

What Was There Before the Museum?

BY ANN BLAIR BROWNLEE

It was a “wretched stretch of land” according to Dr. William Pepper’s biography.

“One gray March day, in 1894, Dr. Pepper and Mrs. Stevenson [another early and important supporter of the Museum and later curator of the Mediterranean and Egyptian sections], with Mr. Justus C. Strawbridge, whom they were anxious to interest in the project, and to whom they wished to show the new land, met by appointment at the end of South Street bridge. A strong east wind blew from the river, and the whole outlook was hopelessly dismal. Mr. Strawbridge stood looking over the dreary waste, whilst Dr. Pepper enthusiastically explained the glorious possibilities offered to his view by the wretched stretch of land before them. With each passing train a dense black smoke rolled up in sooty masses, enveloping railroad tracks, goats, and refuse in a black mist, whilst blasts of coal gas smothered the lungs of the visitors. Mr. Strawbridge gravely listened to Dr. Pepper’s vivid description. He even nodded in courteous approval as the complete plan, at an estimated cost of over two millions of dollars, was explained to him; but his face wore a perplexed expression. As Dr. Pepper turned away for a moment to call the attention of a passing policeman to trespassers, Mr. Strawbridge whispered to his companion: ‘I cannot bear to throw cold water on Dr. Pepper’s enthusiasm; but what an extraordinary site for a great museum! Of course, I would like to help him; but what a site!’” (pp. 439-40).

Perspective of proposed Museum, ca. 1896. Signed by Charles Z. Klauder, at that time with Cope and Stewardson.
Archives of the University of Pennsylvania Museum

IN THE SPRING of 2003, Phase I of the Museum’s FARE project—Future Air-conditioning, Renovation and Expansion—began with the digging up of the Museum’s upper courtyard in order to create the new basement space and its foundations. The sculpture and urns were carefully removed and stored, and the courtyard was cleared to a depth of some 30 feet below the former ground level. During this process, large quantities of old glass bottles and white ironstone china turned up in the fill, making us wonder what was there before the Museum was built.

The site itself did not tell us a great deal. With the exception of a stone path and a small section of brick wall, no architectural remains were uncovered. It appeared that either there was nothing there before the Museum was built or all traces of earlier structures had been obliterated during its construction. It was time to turn to the historical record.

ACQUIRING THE PARCEL OF LAND

The Museum opened to the public in late 1899, and the new building was the culmination of years of effort, led by Dr. William Pepper, the Provost of the University and one of the Museum’s most important early supporters. The site of the future Museum was acquired from the City of Philadelphia in 1894, and the city ordinance of March 30, 1894, required the University “to lay out and maintain [the site] forever as and for a Museum and a Botanical Park and Garden, . . . and also to erect thereon a Museum of Science and Art.” It was a huge site, and an enormous building, the work of three architectural firms (Wilson Eyre, Jr., Frank Miles Day and Brother, and Cope and Stewardson), was designed to fill it.

The site lay between 34th Street on the west and the Pennsylvania Rail Road to the east and between Spruce &



The upper courtyard, also known as the Warden Garden, during construction, March 2004. The line of white pipe along the walls of the Museum indicates the approximate position of the courtyard’s former ground level. The bases of the columns (center) mark the deepest part of the excavation, some 30 feet below. These concrete columns support the roof deck, already in place on the east (left) side of the courtyard. Joseph D. Boaen

South Streets on the north and Blockley or Almshouse Lane to the south. This parcel of land formed a relatively undeveloped part of the so-called Almshouse property that the University had been buying up since 1870, when it acquired the land between Woodland Avenue and Spruce Street and 34th and 36th Streets to form the core of its new West Philadelphia campus.

All this land had been part of a large property purchased by the city in 1829 for the relocation of the city’s Almshouse from Center City to Blockley Township in then rural West Philadelphia. The main Almshouse and hospital complex occupied the irregular block formed by Guardian Avenue,



The Finds



Above: Bottles found in the construction site.
Below: Ironstone pottery fragments, some imported from England, found in the construction site.



