

Minnesota State Academy for the Blind,
Dow Hall
400 6th Avenue Southeast
Faribault
Rice County
Minnesota

HABS No. MN-161-B

HABS
MINN
66-FARL,
2B-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service
Great Lakes Systems Office
1709 Jackson Street
Omaha, Nebraska 68102-2571

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
MINNESOTA STATE ACADEMY FOR THE BLIND
DOW HALL

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- Location: 400 6th Avenue Southeast
Faribault
Rice County, Minnesota
U.T.M.: 15:479790:4903520
Quad: Faribault, Minn.
- Construction Dates: 1883-1884, 1895, 1914-1917
- Architect: Monroe Sheire (original construction and first addition)
Clarence Johnston (1914-1917 alterations)
- Present Owner: State of Minnesota
- Present Use: Storage; community food-shelf program
- Significance: For many decades after its completion in 1884, Dow Hall was the center of activity at the Minnesota State Academy for the Blind (HABS No. MN-161, previously the Minnesota School for the Blind and the Minnesota Braille and Sight Saving School). The 1874 Blind Department Building (HABS No. MN-161-A) became the north wing of the newer structure. Dow Hall received several substantial additions, including a south wing in 1895 and a new north wing in 1914 that required relocating the Blind Department Building. Housing classrooms, residential rooms for students and staff, industrial shops, dining rooms, administrative offices, a library, and an auditorium, Dow Hall witnessed the evolution of national trends for educating the blind. Many changes occurred during the tenure of James J. Dow, superintendent from 1875 to 1920, for whom the building was named.
- Project Information: In 1996, the Minnesota State Academy for the Blind received funds from the Minnesota State Legislature to undertake several projects on campus, including the demolition of Dow Hall (HABS No. MN-161-B) and the Blind Department Building. Key architectural elements were to be salvaged for incorporation into a commemorative exhibit near Dow Hall's site, which was to be converted into a parking lot. In 1997, Studio Five Architects, with Thomas E. Hunt as principal-in-charge, was hired to complete the project. Studio Five retained Hess, Roise and Company as a subcontractor for the HABS documentation. Charlene K. Roise served as principal investigator for Hess Roise and helped draft and edit the reports. Staff historians Shawn P. Rounds and Cynthia de Miranda conducted research and prepared the reports. Jerry Mathiason, as a

subcontractor to Hess Roise, completed the photographic documentation. Gary Paulson oversaw the production of this report for the Minnesota Department of Administration. Elaine Sveen reviewed the report for the Minnesota State Academy for the Blind.

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION

Dow Hall dominates the campus of the Minnesota State Academy for the Blind. The building faces east across a landscaped lawn with a circular drive. A short road running northeast from the drive connects the campus to Minnesota State Trunk Highway 298. Another road extends west from the drive's southwest corner, continuing along the south side of Dow Hall until it turns south and ultimately ends in a parking lot. A paved area provides access to the rear of Dow Hall and to a small brick structure to the west. Most of the school's facilities are south and southeast of Dow Hall.¹

Built during three different periods, Dow Hall has a U-shaped configuration. The central block is the oldest, dating from 1883. The south wing was added in 1895. Between 1914 and 1917, the north wing was erected and the two older sections remodeled. Although built over the course of several decades, the sections share similar massing and materials. They rest on a high basement of coursed, rock-faced limestone blocks. Red-brown brick walls rise three stories above a stone water table. The first two floors of the central block's east side feature a repeating pattern of seven stretcher bonds and one header row. Its upper floor and west side, as well as the walls of the two wings, display only stretcher bond. A stone stringcourse encircles the building at the third-floor level. Brick pilasters divide the first two floors on each side into bays topped by brick corbeling. Rectangular window openings with stone sills pierce the walls and foundations at regular intervals, and hold either one-over-one-, two-over-two-, or four-over-four-light double-hung sash. On the first and second floors, decorative stone lintels ornamented with inscribed stylized sunbursts crown the windows, and bands of stone join the lintels near the tops of the openings. A hipped roof clad with modern shingles caps all three sections. Small eyebrow dormers punctuate the roof, which also holds brick chimneys and ventilation stacks. A modillion cornice marks the roofline.

