

Vermont

A Publication of the
University of Vermont

Winter 1984

My dear Sir: I forwarded today
a sketch plan & elevation of
the Billings Library which after
our talk will I think explain
themselves and I hope meet with
your approval. I trust I have
met your objections & suggestions.
Please be very frank in finding
fault for how the time -
Very Respectfully
Yours
H. H. Richardson

W. H. Shackham Esq. } June 1 - 83

Building Billings

H.H. Richardson thought it was the best library he had designed.

Frederick Billings thought of it as a monument that would bear his name for all time.

The combined talents and resources of these two 19th century giants gave the University of Vermont a national architectural treasure: The Billings Library.

by Laurel Ginter

The building had a quiet beginning; there was no pomp or ceremony and the exact date of groundbreaking is unknown. However, the events leading up to the excavation were anything but quiet, because this building brought together two great 19th century personalities: Frederick Billings, successful businessman and railway magnate who donated the library, and Henry Hobson Richardson, the greatest architect of his time, who designed it. The unique, often friction-filled collaboration between these two strong-minded men produced a national architectural landmark, the Billings Library, as well as a prodigious amount of correspondence which is now housed in the University of Vermont Archives.

It all began in 1882, when George Perkins Marsh, statesman, scholar and native Woodstockian, discovered that he was too poor to bequeath his library, among the most outstanding of its time, to the University of Vermont. Therefore, to insure financial security for his family after his death, he put the library up for sale. The university, itself too poor to buy it, would have lost this trove of scholarly treasure had it not been for UVM alumnus Frederick Billings (class of 1844) who, seeing a way to assist both his old friend Marsh and his alma mater, bought the library and gave it to the university.

Having secured the books, Billings proceeded to create a library. On November 7, 1882, he wrote to university President Matthew Buckham:

How much have you studied up on the subject of a fireproof Library building? — With a capacity say for 50,000 volumes — a building in a form to admit of enlargement if it should be found necessary at any time to

increase its capacity. That subject should be looked into pretty thoroughly. Would it not be well for you to visit the new Library buildings that have been put up here and there in the country, and so get at the best plan and the estimated cost?

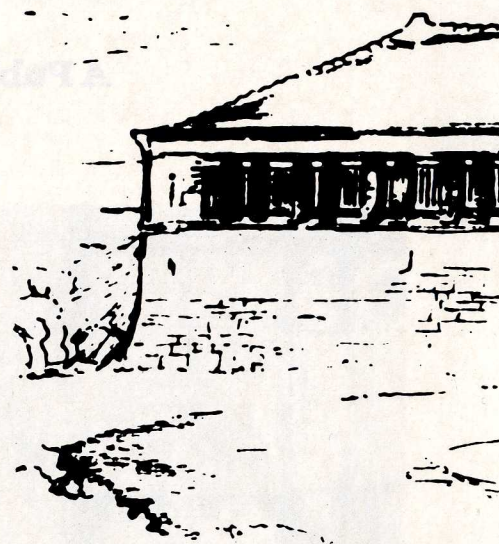
Thus began the sequence of events that led, in September of 1883, to the groundbreaking for the Billings Library.

