



# The Women's Building: 1900-1925



## A look into the early years of Morrill Hall and the women who inhabited it

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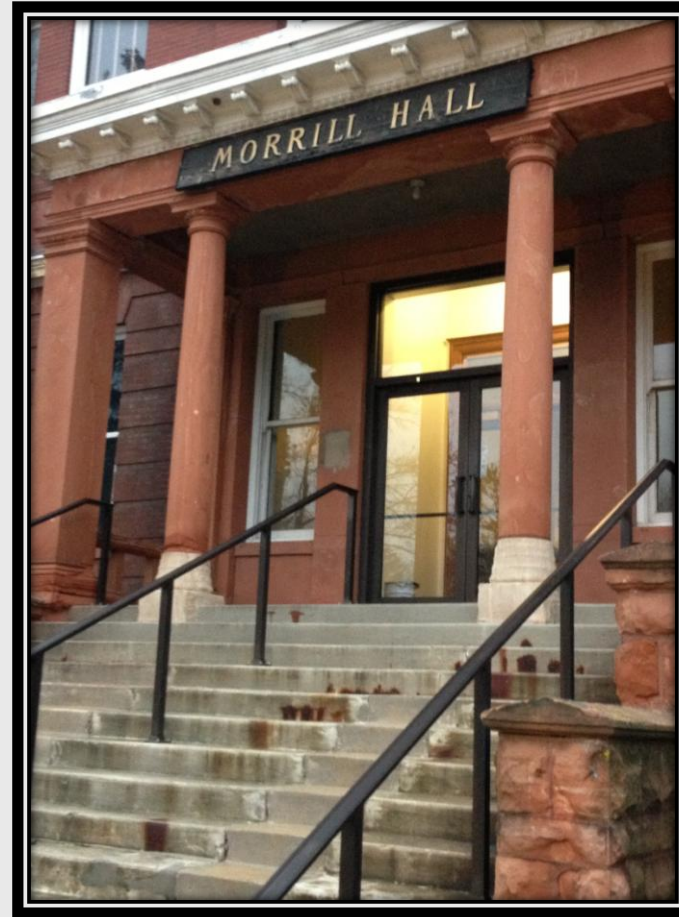
### Background

Today, Michigan State University is a thriving Big Ten School, streaming with both young men and women from all over the globe. With almost 50,000 students attending the school, Michigan State offers a large variety of majors, courses, and extra-curricular activities, ensuring that every student can find their niche here. However, this was not always the case.



Morrill Hall early 1900s

As an intern for Campus Archaeology, I focused my research on the transition from an all male college to the co-ed university it is today. Much of this transition can be attributed to the construction of the Women's Building (now called Morrill Hall) and the first women to reside in this building. They were pioneers, overcoming the widely acknowledged belief that young women were to stay home while young men were to be privileged with education. They made the Women's Building their home, and Morrill has since been a large asset to the school in many different ways.



Morrill Hall today; front entrance facing West Circle Drive  
Via Bethany Slon

Unfortunately, this spring we will all have to say good bye to Morrill before it is demolished, and it's important that we as a community at this university understand the significance of this building, and the women of the university who are tied to it.

### Timeline

- 1885: The Agricultural College of the State of Michigan established
  - Men only
  - Based on agricultural practices
- 1870: The school became Co-Ed
  - Only women closely associated with the college found it worthwhile to take classes (daughters of professors, girls who lived close to the college, etc)
  - Courses geared towards men's role in society
  - Lack of living quarters made it hard for women who didn't live near the campus to attend classes
  - Only 10 women officially enrolled
- 1896: Women's Course established
- 1900: Women's Building was built
- 1901: 150 women enrolled in the college
- 1906: 1,001 students were enrolled, 161 students were women

*"Young women were able to look at M.A.C. as a college where they, too, could receive a practical and scientific education that would prepare them for a career off or on the farm."*  
- Keith Widder