The wings are set back from the central section on the front of Dow Hall. The three-story entry bay projects from the center of the facade. The bay rises above the modillion cornice and terminates in a gabled parapet with a tympanum defined by brick corbeling. An oculus surrounded by radially placed bricks is centered beneath the peak. The name "DOW HALL" appears between the cornice and the stringcourse at the third-floor level. Two windows stand above the Classical Revival-style entrance, which consists of two wood Tuscan columns supporting a simple denticular entablature crowned by an ornamental metal railing. Sidelights and transoms frame the wood-panel door, which holds a large plate-glass window. Concrete steps lead from the front sidewalk to a high brick and concrete porch in front of the door. Pipe railings edge the porch. Arched openings in the brick wall below the railing have been filled with brick. A small wood door on the south side presently provides admittance to the space beneath the porch and, subsequently, to the building's basement.

¹ The description is based upon a site visit by Shawn P. Rounds on March 7, 1997.

A doorway similar to the main entrance is centered on the front facade of the north wing above a narrow concrete porch. The entrance into the south wing is enclosed by a modern flat-roofed brick entry nestled at the intersection of the wing and the central block. Modern three-story brick stair towers project from the north and south facades.

At the rear (west side) of Dow Hall, a doorway set into the foundation of the south wing's west wall allows access to the basement. A boiler house adjoins the south wing in the courtyard formed by the two wings and central block. The east, west, and north walls of the subterranean boiler plant are of the same height and composition as the building's foundations. Three doorways in the plant's west wall are entrances to the underground space. A gable-roofed, glass-walled skylight on the plant's slightly pitched roof illuminates the boiler room below.

At the intersection of the north wing and the central block, a brick-enclosed external stairway begins on the third floor and descends to an exposed metal staircase near the ground. A two-level addition extends from the rear facade of the north wing. The wood-sheathed upper floor is supported on the lower level's stone walls, which feature a single exterior door on the south side. A metal staircase along the south side of the addition provides entry to the upper level through a screened porch.

The interior layout of Dow Hall remains substantially unchanged from its 1914-1917 remodeling. A long hallway running north-south bisects the first and second floors of the center section of the building. Central hallways divide the north wing into four blocks of rooms, while the south wing is laid out like an inverted "T."

Hallway floors are covered with white hexagonal ceramic tiles and edged by a Greek key pattern worked in green and red square tiles. The floors of most rooms above the basement level are wood, although some have been covered with carpeting. Nearly all the building's original wood trim survives, including decorative wood panels in recessed doorways. Many doors, on the other hand, have been replaced and their transoms sealed. Additionally, several rooms now display acoustical tile or suspended ceilings.

The most elaborately ornamented area of the building is the auditorium, which occupies most of the central section's third floor. A low stage stands against the east wall of the room and carries a floor-to-ceiling projecting bay designed to hold a pipe organ; turned wood posts currently screen the now-empty pipe chamber. One-over-one double-hung sash windows line the east and west walls. Wood bars guard the lower half of some windows, presumably to keep children inside. Painted wood trim divides the walls into panels. Wide denticulated molding with a repeating palmette pattern encircles the room below the edge of the coved ceiling, while simpler molding traces the borders of the ceiling's flat surface. False beams, similar to the plain molding, cross the ceiling at right angles and form a pattern of rectangles around a center square. Octagonal wood columns rise to meet the ceiling at the four corners of this pattern.

The columns are crowned with octagonal denticulated capitals decorated on each face with a sunburst pattern. Above the capitals, the columns flare out to merge with the ceiling.