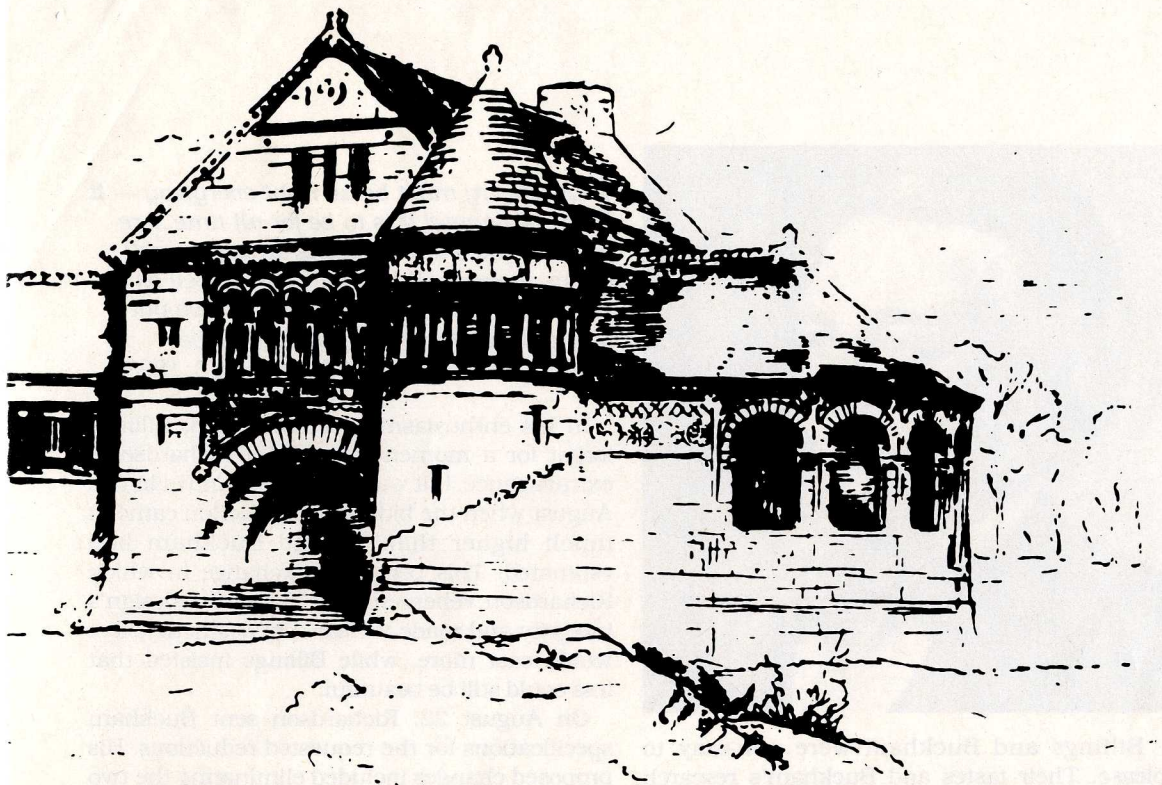
President Buckham carried out the charge Billings had given him, visiting several libraries, and sending plans, photographs and reports to Billings. Billings responded, on March 15, 1883, formally announcing his gift of a library building,

And now the need of the University for a fire proof library building, which has been pressing for so many years, can no longer be put aside. It would be almost criminal to allow the very valuable library, thus enriched by the Marsh collection to run any further risk of destruction or damage. A substantial and graceful building, a fit home for such a library should be built without delay. As the University has no funds to devote to the purpose, and as no time should be lost, I give seventy five thousand dollars to secure such a building. I do this in grateful appreciation of my Alma Mater, the Alma Mater of two of my brothers, and in the hope that others of her children will remember her with gifts . . .

The first mention of H. H. Richardson occurs in a letter dated March 27, 1883 from Billings to Buckham.

Laurel Ginter, '75, is a writer/editor in the UVM personnel department.





Richardson's original design for the library's west elevation submitted to Billings and Buckham in the spring of 1883. (Houghton Library.)

A person this morning recommended to me Mr. Richardson (I think that was his name — the architect of the Capitol at Albany). You might drop in upon him and see if he would submit a sketch.

