

## Periods of Change

Each half century, divided here as 1855-1906, 1907-1945, and 1946-2002, brought important developments in the campus plan. As Michigan State matured, its acreage and the number of its buildings grew. Today, it has 5,239 contiguous acres with 2,100 developed acres and 3,139 acres of “experimental farms, research facilities and natural areas.”<sup>25</sup> Geographical and architectural changes reflect a broadening of institutional mission. During each of these time periods, institutional name changes helped to focus Michigan State’s identity.

In the first half century, for example, the school was called the Agricultural College of the State of Michigan in 1855 and then changed to State Agricultural College in 1861. In the next half century, it became the Michigan Agricultural College in 1909 and then Michigan State College of Agriculture and Applied Science in 1925. In the most recent era, the school became Michigan State University of Agriculture and Applied Science in 1955 and finally, in 1964, became Michigan State University.



“Sacred space” in winter, Michigan State University Museum (LEFT) and Beaumont Tower (RIGHT), 2001.

## From an Oak Opening: The Campus Plan Emerges

### 1855-1906

While strolling amidst the trees and buildings of the West Circle Drive area, it becomes apparent that this quiet yet often traversed section of campus is special. It is the area where the earliest campus architecture, probably sited by John C. Holmes, once stood.<sup>26</sup> As West Circle Drive curves it delineates an open “sacred space,” in which no buildings should ever be built; this area is anchored on the east by Linton Hall (1881), and on the west by Cowles House (1857).<sup>27</sup> These are the two oldest examples of extant campus architecture. The northern anchor is the MSU Union and the southern anchors are the Michigan State University Museum and Beaumont Tower.

When pedestrians head south from the MSU Union toward Beaumont Tower, they are enveloped by tree canopies that form a picturesque umbrella and are visually invited to ascend the knoll where the tower stands. From here, they can survey a random arrangement of oaks, conifers, other deciduous trees, and lawns that are now landscaped but still recall the selection of this “oak opening” as the place where Michigan State University began.<sup>28</sup> This oak opening, a break in the densely forested area, was a desirable location because it required less clearing than many other possible sites and, fortunately, it possessed natural beauty. James Fenimore Cooper, the novelist of frontier life described a Michigan forest in his 1848 book *The Oak Openings* as if it were this site: “The trees, with very few exceptions, were what is called the ‘burr oak,’ a small variety of a very extensive genus; and the spaces between them, always irregular, and often of singular beauty, have obtained the name of ‘openings’; the two terms combined

giving their appellation to this particular species of native forest, under the name of ‘Oak Openings.’”<sup>29</sup> On the periphery of the oak opening, College Hall was erected in 1856 and collapsed in 1918-its wooden framework weakened with age. A decade later, in 1929, Beaumont Tower arose on the same site in the Collegiate Gothic style. It commemorates the site of College Hall, the first campus building devoted to the study of scientific agriculture, and in its verticality, the tower symbolizes future scholastic aspirations.

In 1855, five years after the Grand River plank road extended from Lansing to present-day East Lansing, the Michigan legislature approved the establishment of an agricultural college and stipulated that the land could not exceed fifteen dollars an acre or a distance of ten miles from Lansing. Since cleared land cost more than fifteen dollars an acre, it was essential to find a piece of property with some clearing-hence the desirability of the Burr farm with its natural oak opening. This natural opening allowed College Hall and Saint’s Rest to be erected more quickly in 1856 than if the land had to be cleared entirely. Other reasons for the site selection included the proximity to Lansing and the need to use these 677 acres for experimental farming. There was considerable soil diversity and a variety of trees including many hardwoods, “elm, white ash, swamp white oak, silver maple, basswood, shagbark hickory, and a small proportion of tulip, sycamore, butternut, white pine and tamarack. . . .”<sup>30</sup>

From the beginning, faculty and students from horticulture, botany, and related disciplines engaged in the taming of the campus grounds. In 1856, John C. Holmes was appointed professor in the Department of Horticulture with responsibilities for the preparation of “the grounds for the growing of ornamental trees, Fruit Trees, Shrubbery, and Vegetables. Experiments with the seeds of trees and vegetables, orcharding, vegetable gardening, Landscape gardening, tc [sic].”<sup>31</sup> In 1861, the school became the State Agricultural College. During that year, the Board of Education approved the erection of the first bridge over the Red Cedar River, “near the center line of the farm,”<sup>32</sup> at what is now the intersection of Farm Lane and the river. In the 1860s, George Thurber, M.D., became professor of botany and horticulture and superintendent of gardens, orchards, and grounds. He planted many exotic trees. In



MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY MUSEUM



MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES AND HISTORICAL COLLECTIONS

*Top: Farm Lane, looking south, early 1900s.*  
*Above: Williams Hall, begun 1869, opened 1870, burned 1919. Site of the current Michigan State University Museum.*

the area east of Cowles House, students fulfilled some of their required labor hours pulling stumps. In 1863, the first landscape gardening course was listed in the annual college catalog. In 1870, the scientist William James Beal became a lecturer in botany and horticulture, and he was responsible for many of the early campus plantings; the W.J. Beal Botanical Garden is named in honor of him. That same year, Williams Hall, a dormitory, was completed. It stood between College Hall and Saint’s Rest.