HISTORY

The Minnesota State Academy for the Blind was originally a department within the Minnesota Institution for the Education of the Deaf and Dumb. When established by the state legislature in 1858, the institution was charged with educating deaf children in the care of the state. The legislature added a department to teach the blind in 1864 but failed to allocate operating funds for two years. Beginning in 1866, the Blind Department held classes in various Faribault homes because there was no room in the commercial building that temporarily housed classrooms and living quarters for the deaf students. When the institution moved to its own campus in 1868, the two programs were united in a single building. Overcrowding remained a constant problem, however, so the property of town founder Alexander Faribault was acquired for a separate blind school campus in 1873. The department soon extended a 40' x 60' brick-veneered, wood-framed building (Blind Department Building, HABS No. MN-161-A) from the south side of Faribault's former home. These two buildings accommodated the Blind Department until overcrowding reached a crisis point during the 1882-1883 academic year. State legislators decided that the Blind Department's successful educational efforts called for expanded facilities.²

Building a New Main Hall

James J. Dow, who had been appointed the school's superintendent in 1875, had lobbied hard for the building, and oversaw its construction. Dow initiated a variety of innovative programs in the building during his long tenure, which continued until 1920. Upon his death in 1926, the building was named in his honor.

Plans for the new structure were completed by Monroe Sheire, a prominent Saint Paul architect whose firm had built a handsome stone house for Alexander Ramsey, the state's first governor. Sheire's work was also locally known: he designed Faribault's First Congregational Church in 1867, and was probably responsible for the design of the Blind Department's first building.³

Sheire's design for the school's new hall called for a two-and-a-half-story brick building rising from a high stone basement to a mansard roof; the half-story within the roof was lit by dormer windows. Local limestone trimmed the building's exterior. The structure's brick walls and mansard roof resembled the Blind Department Building, but the new structure was larger in massing and more angular in detailing, using gable-roofed dormers and rectangular windows

² See HABS No. MN-161 for a history of the evolution of the Minnesota School for the Blind.

³ "Report of the Superintendent to the Board of Directors for the Month of March 1883" and "Report of the Superintendent to the Board of Directors for the month of April 1883" in "Record Book of Minnesota Institution for the Blind, Opened February 1883: Personal Property of J. J. Dow," at Minnesota State Academy for the Blind, Faribault; file for Monroe Sheire, Architects Files, Northwest Architectural Archives, Saint Paul.

rather than the round and segmental arches of its north wing. Inside, brick partition walls ran from foundation to roof to prevent the spread of fire. The floor plan placed dining facilities in the basement, classrooms on the first floor, and dormitory rooms on the second and third levels. For the sake of good sanitation, bathrooms and water closets were situated in a tower on the building's west side. The *Faribault Republican* praised this arrangement as "commendable. . . . In accordance with modern sanitation science, [it is] the best arrangement possible for health, next to the location of these conveniences in an entirely isolated building." Regarding the entire building, the newspaper declared it would be a "welcome addition to the line of imposing and beautiful public edifices that now crown the eastern bluff over-looking the city."⁴

Work on the structure got underway that summer, and most of the walls and roof were in place by the end of August. Carpentry and masonry repairs were undertaken in older buildings (including HABS No. MN-161-A) at the same time, and steam pipes and radiators were installed to accommodate a steam-heat system. Progress was slower than anticipated, delaying the start of the fall term until mid-November when a section of the building could accommodate classes. Dow's November report to the board of directors reflected his impatience with the pace of construction: "The presence of workmen on every floor is still a serious but unavoidable annoyance. . . . The necessary furniture for the fitting up of the rooms has been purchased but there still remain unshipped the reception room, the teachers' sitting room and the spare room. These will probably not be furnished for a month to come and perhaps not then." In the same report, however, Dow also revealed his pride in the new work when he boasted that "heat from the steam apparatus is ample to keep the whole building old and new in perfect comfort."⁵

Construction continued on into the new year. By January 1884, the interior was nearly finished, although the students were still housed only on the first and second floors because of a delay in the installation of a fire escape for the third. At the end of February, Dow reported that "the carpenter work in the new building is substantially completed, but several rooms are occupied with material prepared for the piazzas which are not yet put up. During the month gas fixtures have been put in throughout the buildings and fitted with lamps to use until gas shall be introduced."⁶

⁴ "The New Building for the Blind," *Faribault Republican*, May 2, 1883, 3.

⁵ "Report of the Superintendent to the Board of Directors for the Months of July and August 1883," "Report of the Superintendent to the Board of Directors for the Month of September 1883," and "Report of the Superintendent to the Board of Directors for the Month of November 1883," in "Record Book of Minnesota Institution for the Blind"; "Blind Institute Open," *Faribault Republican*, November 21, 1883, 3.