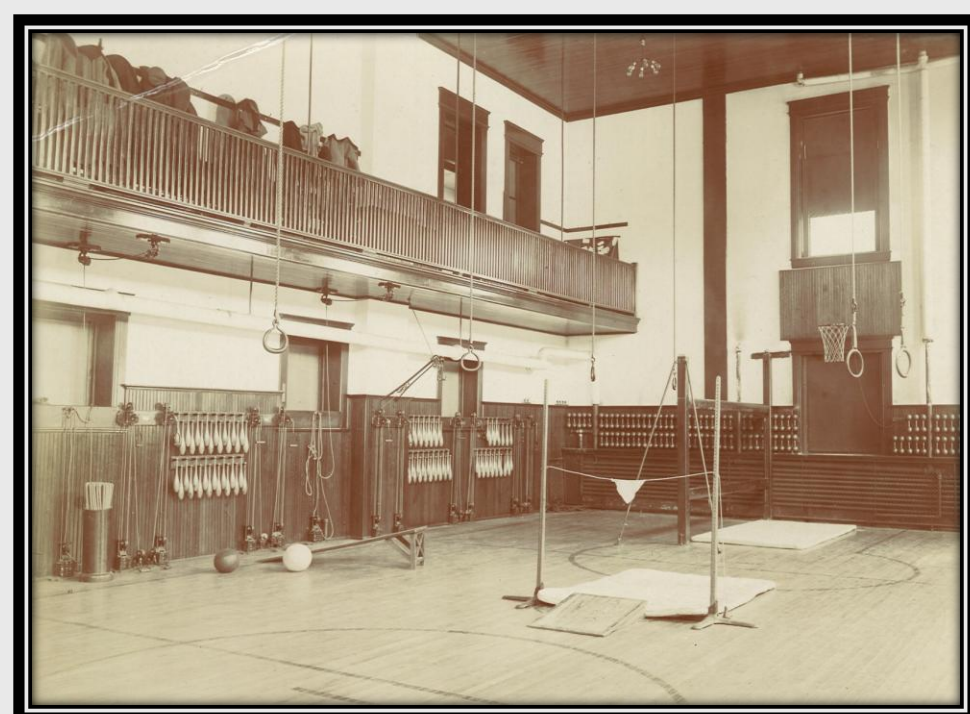
### The Women of the Women's Building

Scrapbooks were a popular way for the young women to document their time at MAC. Fortunately, the MSU Archives have saved many of these scrapbooks, and the scrapbooks can tell us what types of activities and pass times they engaged in.

Many women were members of various clubs, including the Sorian club, the Ero Alphanian club, the Columbian Literary Society, the Feronian Society and the Themian Society.

They also enjoyed performing for their peers, teachers, and families. For example, on May 29<sup>th</sup>, 1903, a pianoforte recital took place in the parlor of the Women's Building, and in 1906 the women took part in a play called "Not a Man in the House."

Of course, they enjoyed having fun and "letting their hair loose," too. They engaged in semi-annual dances and hops, and they hosted special parties, like the Annual Colonial Party that was held between the years 1905 and 1908, and the "Special



The two-story gym in which the girls took physical fitness lessons

Halloween" event in 1906. Sometimes they even got silly enough to participate in the Night Shirt Parade, in which the girls would interrupt quiet time in the evening with hollering and noise, then behave as if nothing had happened. This would always throw the deans for a loop.

Health and fitness was also important to them, just as it is today. They could often be found exercising in the two story gym located in the Women's Building, canoeing and row boating down the Red Cedar River, and participating in the women's swimming club, "The Green Splash."



