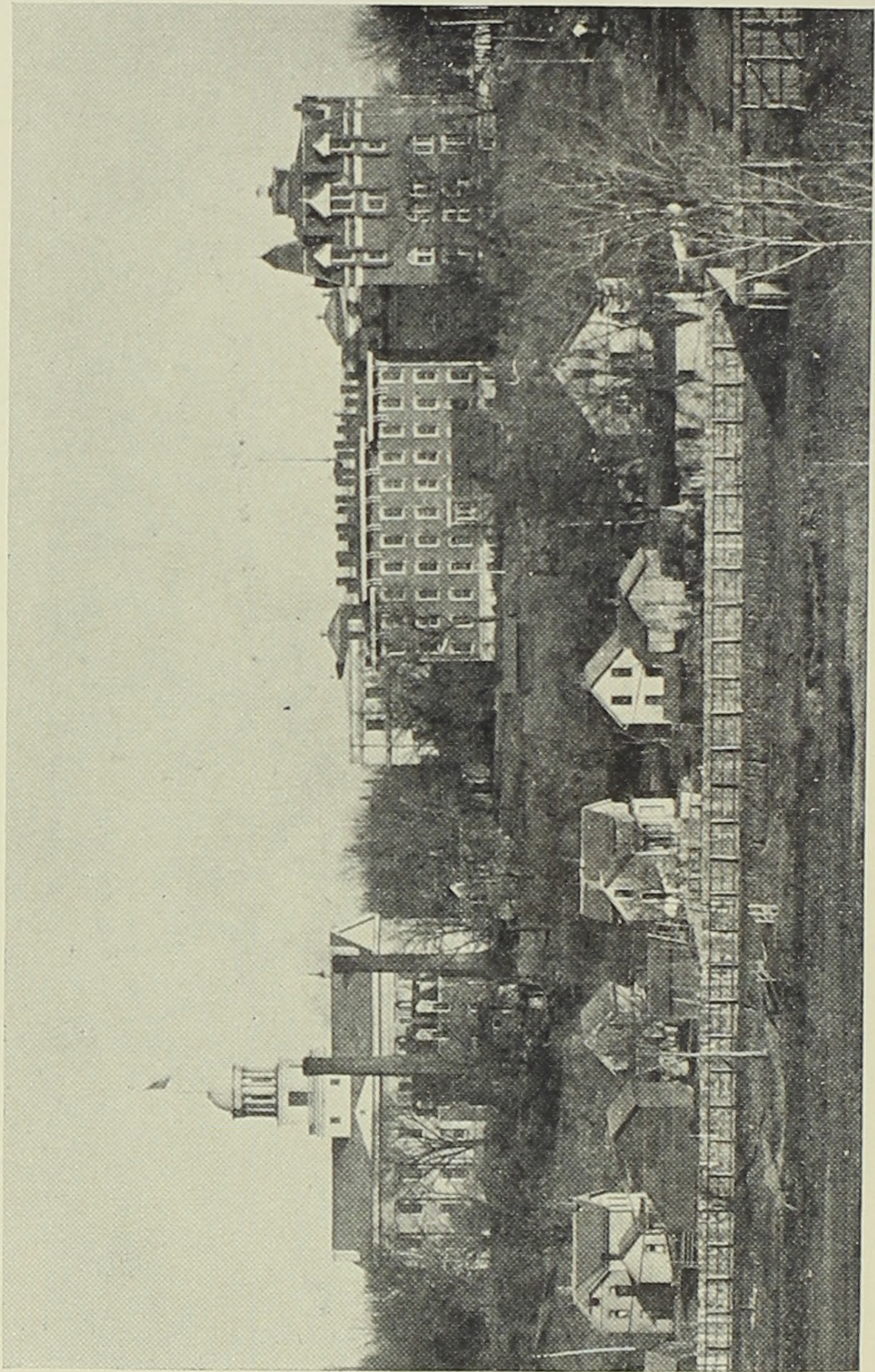
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OLD SOUTH HALL



WEST VIEW OF UNIVERSITY CAMPUS

# THE PALIMPSEST

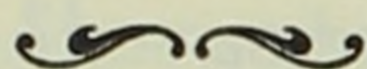
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## Old South Hall

Very early on Sunday morning, March 10, 1901, the night clerk of the Kirkwood House (later the Burkley) happened to look north across Washington Street. There stood the uncompleted Hall of Liberal Arts, now Schaeffer Hall, and west of it in a row stood the Medical Building, Old South Hall, the Old Capitol, and beyond Old Capitol the remodeled chapel building known as North Hall and the Dental Building (now the Old Dental Building). The Iowa City streets were wet, and sleet covered the walks, paving, trees, and buildings. The view was familiar but the sleepy clerk saw that something was wrong; a glare came from the southeast corner of the basement of the Medical Building. Fire!