⁶ "Report of the Superintendent to the Board of Directors for the Month of December 1883" and "Report of the Superintendent to the Board of Directors for the Month of February [1884]" in "Record Book of Minnesota Institution for the Blind."

The new main building, finally finished in spring 1884, nearly doubled the school's capacity to about sixty resident students. By 1890, however, the growing student population again strained the resources of the school's physical plant. Administrators rearranged student and staff quarters in a vain effort to meet everyone's needs. Finally, in 1895, the state legislature allocated funds to build a new wing at the southwest corner of the main hall. The lighting, fire-protection, and sewer systems were extended at the same time. The boiler house and coal sheds at the rear (west side) of the building were remodeled to accommodate the installation of another boiler, and a tall exterior smokestack was built.⁷

Again, work extended through the fall and into the next winter. When finished, the new wing contained playrooms and sitting rooms for boys, dormitory rooms, classrooms, music rooms, and a gymnasium. School officials reported that the south wing "provides an adequate and elegant home for the boys of the school, who have for some years been compelled to put up with crowded or uncomfortable quarters."⁸

Expansion and Remodeling under Clarence Johnston

In less than a decade, chronic overcrowding forced the school's administration to lobby the state legislature for more residential space. Two cottages for boys were completed by 1908, necessitating the enlargement of Dow Hall's district heating plant. At the same time, the administration was concerned about the lack of fireproofing in some sections of the hall. This prompted Dow to propose moving the wood-frame Blind Department Building (HABS No. MN-161-A) away from the main structure and erecting a modern wing in its place.⁹

Funds for the work were not appropriated until 1913; plans were ready by June of that year. Clarence Johnston, architect for the State Board of Control, was responsible for the plans since the school's finances and construction projects had come under the jurisdiction of the board in 1901. Johnston wanted to stylistically unite the buildings of the three state campuses in Faribault: the blind school, the deaf school, and a program for developmentally disabled

⁷ State Board of Corrections and Charities, *Second Biennial Report* (Saint Paul, 1887), 60; Minnesota Institute for Defectives, *Sixth Biennial Report* (Minneapolis, 1890), 15; Minnesota Institute for Defectives, *Seventh Biennial Report* (Minneapolis, 1892), 90-91; Minnesota Institute for Defectives, *Ninth Biennial Report* (Saint Paul, 1896), 46-47.

⁸ Minnesota Institute for Defectives, *Ninth Biennial Report* (1896), 46-47.

⁹ Minnesota School for the Blind, *Thirteenth Biennial Report* (Faribault, 1904), 13; Minnesota School for the Blind, *Fourteenth Biennial Report* (Faribault, [1906]), 12; Minnesota School for the Blind, *Fifteenth Biennial Report* ([Faribault, 1908]), 18-19; "New Boys' Building," *Faribault Republican*, August 14, 1907, 3; Entry for Commission No. 1491: Minnesota State School for the Blind, Boiler House in "Transfer Ledger—Clarence H. Johnston, St. Paul, Minn.," volume 1, at Northwest Architectural Archives, Saint Paul; "Plan of Boiler House for Minnesota State School for the Blind," June 30, 1905, at Minnesota State Academy for the Blind, Faribault; Minnesota School for the Blind, *Sixteenth Biennial Report* ([Faribault, 1910]), 20, 23-24.

children established in 1879. This was a complicated task, given the range of architectural styles used for the buildings of the three schools. Some buildings were obsolete, others were scattered about the grounds without regard to their neighboring structures. Johnston seized upon the common neoclassical elements of the buildings, using them to unite the buildings.¹⁰

Johnston's plans for Dow Hall's south wing initiated the process of transforming the structure's design from Second Empire to Georgian Revival. He replaced the mansard roof and dormer windows with a full third story topped by a hipped roof. Removing the most prominent feature of the Second Empire style could also be justified on pragmatic grounds, since it created more third-floor space. Plans for a new north wing, completed by January 1914, matched the style of the remodeled south wing. The spring term closed early that year, in April instead of June, to allow construction workers to get an early start on the project. Even so, school officials were forced to delay the opening of the fall term until late December, and the contractors continued to work on the project through the winter and into the following spring. In April 1915, renovation of the south wing was complete. The north wing was ready the following October.¹¹

