

# The State of Old Main

By Atira Meyer

*Your ivy mantle, dark and ragged, blown  
By winter winds. Through years of sun and shade  
You have not bowed your head. You seem to know  
That, come what may, you will not stand alone.  
- Nell Stanton Furman, 1941*

After the commemorative cornerstone was laid on September 22, 1887, a wonder of midwestern architecture rose above it on a plot in the Northeastern plains of Lincoln, Nebraska. It stood four stories above its base with walls of red sandstone and pressed brick, rounded arches, and 198 windows of varying shapes and styles. The secretary of the Nebraska Conference at the time called it “one of the most imposing and beautiful structures in the west.”

Nebraska Wesleyan’s first structure stood as a testament to the Nebraska Methodists’ hard work and perseverance, and a symbol of promise in higher education. In its first years, it not only stood for the university’s success, but housed every piece of what made it so. Before more were built, this main building served as a place for classrooms, offices, the chapel, the library, cafeteria, gymnasium, and even the lodging for students. As the NWU campus expanded over the years and buildings sprouted throughout the plot of land, each with a dedicated name, students and faculty began calling this original building “Old Main.”



Despite its sentimental value to the university and its reputation in the state as a piece of historic architecture, Old Main fell into disrepair—in fact, the process of “falling into disrepair” started almost immediately after being erected and has continued such cyclical process to this day.

“Inside the main building, it was a continuing and never-ending round of repairing and refurbishing,” history professor David Mickey wrote of the state of Old Main in just 1902. In his three-volume history of the school, documenting up until 1987, each chapter on buildings and grounds inevitably starts with a comment of this nature:

“As for the buildings, scarcely a year had passed without needing to repair...”

And the list always continued on.

History has shown that Nebraskan Methodists initially had trouble collecting the funds to make Nebraska Wesleyan a reality, and once they had, found that it was difficult to find the funds to keep it running. What were

described as “uncertain” years by Mickey, the first few decades found Wesleyan in a constant financial deficit. Add to that two world wars and a great depression, and you have a university whose budget for the upkeep of its grounds and buildings hardly grew. All the while, the cracks in the walls of Old Main grew “alarmingly” and were “an ominous threat to the endurance of the edifice.” Although records show that Wesleyan staff worked constantly to preserve the aging main building, the list of necessary repairs over the years indicate that the hard work was merely catching up to the damage of wear, age, and the elements, but never quite getting ahead of it until major renovation in 1988.

What was once a vital piece of the building’s architecture – housing everything from typing classes to chemistry labs and administrative offices– now lies disheveled and decrepit beneath the bustling hallways and full classrooms above. The basement of Old Main, officially condemned and sealed off in the University’s centennial restoration project, fell even further into disrepair over the last thirty years as campus life continued above it. Kept alive only by rumor and old university ghost stories, Old Main’s lower level sits entirely forgotten by students and even some faculty of the 2010’s.

It’s not uncommon now, in 2019, to get a response of shock, surprise, or intrigue when mentioning this forgotten piece of architecture.

“Wait, really? Old Main has a basement?” is a sentiment expressed by both students and more permanent members of Wesleyan’s campus, despite the fact that the lower level windows can easily be seen above ground. But, like a concealed entrance to a hidden room, the clearly-present space beneath the building’s first floor is something many only notice once it has been revealed to them.

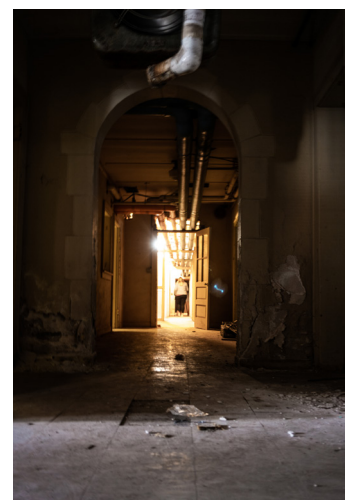


Of course, because the basement can now only be accessed via an external entrance, it’s inconspicuous enough to be forgotten. A set of concrete steps descend about four feet into the earth, meeting a green door set into the southeast corner of the building’s foundation. Through this door, the dilapidated, abandoned remains of the ‘old’ Old Main span the entirety of its 168 by 71-foot base.



The first haunting object to greet you in the dimly-lit lower level is, for some reason, a bright white shopping cart balanced upon a line of wooden floorboards that hang treacherously above a sinkhole of crumbling floor. Whether the pile of eroded flooring rests atop the building’s stone foundation or the dirt below is unclear, as it appears that stepping one foot into the pile would send you falling straight down into the earth.

Continuing into the main hall of the basement, which was once a busy vessel for student and faculty traffic between classrooms, is now lit by a mixture of distant refracted window light, old bulbs, and a newer track of florescent lighting installed for maintenance worker safety. The yellowish tint of these lights on the decaying walls gives the eerie illusion that you’ve stepped back into another decade.



Which decade? Well, that's where things get a bit tricky.