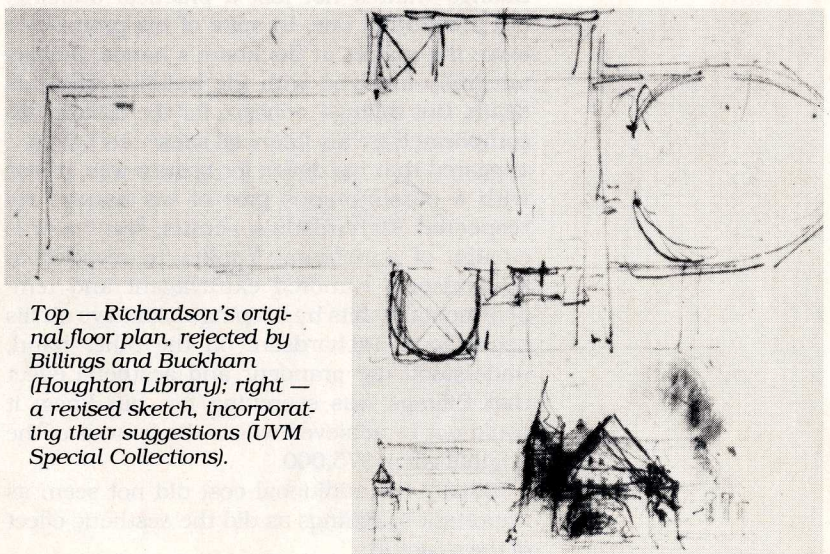
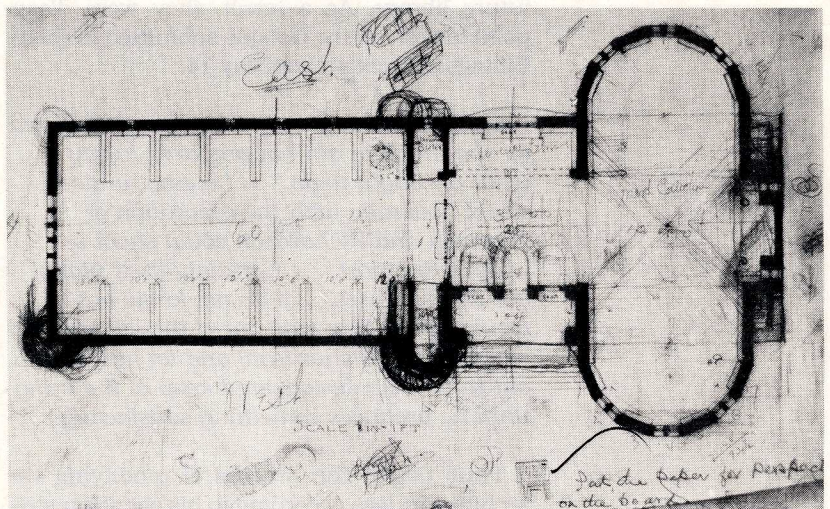
H. H. Richardson, who designed the Crane Library in Quincy, Mass., and Trinity Church, Boston, in addition to the Capitol at Albany, was the first American architect to attain international status. That Billings had become acquainted with his reputation seems clear in his second mention of Richardson to Buckham three days later:

I think it would be well for you to write Mr. Richardson and ask him if he would be willing to submit sketches without expense — give him the general features of what we want. I hear from other sources that he is a very extravagant man — At the same time, he stands so very high, I would like very much to see what he would work out.

Richardson did prepare sketches and urged a meeting with Billings and Buckham. Billings resisted the idea of meeting with Richardson, but reluctantly agreed.

Richardson's eagerness to meet with his clients and Billings' resistance to it became a leit motif in their relationship. The two men met only once, on May 23, 1883, and most of their correspondence was handled through Buckham, who acted as intermediary.*

*For a closer look at the Billings/Buckham/Richardson relationship, see UVM Historic Preservation graduate Mary Jo Derko, "The Billings Library: A Cooperative Effort," unpublished MS, Bailey/Howe Library, 1983.



Top — Richardson's original floor plan, rejected by Billings and Buckham (Houghton Library); right — a revised sketch, incorporating their suggestions (UVM Special Collections).

Portrait of Frederick Billings by Montpelier artist, Thomas Waterman Wood which still hangs over the fireplace in the main lobby of Billings. (UVM Special Collections)



Billings and Buckham were not easy to please. Their tastes and Buckham's research helped them form a clear conception of their future library. As a result, they were disappointed with all the designs submitted to them. Billings to Buckham on May 14:

I am, like yourself, very much perplexed and for the moment am not prepared to say what we ought to do. . . . I cannot understand how men with the reputation of Emerson and Richardson could shoot so wide of the mark . . . Certainly their plans are dead failures . . . I do not know but it would be the best way out of the dilemma to employ him (Richardson) and let him work out some new designs and keep at the thing until he produces something satisfactory.