In 1916, attention then focused on remodeling and fireproofing the central section of the building. The mansard roof and west tower were removed to accommodate the new third story. Materials were salvaged for the third-story walls to match the wings and the lower two floors of the central block. Once again, construction continued through the close of the year and into the next, reaching completion in May 1917. The school's 1918 biennial report reported that \$49,573 of an allocated \$50,000 had been spent during 1916-1917 for "fire proofing centre building and extension."¹²

¹⁰ History of the State Board of Control and the 17 State Institutions Under the Management and Jurisdiction of the Board, 1901-1922 (N.p., ca. 1922), 5; Paul C. Larson, *Minnesota Architect: The Life and Work of Clarence H. Johnston* (Afton, Minn.: Afton Historical Press, 1996), 114-115.

¹¹ Plans for Order No. 2021, June 7, 1913, and Plans for Order No. 2112, January 15, 1914, at Minnesota State Academy for the Blind, Faribault; James J. Dow to B. B. Sheffield, February 18, 1914, in unmarked volume of correspondence, Minnesota State Academy for the Blind, Faribault; "School for the Blind to Close for Repairs," *Faribault Republican*, April 15, 1914, 1; Minnesota School for the Blind, *Nineteenth Biennial Report* (Faribault, 1916), 17; Entries for Commission Nos. 2021 (School for the Blind, South Wing) and 2112 (State School for the Blind, North Wing) in "Transfer Ledger—Clarence H. Johnston, St. Paul, Minn.," volumes 2 and 3, at Northwest Architectural Archives, Saint Paul.

¹² Plans for Order No. 2283, February 18, 1916 and June 10, 1916, at Minnesota State Academy for the Blind, Faribault; Entry for Commission No. 2283: State of Minnesota, School for the Blind, Faribo [sic], Alt. and Add. to Centre Sec., in "Transfer Ledger—Clarence H. Johnston, St. Paul, Minn.," volume 3, at Northwest Architectural Archives, Saint Paul; Minnesota School for the Blind, *Twentieth Biennial Report* (Faribault, 1919), 21.

With the construction completed, the School for the Blind had a main building capable of supporting several types of activities. The basement of the north wing and central block contained service areas, including storerooms, kitchens and a scullery, and dining rooms for students and employees. The south wing's basement was used for industrial training activities, with a loom room, a hammock and basket room, and a woodworking room. School rooms were clustered on the first floor in the central block and the south wing, which also housed the library. Parlors, offices, and other public areas were at the front of the building, while the kindergarten room, the officers' dining room, the girls' sick room and a few employees' bedrooms were located in the north wing. Residential rooms for female students and teachers and a matron dominated the second story of all three wings. The south wing of that floor also contained the head music teacher's studio and a linen room, while a sewing and fancy-work room occupied a portion of the central block. A room above the main entrance was used for mending. On the third floor, a large auditorium flanked by music practice rooms took up most of the central block. Two more music rooms and several maids' rooms shared the south wing. The north wing accommodated more girls' dormitory rooms, as well as a gymnasium and a locker room.¹³

The 1942 autobiography of Karsten Ohnstad, a student at the school from 1930 to 1933, gives a rare description of life in and around Dow Hall from the perspective of a student. Ohnstad wrote of his confusion upon his arrival: "To me the building was merely a hard floor and hard plaster walls that loomed up from every direction. It had no form, no height, no width. There was certainly no arrangement to the halls. They turned and twisted bewilderingly in all directions and popped unexpectedly into rooms that were never in the same place twice. I despaired of ever learning to find my way about alone."¹⁴ Ohnstad had kinder words for the relocated Blind Department Building, converted into workshops, which he characterized as "a busy place, filled with the bang of hammers, the rasp of saws, the clatter of boys. The air smelled pleasantly of pine lumber."¹⁵

Change and Alteration Constant

Although the work in the 1910s marked the building's last substantial renovation, repairs continued in subsequent decades. The Victorian wood porch was removed between 1930 and 1932 and replaced with a columned entry more appropriate to the structure's new style. The 1936-1938 biennium saw Dow Hall's slate roof repaired and replacement of an exterior wood service staircase with a steel unit. Meanwhile, WPA workers repointed the building's exterior

¹³ Plans for Order Nos. 2021, 2112, at Minnesota State Academy for the Blind, Faribault.