By the time the alarm had been turned in and the volunteer fire department had arrived, the fire was out of control, sweeping quickly up the stairway and elevator shaft of the four-story Medical Building. The clanging of the fire bell and the

piercing whine of the whistle at the waterworks roused the sleeping city. It was evident from the first that the Medical Building was doomed and the volunteer firemen turned their attention to Old South Hall, only a few feet north of the Medical Building. Could it be saved?

The flames reached out across the space and licked hungrily at the frame cornice of the three-storied, many-chimneyed South Hall. Soon the top part of the second building was burning and the pressure was so low that water did not reach the flames. The destruction of this building was slower, since the fire worked its way down instead of roaring upward as it had done in the Medical Building, but in two hours Old South Hall was also in ruins.

In this case, however, it was possible to save much of the furniture, books, and equipment. Firemen, faculty members, students, and townspeople carried out everything movable. The Zeta-gathians and members of Irving Institute saved most of the belongings of the four literary societies from the rooms on the third floor, except one carpet. The second floor was occupied chiefly by offices and classrooms of the Liberal Arts College and the first floor and basement housed the engineering department. Most of the furniture, equipment, and books, including the engineering library

of some 750 volumes, were saved. Fortunately the fire did not spread to the historic Old Capitol nor to the new building of Bedford stone just being completed — the present Schaeffer Hall — which sustained only minor injury.

Irving H. Hart, now on the staff of Iowa State Teachers College at Cedar Falls, a student at the University at the time of the fire, described the incident as follows:

“My roommate and I were awakened sometime after midnight on the night of the fire by the glare of the flames. When we reached the campus, the Medical Building, which then stood south of South Hall at the head of South Capitol Street, was a roaring caldron of flames. South Hall was a three-story brick-veneer building with a wooden cornice, and when we reached the scene of the fire, South Hall was not yet in flames. Soon after, however, the cornice of the south end of South Hall burst into flames. . . .

“Dr. W. C. Wilcox, Head of the Department of History at that time, and later Dean of the College of Liberal Arts, had his office on the third [second] floor of South Hall. I was one of four or five students who endeavored to remove as many of Dr. Wilcox's books and possessions as possible from his office before the building was abandoned to the flames. We had just come down

from what we considered our last possible trip from the third [second] floor where the smoke was absolutely stifling when we met Dr. Wilcox at the north entrance of the building. . . . When we told him that we had been able to save a good many of his books, he still insisted that he must himself go up to his office in order to secure his class records, lecture notes, and other personal belongings from his desk. . . . We students dissuaded Dr. Wilcox from attempting to go up to his office and two of us volunteered to make the trip again and get what we could. . . . When we reached the office we realized that we had no keys, but we broke the roll-top, ripped the pigeon holes out of the desk and released the mechanism which automatically locked the desk drawers, and each of us took two of the desk drawers in his arms and started back for the lower regions."

Byron J. Lambert, another engineer who was present at the fire, recalled that on the night of March ninth he had taken the part of the father in "Little Women", a play given by the Zetagathians and Hesperians. For one scene he had borrowed some plated silverware from his landlady. All he ever found of it was one table knife, entirely unsilvered. He did, however, help save the cherished 100,000-pound Riehle testing machine, which was in the basement of Old South Hall, by

playing a stream of water over it. The machine is still in use.

So Old South Hall passed into the realm of history. For forty years it had served the University. What had happened in those forty years? What had they meant to the University and the State of Iowa? Let us go back to the beginning of the University for an answer.

Although the University had been officially established in 1847 and opened its doors in the spring of 1855, it had no home to call its own until the State capital was moved to Des Moines in the autumn of 1857 and the stone Capitol was transferred to the University. For the preceding two years classes had met in a small rented building, the Mechanics' Academy, two blocks east of Capitol Square.

Soon after the University opened, the faculty pointed out to the Board of Trustees that more space was needed for classrooms. Two departments were carrying on their recitations in a single room and other rooms were separated only by board partitions, resulting in interruptions and confusion. Furthermore, the faculty pointed out, housing conditions in Iowa City made living costs too high for students of limited means. Rates for board and room in private houses were prohibitive and, as a result, so many of the students were



from the vicinity of Iowa City that the University had been derisively described as the "Johnson County High School".