Thus began the process of modifying the architect's ideas according to his client's tastes. Billings wanted not just a practical building, but a beautiful one. In spite of his promise to leave the matter in Buckham's hands, he was integrally involved with the building until his death. But Billings' concern for the design was complicated by his financial sense, and often it appeared that his desire for beauty was at war with a parsimonious part of his nature. He respected Richardson's genius, but he was enough of a Vermont Yankee to respond to Richardson's rumored extravagant and temperamental habits by keeping a close eye on his pocketbook. Richardson, on the other hand, understood the grandeur and aesthetic effect that Billings was searching for, but knew it could not be achieved within the bounds of the original gift of \$75,000.

Initially the additional cost did not seem as important to Billings as did the aesthetic effect of the structure.

That Library must be all right everyway — It bears my name! It is to be for all time. Are you sure the Marsh Apse is large enough? Let us make it all lovely inside as well as outside. A few pennies more better be put into it, rather than anything should be wanting. (Billings to Buckham July 3, 1893).

In his enthusiasm over the design, Billings forgot for a moment his fear of Richardson's extravagance, but was sharply reminded in late August when the bids for construction came in much higher than he and Buckham had estimated. This began an exchange in which Richardson vehemently defended the design's integrity and made it clear that aesthetic effect would cost more, while Billings insisted that less could still be beautiful.

On August 22, Richardson sent Buckham specifications for the requested reductions. His proposed changes included eliminating the two northern turrets, cutting the Main Reading Room by one alcove and using local stone for the entire building.

Ironically, on the same day, Billings wrote to Buckham expressing his willingness to increase his gift, a sentiment which he later contradicted:

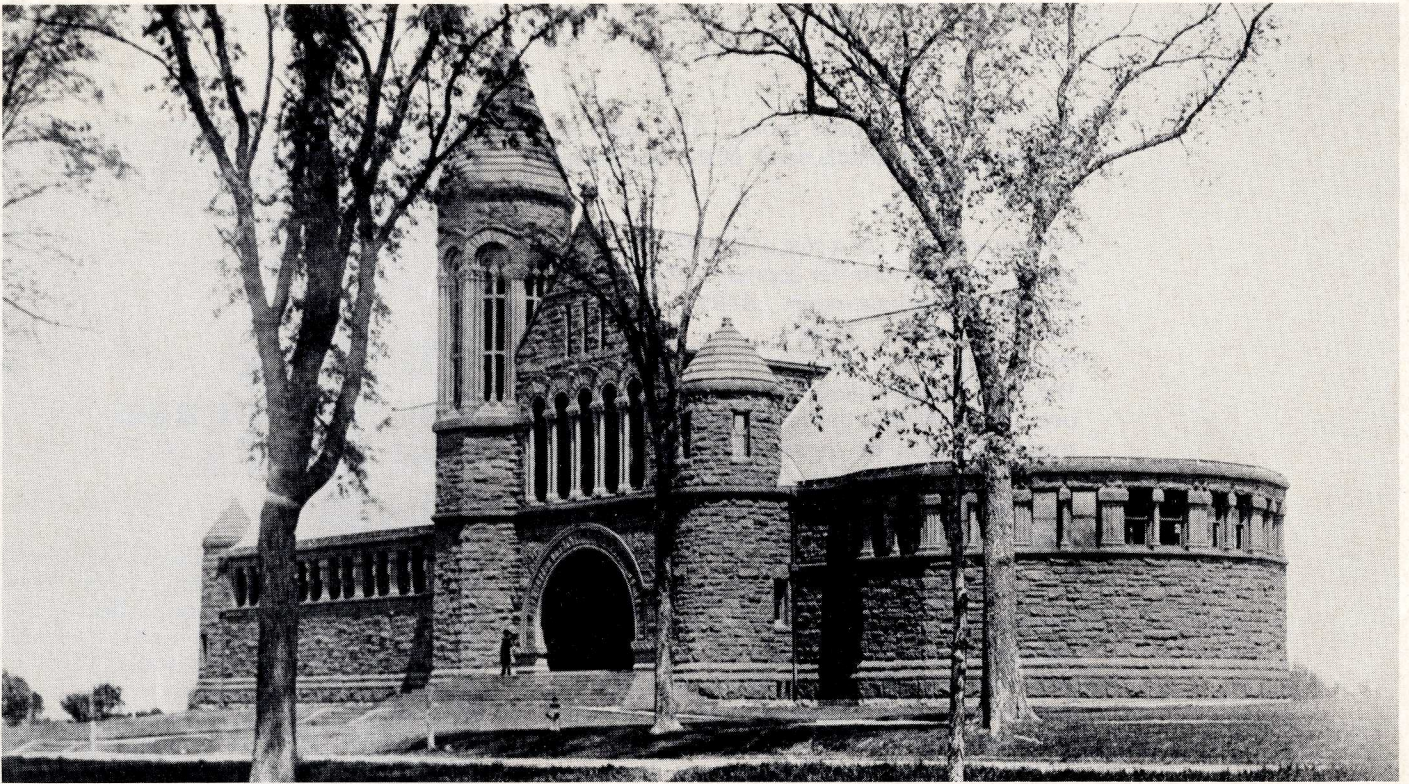
Having promised you \$10,000 in addition to the \$75,000, I want to say confidentially that I will go somewhat futher, if we can get the right thing. The building must be everyone's admiration if the cost go up to \$100,000 . . .

