

Ready for new life, Varsity Hall embodies rich history

By Brian McNeill

bmcneill@dailyprogress.com | 978-7266

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The University of Virginia is nearly finished with its \$4 million restoration of Varsity Hall, a 150-year-old building with a bizarre past.

Over the past 18 months, construction crews have toiled to refurbish the 6,000-square-foot building at the end of Hospital Drive and restore it to its original grandeur.

"The people who know this building from before are just astounded at the difference," said Joseph D. "Jody" Lahendro, historic preservation architect for UVA. "The common comment that we're getting is: 'I never could have imagined it could have looked this amazing.'"

When it opens at the start of the spring semester in January, Varsity Hall will be the temporary headquarters of the Batten School of Leadership and Public Policy, UVA's new school financed by a \$100 million gift from media tycoon Frank Batten.

Over the years, Varsity Hall has served as nursing student quarters, a fraternity house, faculty offices, a meeting spot for the Board of Visitors and a school of military government during World War II. Most recently, from 1960 to 2001, it was occupied by the university's U.S. Air Force reserve officer training program.

It was built as the university's infirmary in 1858 after a typhoid outbreak killed 19 people at UVA and forced the cancellation of a month of classes. Historic preservationists believe it was the nation's first infirmary built specifically for a college campus.

Originally called The Retreat for the Sick Students or simply The Infirmary, Varsity Hall was designed under the era's prevailing theory of medicine that infectious diseases are caused by foul odors.

According to the "miasma" theory of disease, sick patients need lots of fresh air and exercise to get healthy. As a result, Varsity Hall has an innovative ventilation system that carries fresh air through an open corridor in its basement and up through tiny shafts. Similarly, several patient rooms have balconies from which they could breathe the outside air.

To keep sick students warm, each patient room has a fireplace. Plus, a coal-fired furnace, which remains in the basement, would send warm air up through the building's central heating system. A black steel oven, also remaining in the basement, would cook hot meals for sickly students.

"This building is special," said Brian Broadus, an architect with Train & Partners, which handled the project for UVA. "This is what historic preservation is all about - revealing the stories that buildings are here to tell. It makes our lives more interesting."

Varsity Hall's architect was William A. Pratt, an early university architect and the school's first superintendent of buildings and grounds. Pratt immigrated to the United States from England in 1832, eventually opened a daguerreotype studio in Richmond and patented one of the first

methods of coloring daguerreotypes. Today, his work can fetch high prices, such as a daguerreotype of Edgar Allan Poe that was bought at auction last year for \$150,000.

"He was an architect, photographer and a bit of an entrepreneur," Lahendro said. "He was UVa's first significant post-Jefferson architect."

The project to preserve Varsity Hall started four years ago with historical record research. In March 2005, the 500-ton building was transported 185 feet from its original spot to its current location. The \$3.7 million relocation allowed UVa to build Robertson Hall and renovate Rouss Hall, a two-building complex that will be home of the McIntire School of Commerce at the beginning of the spring semester.

As part of the Varsity Hall project, the preservationists restored its original interior decor - white institutional plaster walls, terra cotta-colored paint trim and darkly scratched hardwood pine flooring.

"We like the patina of age," Lahendro said. "The scratches, the nail holes, all the things that have accumulated through time. We want those things."

David J. Neuman, architect of the university, said historic preservation is essential at an institution with as much history as UVa.

"It's important for any campus, but particularly to UVa, to preserve its cultural history for faculty, students, staff and the community at large."

Apart from the Varsity Hall project, UVa has several historic preservation projects on the horizon, including plans to refurbish the old faculty apartments building near Beta Bridge.