Many glass bottles, some certainly refuse from the time of construction, turned up, as well as large quantities of fragmentary white ironstone china. Although this material was from a construction site, not an archaeological excavation, it is possible to draw some conclusions. Some of the bottles and other objects were likely discarded by workmen during construction, but the ironstone china in such quantities and other household objects suggested that the fill had come from a dump. Also coal and ash, common in 19th century dumps, were found in great quantities. To put all this into the broader context of the history of the site and the building, we turned to contemporary maps, plans, correspondence, and photographs to fill out the story.



Fragment of business card found in the construction site for G. Herzberg, Mehlin Piano dealer, with a calendar for 1897 on the reverse.



Looking south at the Almshouse complex. The barn and children's asylum are to the left, the frame house is on the street corner near center, with the main Almshouse in the background and the University Hospital at right.

Pine Street, 34th Street, Vintage Avenue, and the Woodland Cemetery. Its successor, the Philadelphia General Hospital, closed in 1977. The huge site was subsequently redeveloped and now houses medical and research facilities for the University of Pennsylvania, Children's Hospital, and the Veterans Administration.

The undeveloped Almshouse land to the east of 34th Street, including the parcel later partly occupied by the Museum, was designated a public park in 1883, but the site served a number of different functions, as noted on the map of 1893. To the east, next to the railroad tracks was an open lot separated by a lane from a Water Department pipe storage yard. The lane ran along the edge of a bluff, and the open lot was apparently used as a dump, as was the land on the east side of the railroad tracks.

This part of the site was particularly unpromising for the construction of the future Museum. As Francis Newton Thorpe noted in his biography of Dr. William Pepper, "Most of it had been a dumping-ground for years, and the refuse formed a steep, rugged slope to the railroad track. Goats roamed over it, feeding here and there on the scanty green patches among the ash-heaps, and broken bricks and old shoes were strewn over the uneven surface" (p. 439). Indeed, Pepper reported in a memorandum of August 2, 1895, that the "smoke nuisance and the surrounding conditions" of this eastern end of the site contributed to the decision to build the Museum's west wing first.

The western end of the site also posed problems in that several buildings still in active use had to be demolished. Facing South Street, next to the pipe storage yard, was a public bath house. Erected in 1885, this free public swimming pool was enormously popular, as is evident from its astonishing attendance figures during its June to September season in 1895: 153,589 people!

Several other structures were also slated for demolition. At the corner of 34th and Spruce Streets, there was a small frame house occupied by an official of the Almshouse. To the south stood a much older house and a large stone barn, both



1893 Map of Almshouse and Surroundings showing the location of the Public Bath House on South Street, the Water Department Storage Yard to the east (below), and the unlabeled Blockley or Almshouse Lane to the south (left).

built in 1836, not long after the earliest Almshouse buildings. The barn and its associated sheds served as the Almshouse stables, and the large house was the home of the children's hospital or asylum.

The barn and the children's asylum were actually on property that had not been part of the original site acquired in 1894. The original Museum site, as acquired from the city, was eight acres, part of a twelve-acre site whose boundaries ran roughly from Spruce and South Streets to Blockley Lane and from 34th Street to the railroad tracks. A four-acre parcel, at the western end of the area, was not included. The missing four acres created a site that was truncated on the west. The architects found it impossible to design a large Museum building oriented toward South Street without these four acres, so Pepper spearheaded a campaign for another city ordinance that would enable the University to acquire them. In October 1895—nearly a year after the first ordinance—a second one conveyed an additional one and two-sevenths acres to the University on the same terms as the 1894 eight-acre purchase. Though not the full four acres (only the section with the barn



Inverted blueprint of the proposed block plan for the full Museum from July 12, 1895. At center bottom is the public bath house. The barns, the stables, and the dwelling that served as the Almshouse children's asylum are also noted within the four-acre site surrounded by a red line.

indicates the outline of the four-acre site, and within that the barn site, but the proposed School of Architecture is gone. The Museum courtyards and the garden on the west side are now labeled “Park and Botanic Gardens,” a reminder of the stipulations in the 1894 ordinance. Three months later, in April 1897, the contractors began clearing the site to begin construction of the Museum.

