Goodbye, Morrill Hall. We Knew Thee Well.

One hundred twelve years after its opening, and 151 years after the signing of the Morrill Act and the designation of Michigan Agricultural College (now MSU) as the country’s first Land Grant College, MSU’s venerable Morrill Hall is being demolished.

MORRILL HALL’S INTERIOR
load-bearing structure consists of wood framing rather than steel, with a foundation that rests on timber pilings. Close monitoring of the internal wooden structure has revealed irreparable deterioration, indicating that the more-than-110-year-old building was approaching the end of its useful life. Choice of exterior building materials, while appropriate from a state pride point of view, has also been problematic. The red sandstone, quarried near the shores of Lake Superior, has proven to be highly porous and susceptible to severe erosion.

After careful study, the university determined that reconstruction and restoration of the building, which was built in 1900, would not be economically feasible. In June 2010, the Michigan State University Board of Trustees approved a plan to demolish the red brick building on the campus’s north side. However, the replacement of Morrill Hall offered the university a unique opportunity to significantly upgrade the quality of space for its current occupants, and to achieve a more efficient use of space through effective design and allocation.

To provide space for current Morrill Hall occupants, the plan included a newly-opened addition to Wells Hall.

MORRILL HALL HISTORY
Originally opened in 1900, Morrill Hall is named in honor of Justin Smith Morrill, the Vermont senator for whom the Morrill Act is named and who brought about the establishment of the land-grant university. President Abraham Lincoln signed the Morrill Act into law in 1862. For the past 110 years, Morrill Hall has served MSU well, originally known as The Women’s Building, a residence hall and course facilities site for women.

The construction of the building was a direct result of the new Women’s Course that had recently been created with the help of Mary Mayo. Although female students had been attending the college since 1870, numbers were remarkably low due to two significant factors. The first was that there was no female housing. The college could only find so many faculty members to take the women into their homes during the school year. The other issue was that agriculture was the only program until 1885 (when engineering was added), and not many women were interested in the limited courses available.

By 1895, after 25 years of women attending the school, only 24 had actually graduated with degrees, and in the eyes of Mary A. Mayo, a Michigan farmwoman, schoolteacher, and mother of a son and daughter, this was hardly sufficient. In a lengthy address to the Michigan Grange, of which Mrs. Mayo was a member, she said, “Thinking parents of today are anxious that their daughters shall be as thoroughly trained for the practical work of their lives as are their sons.” Her eloquence inspired the Grange to ask for a women’s course at the College.
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WOMEN’S COURSE AN INSTANT SUCCESS

In the fall of 1896, 42 women entered the trial program in old Abbot Hall. The Women’s Course was a five-year program that consisted of cooking, sewing, human nutrition, household management, home nursing, and house architecture. The program was an instant success, and the decision was made for the program to have its own building.

Begun in 1899, and ready for the coeds at the opening of the fall term the following year, the new building was formally dedicated on October 25, 1901, and became known as The Women’s Building. It cost $95,000 to build, and included state-of-the-art kitchen laboratories and sewing rooms among other instructional facilities.

The women were able to live comfortably in the same building, with their own dorm rooms, lounges, gymnasium, and cafeteria. There was even a pond and garden area where the parking ramp stands today, known as “The Lagoon,” complete with an island in the pond for picnics. The Women’s Building was close to the post office, library, and other college buildings, and faced a pleasant stretch of thick green lawn containing beautiful trees and shrubbery. It was said that bringing women to the college was a success for the men as well, as their manners and personal upkeep improved dramatically as the number of eligible women on campus increased.

DUBBED “THE COOP”

The home economics courses were extremely popular and, as attendance expanded, the building was able to house up to 120 students as well as all faculty. It was a palace to the residents at the time. Dubbed “The Coop” by the male students because “all of the ‘chicks’ live there,” this four-story structure provided everything necessary for the comfort and health of its young women residents. Each room came fully furnished with a bedstead, mattress, dresser, wash-stand, two chairs, washbowl and pitcher, and a closet, and cost about $10-12 a term.

The building also housed the dean, the head of the home economics department, her assistants, and the physical education instructor. These faculty members would sleep in rooms adjoining the fire escapes to prevent late-night loiterers from entering through the unlatched windows to hang out with friends. The Women’s Building had “absolute quiet” hours from seven to ten o’clock p.m. Lights went out at ten o’clock, and only two eleven o’clock parties were allowed each term.

MAJOR CHANGES INCLUDING NAME

In 1937, major changes to the building took place. Enrollment in the Women’s Program had continued to increase and Sarah L. Williams Hall was built to house more students. With the new West Circle buildings being built to serve as housing for women, the decision was made to spend $83,000 on the Women’s Building to convert it into classrooms and offices for the Liberal Arts Division.

The renovation included offices for the dean of liberal arts; the departments of economics, education, English, geology and geography, history, mathematics, sociology and zoology; and large classrooms. This was also when the building’s name was changed to Morrill Hall. The building underwent one more renovation in 1956, when certain parts of the structure were expanded.

MEMORIES WILL REMAIN

Demolition of Morrill Hall began in May 2013. The work scope involves demolition of structure, and site-restoration with lawn, sidewalks, benches and commemorative signage. Opportunities for additional site-restoration are also being explored, including ways to commemorate the significance of the Morrill Act, and, potentially, use pieces from the Morrill Hall building.

And while the stately red brick and sandstone building on Circle Drive will soon be gone, the Women’s Building, the Women’s Course, and Morrill Hall will live on in the history of MSU.