Two days later Billings wrote to Buckham in reaction to proposed changes:

. . . I fear as you say that the building will be very much cheapened — I think the safe course is to get estimates from local contractors. I don't believe there is any need of taking away anything from the substantial and graceful attractiveness of the plan, especially with my willingness to increase my gift.

On August 30, Richardson offered a way out of the contracting dilemma:

The solution I propose then; since you say Mr. Billings wants the building in its entirety, is to contract for the exterior stonework just as it stands in the drawings, but without any carving, as to push the work ahead as rapidly as possible, leaving the whole interior, in which we can greatly economize, for future consideration. This would be a contract — would it not? — which would secure the main things you



Front view of Billings Library, shortly after the building's completion. (UVM Special Collections)

both want. Of course, the resulting building would in the end require an expenditure beyond the limit which you named to me when last in Brookline, but perhaps not beyond the limits of Mr. Billings' generosity, if I rightly understood you.

Buckham and Billings agreed to a similar solution, contracting with Norcross (Richardson's contractor) for the foundation only. At this point Buckham requested Richardson to draw up a new set of plans and specifications, the details of which are not referred to in the extant correspondence. These new specifications were sent to Norcross in early October, at which time Billings redefined his financial position, retracting in his October 10 letter to Buckham his promise to give \$100,000 for the library:

I am very anxious to know about the new estimate and specifications for it is my desire that the total expenditures on the Library building should not go beyond \$85,000 at the outside.

In his letter to Buckham on October 15, Billings indicated that the dispute over the contractor was nearing an end:

If the building can be fully completed in every respect by Norcross within the amount that I have suggested, that is not increasing the expenditures over \$75,000 by more than \$10,000, I suppose it would be better to let him do the work, but unless he is brought down from his high horse by competing bids we will be in trouble.

The job was put out to bid on November 5. Richardson responded to this action by expressing concern that the work not be given to a contractor who could not understand the importance of the design:

I do hope most sincerely that the mistake will not be made of giving the work into the charge of anyone unless he is not merely pecuniarily responsible but also fully able to appreciate and execute the character of the work proposed.