By the end of the 1860s, there were twelve buildings: one classroom building (College Hall), a greenhouse, two barns, a farmhouse, a herdsman’s house, a dormitory (Williams Hall), a boarding hall (Saint’s Rest), and four faculty houses including Cowles House. Although all but Cowles House have long since disappeared, the sites of many of these buildings are occupied by extant buildings and some of the same thoroughfares are still in use. The road just north of faculty house #4 (now Cowles House)

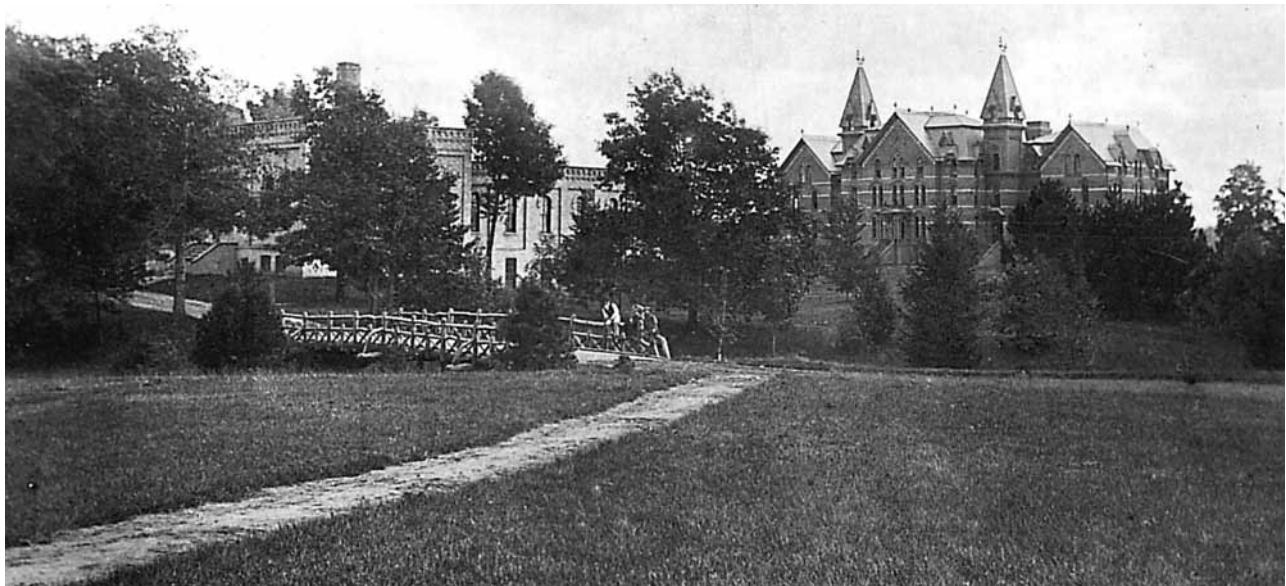
and south of faculty houses 1, 2, and 3 (now Gilchrist, Yakeley, and Landon Halls) became Faculty Drive and then West Circle Drive. Eventually, this road was extended to Michigan Avenue to become the Beal entrance, named for Prof. Beal. This is the oldest road still extant on campus. By 1870, Farm Lane was a north-south road with a westerly jog. Later, this jog became part of East Circle Drive, just north of North Kedzie Hall, until it closed to through traffic in the late 1990s. In addition to Farm Lane, by 1870, two railroads already stretched across campus along courses similar to those of today.

During the 1870s, the first campus plan emerged, the Committee on Buildings and College Property was created, and the number of campus visitors increased with the initiation of the Farmers' Institutes. The campus was becoming a more complex educational resource. In 1871, Pres. Theophilus C. Abbot requested and received State Board of Agriculture approval to hire a landscape gardener. "Early in the spring [1872] the grounds were laid out by a competent landscape gardener. Locations were established for drives, walks, groups of trees, and several additional buildings."<sup>33</sup> Clearly, President Abbot wanted a cohesive plan integrating architecture and landscape. Adam Oliver, a landscape gardener from Kalamazoo, Michigan, provided the initial scheme for roads, walks, and building sites. His plan no longer exists, but the board's remarks do: "Resolved, that the plan submitted by Mr. Adam Oliver for

the improvement of the college grounds shall be completed by inking or painting the outlines of the river and ravines, and the walks and drives, and by marking upon it the trees and groups of trees existing upon the grounds."<sup>34</sup>

Oliver's main contribution was a fluid pattern of roads and paths which is reflected in the first publication of a campus plan in *The Nineteenth Annual Catalogue of the Officers and Students of the State Agricultural College of Michigan of 1875*. This published plan reinforces the campus description that was included in the catalogs of 1869 and 1870. A portion of the 1875 campus description reads as follows: "[T]here are walks, drives, rustic bridges, lawns, flower borders, and groves in pleasing variety. The buildings, mostly of brick, stand upon a slight eminence among the forest trees, which have been purposely retained."<sup>35</sup> Significantly, what is now West Circle Drive was influenced by Oliver's plan, and emerges as a quasi-circular drive. The informal grouping of buildings in a park environment still speaks to us as a beautiful and humanly scaled place. Like other land-grant campuses, this informality was supposed to express "modest rural values" that contrasted with "the elitism and formality of . . . traditional colleges."<sup>36</sup>

In several of his annual reports to the State Board of Agriculture, President Abbot spoke of the campus plan and its development. The "college" and the "farm" were the terms many used to describe the area where buildings



MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES AND HISTORICAL COLLECTIONS

**Rustic bridge near (Beal) Botanical Garden. Chemical Laboratory (left) and original Wells Hall (right) in the background, late 1800s.**