THE MUSEUM'S UPPER COURTYARD

Although a number of buildings had been demolished to make way for the new Museum, none were in the area of the courtyard excavated during the FARE project, except for a small corner of the barn that lay in the southwest part of the courtyard. Most of the remains, if any, of the barn and the public bath house lay under the undisturbed Museum building. So how are we to explain the artifacts we discovered when

digging in this courtyard? Since parts of the eventual Museum site and its surrounding area had been used over time for dumping, the household debris—the ironstone china fragments, the coal, and the ash—probably resulted from this activity and simply became incorporated into the site fill along with the construction workers' debris. Though not directly indicative of the Museum site's previous occupants, finding these remains and putting them together with the documentary and photographic record available from the University of Pennsylvania Archives and the Museum Archives, we have gained a picture of what was there before the Museum. 🏠

and stables), it was enough to proceed with the project. According to Pepper's biography, he expressed his jubilation at this success facetiously in a letter to Sara Yorke Stevenson: “The old barn, our barn, now looks beautiful in my eyes. Let us guard it and fit it up as a museum and use our money to maintain it and conduct our great explorations.” [p. 439]

This struggle for the barn site can also be followed on a series of proposed block plans prepared by the Museum architects. A plan of July 12, 1895, shows the four-acre site in dashed lines, but seems to indicate that the full twelve-acre site will be acquired since almost half of the proposed building lies in the four-acre site. A plan of a year later, dated June 13, 1896, shows some significant changes. The plan of the building has evolved, and the entire proposed structure has been shifted eastward, creating space for a large garden at the corner of 34th and Spruce Streets. The four-acre site is indicated, as is the barn site, marked as a roughly triangular parcel on its northern side. The northwest section of the proposed Museum, the first phase to be built, sits mainly in the barn site, and it is very apparent how important it was to acquire at least that part of the four-acre site. This plan also shows a proposed building for the University's School of Architecture farther south along 34th Street where the farmhouse-turned-children's-asylum stood. An even later block plan of January 12, 1897 (not shown), still

digging in this courtyard? Since parts of the eventual Museum site and its surrounding area had been used over time for dumping, the household debris—the ironstone china fragments, the coal, and the ash—probably resulted from this activity and simply became incorporated into the site fill along with the construction workers' debris. Though not directly indicative of the Museum site's previous occupants, finding these remains and putting them together with the documentary and photographic record available from the University of Pennsylvania Archives and the Museum Archives, we have gained a picture of what was there before the Museum. 🏠



Inverted blueprint of the proposed block plan from June 13, 1896, with the four-acre site, the barn site within it (green line), and the first part of the Museum to be built. The barn is still indicated (in blue) as are some contour lines showing the land falling away west to east (right to left).

A Swimming Pool or a Museum?

In April 1897, as demolition of the public bath house was beginning, Edward W. Patton, the member of the city's Select Council representing the 27th ward, wrote to Pepper. Clearly thinking of the approaching summer season, Patton inquired whether it would be possible to open that part of the swimming pool that had not yet been demolished. Unfortunately for the hopeful swimmers, the architect Frank Miles Day reported to Pepper that this was not feasible and would result in additional expense and delay to the project and "the total dissatisfaction to those who attempted to use the small remaining portion of the pool." Pepper, a shrewd politician, replied to Patton: "Make the people understand that it could not be spared. We are going to spend over a million dollars in the 27th ward. It is going to bring a great many people and a great deal of business there. I know they will understand, and they know that they can count upon you to get them another and even finer bath house."

There remained one last obstacle to the demolition of the bath house. The University's Athletic Association had its rowing tank in the bath house, and, at the last minute, on April 13, 1897, with demolition of the building imminent, the contractor reported that he had been told that the tank could not be removed for several more days. The contractor asked the architects "whether we instruct him to tear the house down, over the heads of those who at present occupy it. . . . We . . . think it injudicious to use any force in the matter and have instructed him to wait until such time as he can get peaceable possession."

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