The girls relaxing on the steps of the Women's Building; early 1900s

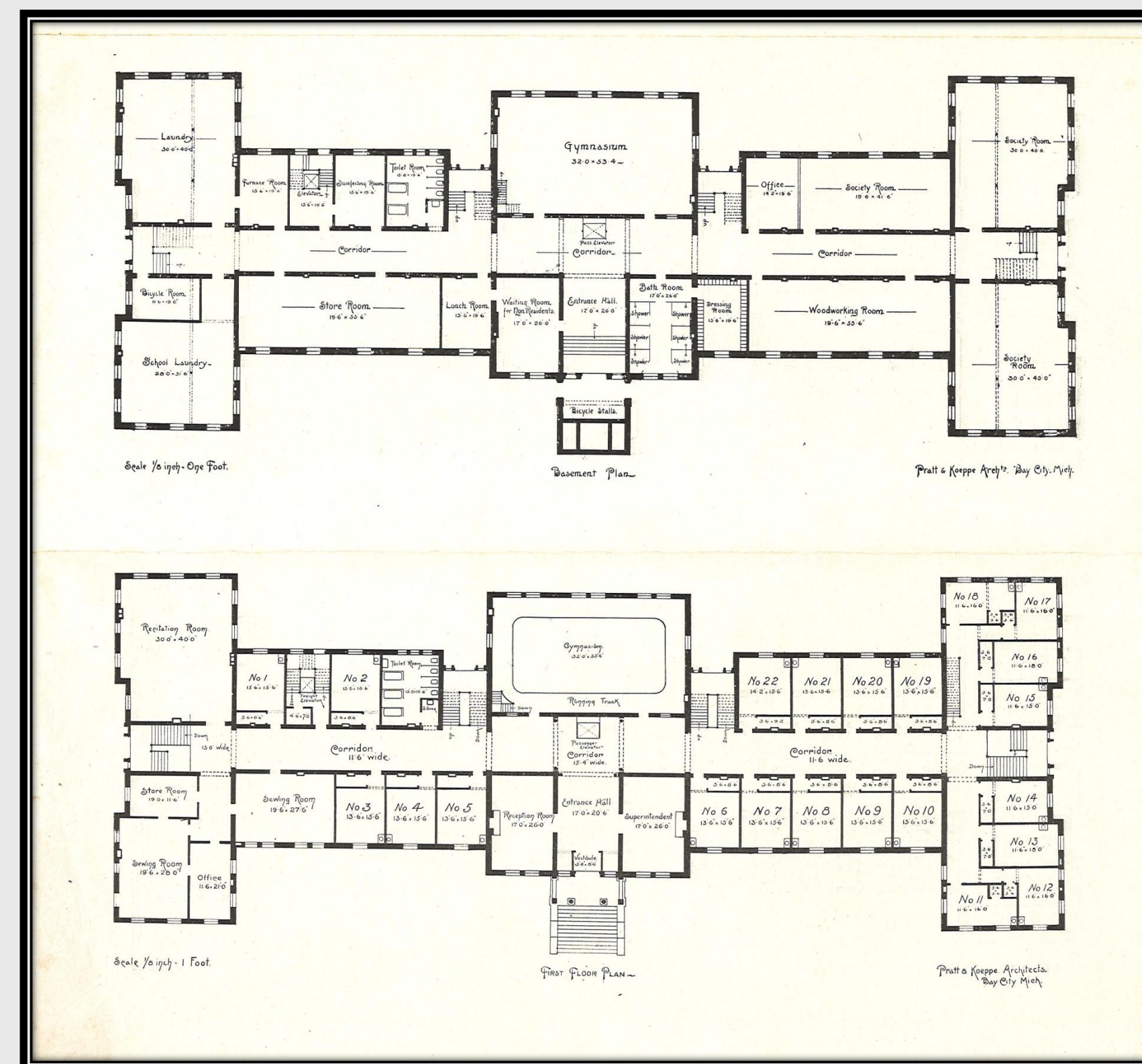
### Exterior

The location of the building was specifically planned out to be in close proximity to the post office, the library and other college buildings.

The outside walls are made of iconic red sand-stone from Lake Superior.

At the time it was built, it stood on the bank of a small artificial pond, now the Grand River parking structure.

It was meant to be a symmetrical building with regard to central staircase entrance. However, prices in materials at the time forced the builders to leave the building without its north wing, and this was never altered.



Original layout of the basement and first floor

### Interior

Rooms included, but weren't limited to

- Kitchen lab with smaller dining rooms attached for cooking classes
- A large recitation room
- Parlors on the second floor
- A main dining room on the third floor, with smaller dining rooms throughout the building
- Music rooms
- Toilet and bath rooms
- Living quarters for 120 girls, deans and instructors

A single living quarter was furnished with a bedstead, mattress, dresser, wash-stand, two chairs, washbowl and pitcher. Each contained a commodious closet.

The rooms were furnished with red oak wood, heated by steam and lit by electricity

Character of these women were portrayed through interior decorating. A note from those living in the building (now at the MSU Archives) was submitted with many decorating requests, for example:

*"That there be in the center of the first floor corridor a cast of heroic size, of the Venus de Milo. It shall typify pure levity, perfect physical development and mental power."*



Left: Photo of a typical bedroom in the Women's Building  
Right: statue of Venus, requested to stand in the front entrance.