Some State officials had recognized the need of the University for more room. In his report submitted to the General Assembly on December 1, 1856, James D. Eads, Superintendent of Public Instruction, had suggested an appropriation for a new building. In his biennial message to the General Assembly delivered two days later, Governor James W. Grimes had stressed that proper organization of the University demanded suitable accommodations for students. These suggestions apparently produced no results at the time, for a year later the faculty submitted a second petition, asking for a boarding hall with study rooms and dormitories, large enough to house one hundred students. They estimated the cost at between \$20,000 and \$25,000.

South Hall became more than a fond hope when, on February 16, 1858, Senator Samuel J. Kirkwood of Coralville introduced an act appropriating \$27,000 for the University, \$20,000 of which was to be used for the construction of a new building. The act was amended, reducing the building appropriation to \$10,000, but finally, on March 11, 1858, the first campus building constructed specifically for University use was au-

thorized. The Board of Trustees met immediately and appointed a building committee of five members — E. C. Lyon, Hugh D. Downey, Morgan Reno, William Burris, and Edgar Wright. Details of construction were left entirely to the discretion of this committee. Thomas Banbury was employed as superintendent of construction, with his compensation fixed at \$4.00 a day.

The ground-breaking ceremony occurred on Monday morning, June 7, 1858, at 7:00 A. M., attracting a large crowd to the University campus in spite of the early hour. The local newspaper, the *Iowa Weekly Republican*, reported: "The designs are very beautiful, and if built in accordance with those, the building when finished will not only be an ornament to University Square, but will subserve the higher good of the State University." The editor added this comment: "To build it out of the fund it will require the utmost economy and good management."

By August, with construction at full speed, it became apparent that the funds were insufficient to allow completion of South Hall and the Trustees voted to borrow \$5,000 from the University fund, the loan to be paid from future appropriations. This action later became the basis of much criticism. February of 1859 saw South Hall still far from completion. Accounts showed that \$16,-

000 had been expended already and that an estimated \$10,000 would be required to finish the structure. Again the Board of Trustees appealed to the General Assembly for a second appropriation. After much bickering and reprimanding for mismanagement of funds, the legislators solved the problem by transferring the remaining saline lands to the University, with the provision that no more than \$10,000 of the proceeds of the sale of these lands were to be used in completing South Hall.

The scarcity of funds necessitated the modification of plans several times, but when the construction was finally completed in 1861, South Hall was a red brick building measuring 108 feet north and south by 45 feet east and west. It had three stories and a basement. Its most conspicuous feature was the horizontal row of ten chimneys along each side, for the rooms were heated by stoves or fireplaces. The lights were candles or kerosene lamps.

When the University opened in September, 1861, rooms in South Hall were available for occupancy by men students at the rate of \$3.00 a term for single rooms and \$6.00 a term for double rooms, a sharp contrast to the present dormitory rates. A section of the south end of the building was rented to Professor Theodore Sutton Parvin

for living quarters at \$150.00 a year. Professor Parvin made his garden just east of South Hall. In 1865, a Mr. Jordan was employed to manage the boarding hall, which was to be operated on the "European plan". This dormitory-boarding hall arrangement lasted only a short time, for both the enrollment and curriculum expanded and, because of the scarcity of classroom space, most of South Hall was taken over for recitation rooms.

During the following years, University students manifested an interest in the welfare of South Hall. In 1870, the editor of the *University Reporter* remarked on its need for a new roof, an improvement which came two years later. The students were pleased with the construction of a new walk between the stone steps of Old Capitol and South Hall. This, it was said, was "much more pleasant than the alternate brickbat heaps and mudholes that were formerly found there." In 1877 the student paper — quite correctly — labelled South Hall a fire hazard. Revolving chairs were apparently an innovation in 1885, for the campus newspaper of that year carried an account of the refurnishing of rooms in South Hall for use by the Board of Regents. The furniture included twenty-four new chairs, eighteen of which were the revolving type.

In the 1860's and 1870's, the chief source of

social life for University students was centered in the activities of the literary societies. To provide a permanent home for these organizations, the Board of Trustees, in 1863, voted to spend \$1,200 for finishing four rooms on the third floor of South Hall. This amount was later increased to \$1,500. In 1865, \$500 was appropriated by the trustees to prepare the southeast room for use by the Zetagathian Society and a like amount was later given to fit up the northeast room allocated to Irving Institute. Later the southwest room was assigned to the Hesperians and the northwest room to the Erodelphian Society. In 1870, the north and south partitions were removed, and the Zetagathians and Hesperians occupied the enlarged south room jointly. The Irvings and Erodelphians made a similar coalition at the north end.