It almost seems as if there are architectural elements (and artifacts) present from every era in which the basement was in use, apart from maybe the 1970's and '80's. Original stone arches are juxtaposed with textured plaster, brightly-painted drywall, floral wallpaper, and exposed brick, and ceilings consist of everything from slats of wood, to antique ceiling tiles and crumbling sections of old drop ceilings. Not only that, but signs of every era of electrical advancement seem to be present in the exposed fixtures. A single lightbulb may hang from a chain in one room, while full fixtures connected to functioning switches are present in others. Even a more modern-looking ceiling fan lies on the floor of one old classroom, right next to what appears to be the old ash dump in the wall from an upstairs fireplace or coal stove, surely removed long ago.



What happened in the basement at the time of its demise is a mystery. The state of it near the end of its final decade prior to condemnation is sparsely documented in the history books, apart from vague comments that Old Main always needed repairs. No member of the current grounds and maintenance staff has been with Wesleyan long enough to know exactly how it all progressed. So it remains unclear, then, why the space appears to have been gradually abandoned, room by room, each at different points in history—especially considering it was all closed off at once in the 1988 renovation.

---

There are many buildings that stand today—not only in Lincoln but across the country—that are both older than the building and in much better shape. So, what was it that did Old Main's basement in?

“It was probably the moisture,” guessed Jim Ruzicka, current director of Wesleyan's Physical Plant. He led the 2018 cleanup project in Old Main's basement that removed some of the trash, fallen plaster, and other clutter that had piled up over the years. Although he's only been here for just under two years, that task got him close enough to see the damages: the mold, the cracking walls, collapsing ceiling tiles. He saw that moisture from the surrounding earth—especially leaking in through cracks and windows during wet seasons—was most likely the culprit for many of the lower level damages. So, he wasted no time in taking care of what he could.

“We laid new dirt last year, trying to keep the moisture away from the foundation as much as possible, and brought up the window wells a bit higher too, just trying to preserve the foundation,” he explained. “You can't fix inside stuff without fixing the outsides first.”

But moisture isn't the only culprit for the basement's demise—it was also an issue of money.

For a university that started its first years in debt, regular and high-quality upkeep of the structure has been difficult to achieve. In 1982, it cost over \$270,000 to reset only the North, West, and South windows in Old Main.



Today, a full window restoration is estimated at nearly \$500,000, with the basement windows costing \$60,000 alone. Ruzicka explained that, in order to make necessary renovations like this a reality, it requires a mix of long-term budgeting and help from the university's donors.

---

So what will be in store for Old Main as it heads steadily toward its 150th birthday?

With Ruzicka as Director, there are hopes that Wesleyan can expect to see regular upkeep of the buildings that need it most, and maybe even some larger improvements over time.

After about a year and a half spent on campus, he has already addressed some issues that had been previously overlooked, like the Old Main basement and a collapsing floor in the Maintenance Building. He's also getting things organized administratively, preparing to streamline future upkeep and renovation around campus. He's proud to show off his set of flat-file cabinets behind his office, where each building has a designated, labeled drawer where he's gathered all the files that were once scattered across different offices around campus. Each building's original blueprints, and any subsequent prints from repairs or renovations, are now accounted for and secured safely in their respective drawers—apart from Old Main, whose original blueprints from 1887 have not yet been found.

Ruzicka is type of man who is forward-thinking but also appreciates the past, so his goals for Old Main include both repair and restoration over time. He explained that he likes to keep things original in older buildings, “within reason,” but that practicality must also play a role in maintenance and renovation. Luckily for Nebraska Wesleyan, Ruzicka understands the value of historic buildings like Old Main and already feels invested in keeping it in shape.

One of his short-term goals for Old Main is a renovation-restoration project for the Alabaster Lounge—funded by an alumnus donor—in which the layout will be reset back to its original state prior to the 1988 renovation. Other goals include new windows for efficiency and repointing the outer masonry to maintain the structure.

In a perfect world?

“I'd love to do a full restoration of Old Main,” Ruzicka assured, looking out his office window and across the courtyard to the East windows of Old Main.

Of course, all at once, a full restoration would not only take time, but undoubtedly would cost far over a million dollars to complete. Not only that, but without the blueprints or many photographs of the interior from the early years, restoration to its original design is nearly impossible.

Still, Ruzicka remains hopeful and dedicated. Although his dream project may never become a reality, it's clear



that he plans to do what he can during his time with Wesleyan to ensure the buildings stand strong for years to come. And whether or not those blueprints are ever found, his plans for practical renovation and restoration will maintain the dignity of what David Mickey called “the symbol of Nebraska Wesleyan’s origin and durability.”

Because of the dedication from staff like Ruzicka, generous donors, and everyone else that has come to appreciate Wesleyan’s Old Main over the years, Nell Stanton Furman’s words still ring true from her 1941 graduation poem, “A Tie That Binds.” Now, after 132 years of “sun and shade,” Old Main still stands, and it does not stand alone.