### The Women's Building Today

In 1937, the name was changed to Morrill Hall (after the Morrill Land Grant Act). The Morrill Act granted each state a certain amount of land for agricultural colleges, based on the number of senators and representatives. MSU was one of the first colleges to be founded under this new land grant. Women moved into Williams Hall in West Circle, and the building was then used for offices and classrooms. Besides the installation of elevators, not much has changed in the 100+ years since the building was constructed.

August of 2013 the building will be razed. The building can no longer support itself, and there is not enough money to continue to repair the poor ventilation and leaking ceilings.

### Future Plans for Morrill Hall

There are plans to make a memorial for the building, consisting of

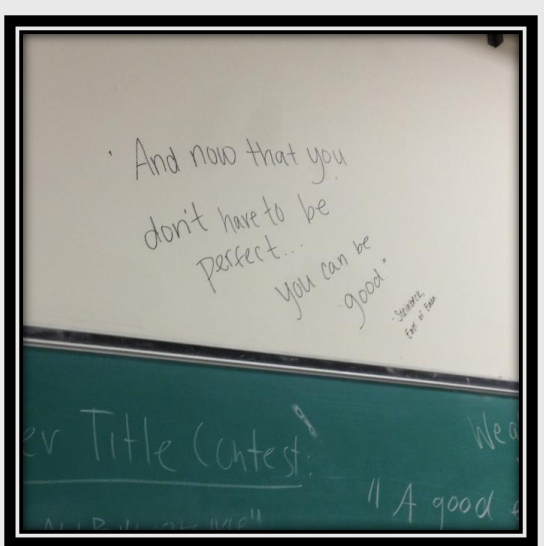
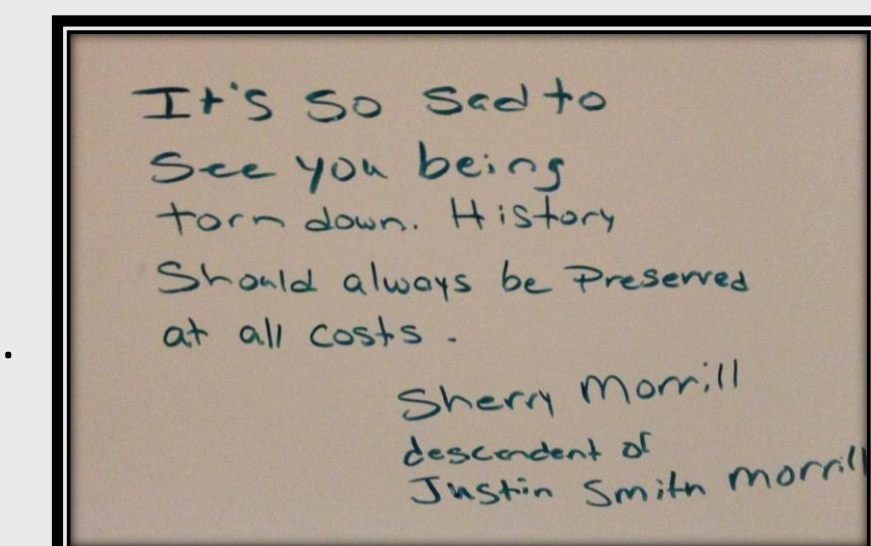
- A wide sidewalk with the same border layout as the original building plan
- Trees, gardens and benches bordering the walkway

There are also plans to salvage some materials from the original building to be used in commemorative columns, including red brick, the fluted column from the east entrance and the already existing foundation.

*"... If [Morrill's halls] had tongues as well as ears, what stories it might tell of life, of death, of ghosts, of tunnel exits and fire-escape entrances, of midnight spreads, of whispered romances, or dreams that did and did not come true, of bright visions that faded and of other visions that grew and grew to splendid realities."*  
-Mary Kay Allens, one of Morrill Hall's first inhabitants

### Archaeological Significance

It is important to take the steps to create an archaeological site once the building is demolished. Anything from makeup containers, mirrors, hairbrushes, old writing utensils, cooking utensils, pots, pans, to wood shop tools could all be found, and these findings will help us to learn more about what these women worked with and used day to day. We'll be able to note significances, like what common, what was rare, what they valued, and what was important to them.



Some of the many messages written on the walls of Morrill Hall in it's last days.  
Via Bethany Slon