¹⁴ Karsten Ohnstad, *The World at My Fingertips* (Indianapolis, Ind.: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1942), 83.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 125.

brickwork and recaulked the windows. Between 1938 and 1940, the side porches were removed, allowing more light to enter the basement.¹⁶

During the early 1940s, the school faced the challenge of maintaining its physical plant despite wartime shortages of materials and equipment. Soon after the war's conclusion, acoustical ceiling tile was installed in the building's hallways and some common rooms; additional acoustical tile was placed throughout the building in the following decades. False walls were built in the boys' dining room between 1946 and 1948 to hide walls damaged by persistent water seepage. The textbook library was moved into special bookcases in some classrooms, and the principal took over the former boys' coatroom area near the superintendent's office. Additionally, the steward's apartment was remodeled and redecorated.¹⁷

The steam plant was decommissioned and the exterior smokestack demolished between 1948 and 1950, when the school was connected to the district heating facility at the neighboring state hospital. A series of fire-protection projects were carried out at Dow Hall from the late 1950s into the 1970s, including replacement of metal fire escapes with enclosed exterior stairwells. Improvements throughout the building's interior included installing fluorescent light fixtures, replacing doors, sealing transoms, and altering stairways.¹⁸

Dow Hall continued to serve as the main building on campus, housing students, administrative offices, classrooms, and other functional spaces until 1984. In that year, the Lysen Learning Center was completed and many activities transferred there from Dow Hall. In acknowledgement of the building's long contribution to educating the state's blind and visually impaired, Dow Hall was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1990. The honor, however, did not ensure that the building would find a new use. In 1997, with the building

¹⁶ Minnesota School for the Blind, *Twenty-seventh Biennial Report* (Stillwater, Minn., 1933), frontispiece; Minnesota State Board of Control, *Nineteenth Biennial Report* (Stillwater, Minn., 1938), 245; Minnesota Division of Public Institutions, *Biennial Report for the Period Ending June 30, 1940* (Stillwater, Minn., [1940]), 119.

¹⁷ Minnesota Division of Public Institutions, *Biennial Report* (Stillwater, Minn., [1942]), 138; Minnesota Braille and Sight Saving School, *Report of the Superintendent* (Stillwater, Minn., [1944]), 16; Minnesota Division of Public Institutions, *Biennial Report* (Stillwater, Minn., [1946]), 132; Minnesota Division of Public Institutions *Biennial Report* (Stillwater, Minn., [1948]), 168-169; Minnesota Division of Public Institutions, *Biennial Report* (Stillwater, Minn., [1952]), 246.

¹⁸ "One Hundred Years of Sight and Sound," 14-15; various project plans held at the Minnesota State Academy for the Blind, Faribault; Thomas R. Zahn and Jacqueline Sluss, "Blind Department Building and Dow Hall, State School for the Blind," National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form, 1989, copy on file at the State Historic Preservation Office, Minnesota Historical Society, Saint Paul; Barb Morrissey, Administration Office at the Minnesota State Academy for the Blind, telephone interview by Shawn P. Rounds, June 17, 1997.

vacant except for a small community service program in the basement, the school's administration proceeded with plans to demolish Dow Hall in the following year.¹⁹

¹⁹ Ibid.

