

Beauty is a Silent Teacher

-Floyd Starr

Architecture and Landscaping at Starr Commonwealth

Alice Murphy, Presenter

Elizabeth Goodenough PhD, *Where Do the Children Play?*, Sponsor

Amy Reimann MSI, Director of Archives, Starr Commonwealth

Abstract

Between 1915 and 1952 Floyd Starr, founder of Starr Commonwealth in Albion, Michigan, employed architect Marcus Burrowes to design eleven buildings for his growing reformatory. Burrowes, who became a friend to Starr and a believer in the school, promised "I'll draw the plans . . . and you may pay me whenever you can." His English revival style has brought comfort and stability to what is now a 350-acre campus. Research on the architecture and shared philosophies of Burrowes and Starr will help guide and develop a Centennial exhibition at the school and possibly other exhibitions planned for the Farmington Hills Library (near where Burrowes built his own home, Burbrook, and other country estates) and his five libraries in Detroit.

The intentions of Burrowes, both in the architecture as well as in the interaction of these structures with their surroundings, show how his modified Tudor Revival style aimed to connect children with living things and natural elements, as well as offer the safety and permanence of a home. Inspired from 1907 to 1909 by association with Detroit architect, Albert Kahn, Burrowes' vision evokes reminiscence of old English cottages. It harmonizes as well with the rehabilitated farmhouses Starr favored for daily chores of milking cows and feeding chickens. The half-timbering, sharply angled roofs, rounded windows and doors, high chimneys and centrally located fireplaces offer domestic comforts lacking in more industrial configurations of the period. The Burrowes-designed Brueckner Museum has a cloistered entranceway and oak doors that open onto a gallery of modified Norman design. His Chapel-in-the-Woods with its simple lines and strong brick walls carries the history of the school and the message of Jesus in thirty-two stained glass windows designed by Wilbur Herbert Burnham. The interplay between these homey, farm-like, sacred structures and the exterior walks, drives, gardens and wooded hills designed by T. Glenn Phillips and Genevieve Gillette creates a sense of security, beauty, and stability for those living at the school. These natural features reflect Starr's promise to the boys, "Your play space is as big as all outdoors." This idea of space is present indoors as well, as Starr insisted, "You cannot expect a bunch of active, clumsy boys to work in a cramped and cluttered space. They've got to have room in which to move around." Starr and Burrowes had a shared reverence for the past and confidence that charming houses, comfortable recreational spaces, and splendid grounds influence the attitudes and growth of young people in positive ways. Such faith in organic traditions cultivated at this lakeside campus is not evident in more economically designed institutions.

Objectives

- Analyze the architecture of Marcus Burrowes at Starr Commonwealth.
- Compare his home-centered designs to other reformatories of the time.
- Define how landscape design relates to the buildings.
- Investigate how architectural and natural aspects of the school reflect the founder.
- Study the effects of the campus on those enrolled at the school.
- Compile information for a published paper.
- Provide content for a travelling exhibit celebrating the 100th anniversary of Starr Commonwealth.

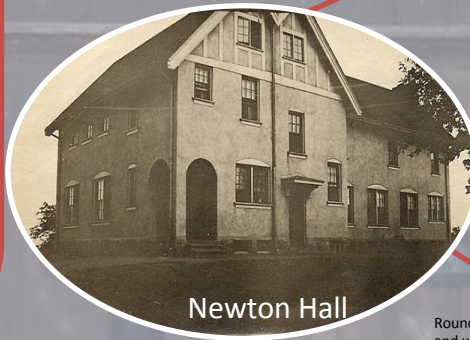


Boys played on the vast grounds



Chinese pheasant companion

Tudor Revival Style



Newton Hall



High Chimneys



Half Timbering



Rounded doors and windows

Bell donated to chapel by Marcus Burrowes



Methods

Readings

- *Faith Made Visible*, Keith J. Fennimore (1988)
- Starr Commonwealth News (Spring, 1937 and Winter, 1948)
- *A Boy's Point of View*, Gerald Robinson (2005)
- "No such thing...," Elizabeth W. McAdam and Floyd Starr (1968)
- Correspondence from archives (1944-1967)

Consultations

- Amy Reimann, Starr Commonwealth archives
- Sally Bund, assistant archivist, Bentley Historical Library
- James G. Leaf, *A History of the Internal Organization of the State Reform School for Boys at Westborough, Massachusetts 1846-1974*, unpublished thesis (1988)

Applications

- Compiled notes and summaries of sources.
- Compared Burrowes' architecture to other reformatories and structures.
- Observed the campus firsthand to consider its effects.

Results & Conclusion

Philosophy of Floyd Starr

"There is no such thing as a bad boy."
"Beauty is a silent teacher."

"You cannot expect a bunch of active, clumsy boys to work in a cramped and cluttered space. They've got to have room in which to move around. That's been one of the secrets of our success..."

Effects of the Campus

"The fondness I have in my heart for . . . the Campus will always remain unchanged." Gerald D. Robinson, Alumnus
"As I was once, so today are there others as homeless, as penniless, as helpless, asking only for a chance to become what I have become, a solid, worthwhile American citizen." Danny, Alumnus
"Some of the finest citizens of this and other states are products from your ranks." Frank D. Fitzgerald, former Michigan Governor
"I have investigated [Starr Commonwealth] from every angle and find that it is all it claimed to be--and more." James Inglis, former Chairman of the Board, National Bank of Detroit
[Regarding the institution in Westborough, Mass.] "the decision to follow the architectural model of their own adult penitentiaries rather than create a cottage system for their juveniles. . . compromised [it] from the outset."
James G. Leaf, PhD
"There is no institution in this or neighboring states which is doing so much for the youth of our land." Alexander G. Ruthven, former President of the University of Michigan

Conclusion

Observations from those both inside and outside Starr Commonwealth imply that the comfort, stability, and beauty provided by landscape and architecture had a positive impact on the way the boys developed and grew. Starr Commonwealth's commitment the cottage style, regardless of cost, created a nurturing reformatory. Future schools could benefit from observing the success of the design of this institution. Architecture and landscape should not be underestimated.



Newton Hall
1915



Emily Clark Building
1917



Wilcox Cottage
1918



Hillside Cottage
1920



Webster Hall
1934



Inglis Cottage
1939



Chapel-in-the-Woods
1949



Brueckner Museum
1952



Norton Cottage
1957



Candler Hall
1957



Kresge Cottage
1958