Although Norcross's second bid was also high, the local contractors' fear of Richardson, which Billings referred to as a "bete noir," coupled with artistic concerns, led Billings to be convinced that he could not get the building he wanted for \$85,000:

Your careful study of Library architecture and personal examination of Library buildings, of which you have so kindly given me the benefit, and our conferences over plans submitted for a building for the University make it clear that \$75,000 will not secure an entirely satisfactory structure. I desire the Library to be not only supremely fit for its purpose but unique, graceful and impressive — I therefore increase my gift from \$75,000 to \$100,000. (Billings to Buckham Nov. 16)

Once the issue of money was settled, Billings returned to his earlier state of enthusiasm and involvement in the design. On November 28, he wrote Buckham, "We will have the arch — and the carving on the chimney — secure them

even if it costs a little more." And then, on December 3, he details some of the necessities and their costs:

the stone arch . . . at a cost of \$1329

carving on the hammer beams . . . \$330

stairs from the basement . . . \$165

the storm porch . . . \$286

ceiling paneling . . . \$2004

We shall be expending I judge nearly \$10,000 over the \$100,000, but being in the for thing I must not stop at these last expenditures which are needful to finish up the work becomingly. . . . It is lucky that I made my gift when I did; I am too poor to make it now.

The Billings Library was dedicated at Commencement in June, 1885. Characteristically, Billings chose to be absent from the festivities and sent instead a long letter detailing his gratitude to the University for all the advantages it had given him.

Dedication did not mean stasis, however. Billings, long dissatisfied with the length of the main reading room, decided to extend it by 20 feet and to add another room, which could be locked, in back of the fireplace, to house the Marsh collection. In the midst of planning this addition, H. H. Richardson died and the changes were carried out by his firm.

As much as two years after Richardson's death, Billings was still rankled by their financial squabbles. He was exasperated by the description of the Billings Library which appeared in Mrs. van Rensselaer's biography of Richardson and which suggested that the architect's design for the main reading room had been cut back for financial reasons. The implication that he had been ungenerous in building the library was unbearable to the man who had written to Buckham in May, 1885, "... it is not just money that I put into the building. My love is built into it." He wrote Buckham on August 8, 1888:

The statement in the Richardson book that he would have made the North part of the building more (impressive) but was kept from doing so from "motives of economy" cuts me to the quick.

In 1890 Frederick Billings received an honorary degree from the University of Vermont. The following October he died, leaving a considerable endowment to ensure that the Billings Library would be well cared for.

Billings could not have foreseen that his building one day would house a student center rather than a library, but he seemed content to know, as he had written to Buckham seven years before his death, "It will be for all time." ■