For many years, before the advent of movies, dances, competitive athletics, and an organized social program, South Hall was the scene of the Friday evening literary programs, which brought students and faculty together to hear debates, orations, essays, and drama, sponsored by these literary groups. To promote social life in the early days of the University, parties, socials, oyster suppers, and other festivities were frequently on the entertainment schedule.

A prominent social event in early days was the

annual Thanksgiving celebration. A social program was presented in the chapel building (North Hall), and a dinner in the traditional manner was then served in the dining room of South Hall. The student newspaper carried a brief account of this gathering in 1869:

“At 10 o'clock, refreshments were announced and all were invited to repair to the South Hall, where we found tables nicely arranged and decorated and supplied with a great variety of good things pleasing to the palate.”

While all these things were occurring on the top floor of South Hall, the two floors below and the basement hummed with various activities. Although the building was planned as a dormitory, it served in that capacity for only a few years. The second floor was soon remodeled to provide recitation rooms and offices for Liberal Arts classes and professors — English, foreign languages, history, and public speaking. When the University organized its College of Medicine in 1869 the south part of the first floor (previously occupied as an apartment by Professor Theodore S. Parvin) and the basement were assigned to the new department for lecture rooms and dissection laboratories.

It was apparently about this time that gas lights were substituted for the kerosene lamps and can-

dles which had served the early occupants of South Hall, for the Zetagathian Hall was equipped with gas burners in 1870. Some ten years later, 1880-1882, steam radiators were installed in place of the stoves, the steam coming from boilers in a small brick building west of Old Capitol.

When the Medical Department moved into the new Medical Building in 1882, the Dental Department, newly separated from the Medical Department of which it had been a part since 1870, was assigned a large room across the southern end of the first floor of South Hall as an infirmary and lecture room, and the southern end of the basement was used as a laboratory. By 1894 the dental clinic had outgrown its quarters and the faculty requested that the Board of Regents either ask for \$15,000 to remodel South Hall or request an appropriation of \$50,000 for a dental building. The second alternative was chosen and in 1895 the Dental Department moved out of its unsanitary quarters in Old South Hall into the new (now the old) Dental Building.

In the meantime engineering had entered the University, at first as a separate "chair" established in 1873. Professor Philetus H. Philbrick, selected to occupy that chair, was assigned two small rooms on the second floor of South Hall. With the development of engineering more room

was urgently needed and when the Medical Department moved into its new building in 1882 some of the space on the first floor and basement of South Hall was allotted to civil engineering students. Apparently this was in the north end, for the southern part was used by the Dental Department. When the Science Building (now the Geology Building) was completed in 1885, the engineering department was installed there temporarily, but ten years later it was returned to South Hall, where it occupied the basement and first floor, the Dental Department having moved to its new building in 1895.

Old South Hall during these years had something to offer women students. When the Medical Department moved out of South Hall in 1882, one of the vacated rooms was allocated to classes in elocution and as a gymnasium for women students. In the summer of 1886 the northwest room on the first floor was carpeted and fitted up as a study room for girls and it was still in use for that purpose in 1901.

So it happened that when fire broke out that raw, sleety morning of March 10, 1901, the four literary societies occupied the third floor of Old South Hall, various departments of the Liberal Arts College were located on the second floor, the engineering department had its classrooms, offices,



library, and laboratories on the first floor and in the basement, and one room was reserved as a study room for girls.

That was a gloomy March morning for the University and for Iowa City. Those who gathered about the ruins of the two buildings that Sunday no doubt recalled the early morning fire which had swept North Hall on June 18, 1897, and destroyed a large part of the University Library. North Hall, rebuilt, now looked trim and serviceable. The new Liberal Arts Building (Schaeffer Hall) seemed to weigh down one corner of the campus. Only a few broken windows and minor damages, all estimated at some \$500, had resulted from the fire. Old South Hall was gone. The Medical Building, less than twenty years old, was a mass of smoke-blackened brick walls. The Old Capitol still stood serene and beautiful upon the hill above the Iowa River, looking down upon the ashes. Few of the shivering, curious onlookers that Sunday morning realized that the old era of buildings had ended; that the University was entering upon a new age.

KATHERINE V. BATES