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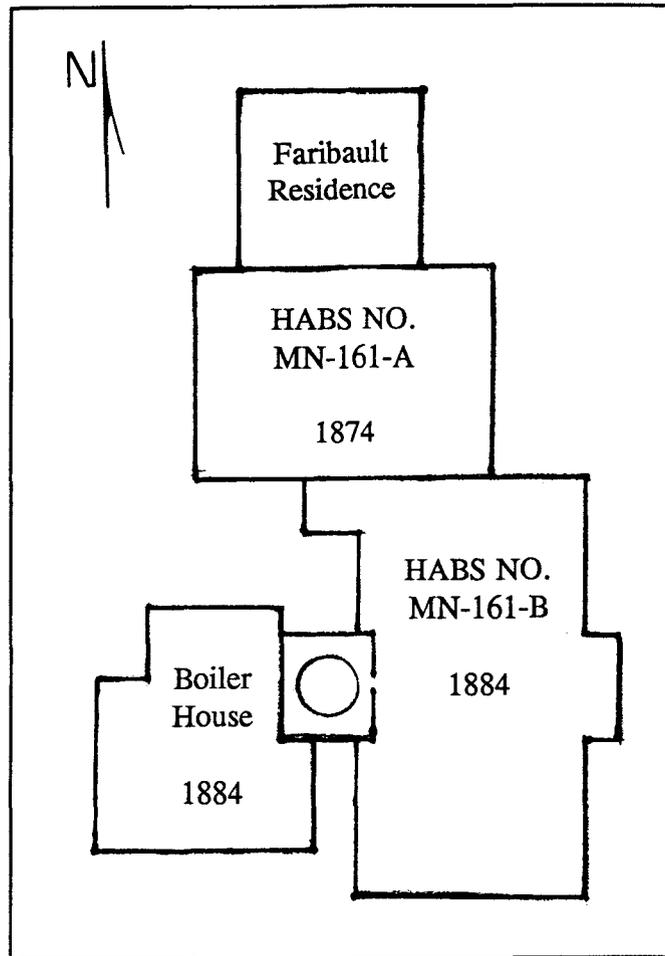


Figure 1. Central campus, 1884. Based on Sanborn Insurance Map, 1884.

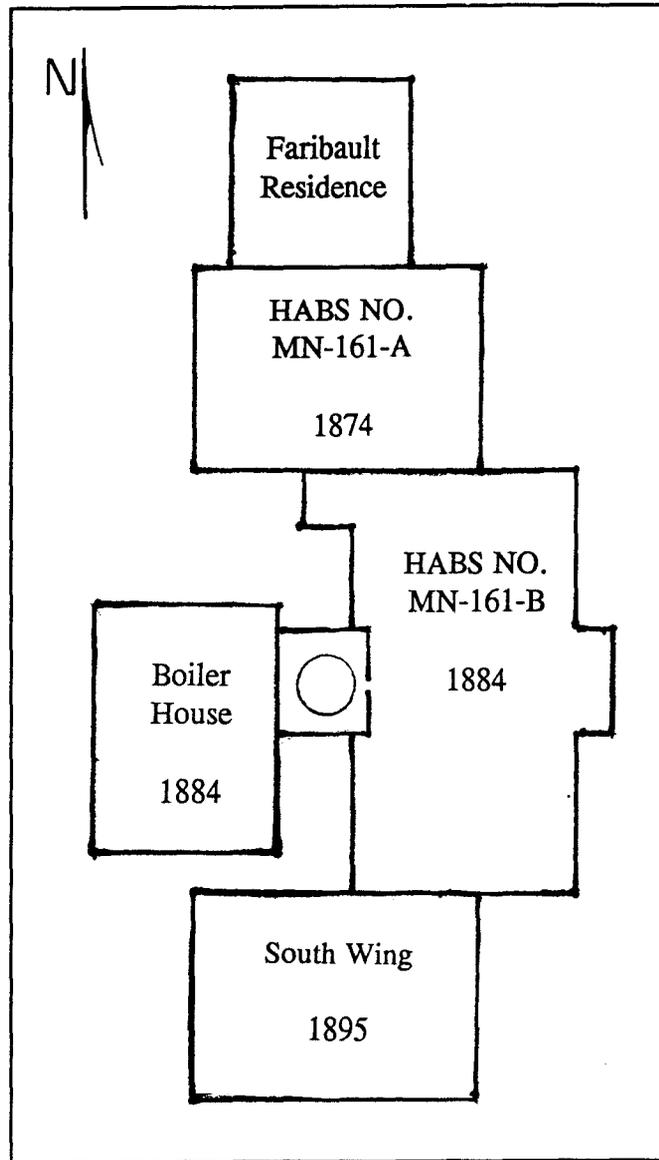


Figure 2. Central campus, 1895. Based on Sanborn Insurance Map, 1899.

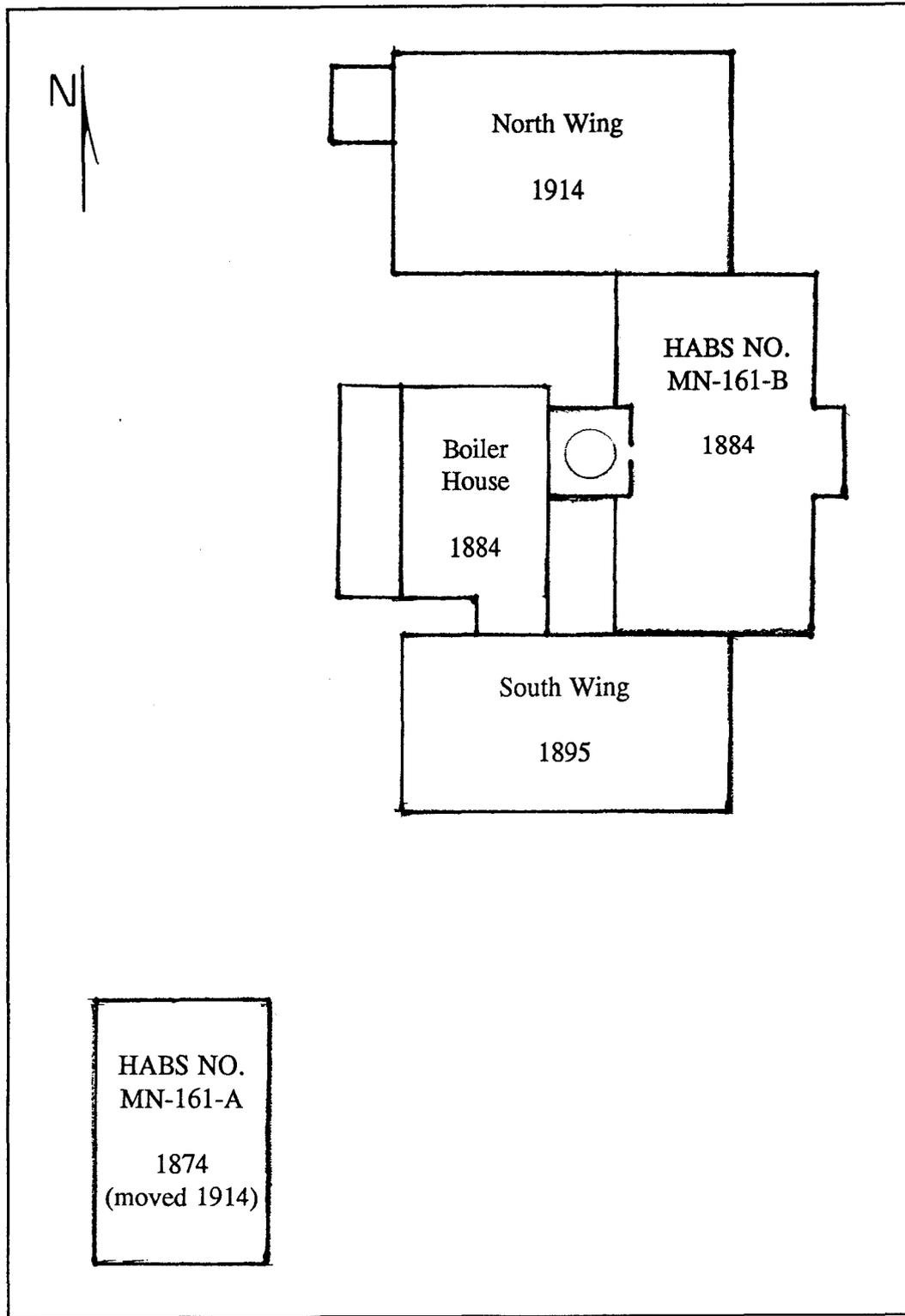


Figure 3. Central campus, 1914. Based on Sanborn Insurance Map, 1914.