Billings: A new phase of building begins

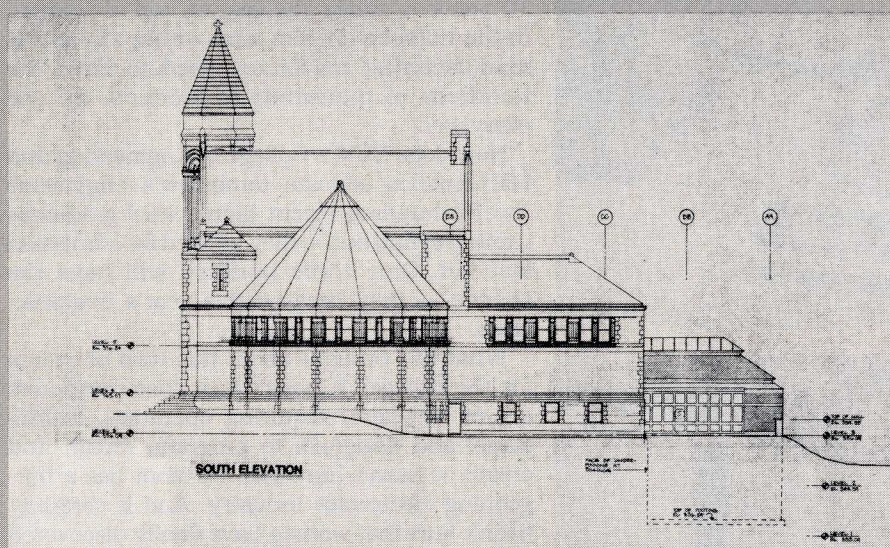
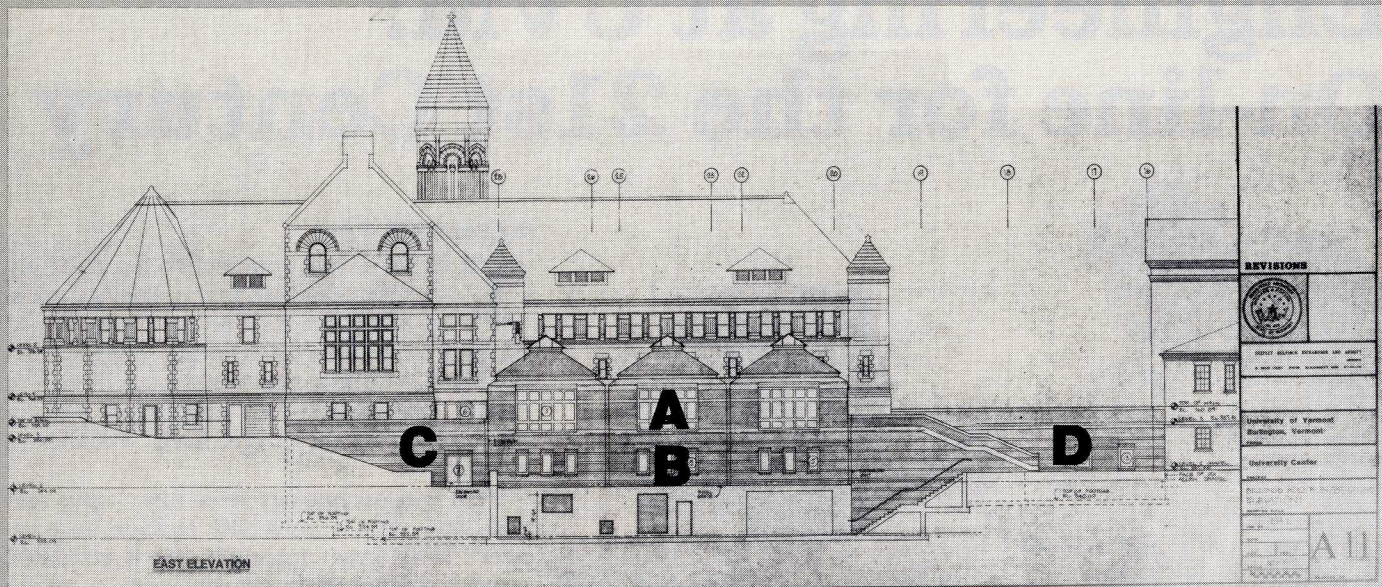
The saga of the Billings Library does not end with its donor's death. For almost 80 years students read and researched within its walls. Then, in 1961, the books were moved out to the newly completed Guy W. Bailey Library. In 1963, a transformed Billings opened its doors: bookstacks were now offices, reading rooms, meeting and program spaces; the basement, a snack bar — in short, it was now the Billings Student Center.

The transformation goes on. New construction and renovation of Billings and Ira Allen Chapel will begin in Spring 1984. A student center complex, designed by the architectural firm of Shepley, Bullfinch, Richardson and Abbot, in cooperation with Preservation Partnership, should be completed within two years after work begins. Both Hugh Shepley and the late Joseph Priestly Richardson are grandsons of Henry Hobson Richardson, architect of the original building.

The design does not attempt to recreate either Billings or Ira Allen, but uses motifs from both structures to provide unity to the entire complex. President Coor explains that "the genius of the design is its ability to unite an overused building with an underused one, spread the traffic evenly between them, and not mar the architectural or historic integrity of either."

The plan connects the two buildings with an underground corridor of offices, expands the Catamount Den by appending a dining area to the east side of Billings at basement level, and provides the university with a much needed lecture hall, to be constructed to the northeast of Ira Allen Chapel, facing Colchester Avenue. New construction will total approximately 30,000 square feet.

In addition to this new construction, existing space will be rehabilitated to accommodate student organizations and programs more efficiently.



ARCHITECTS' DRAWINGS OF THE PROPOSED ADDITION TO BILLINGS. Above: East elevation showing (A) dining area, (B) student offices, (C) terrace and conference room, and (D) terrace and connector to Ira Allen Chapel. Left: South elevation. The shaded area is the proposed dining room. To provide unity to the completed structure the addition design incorporates the roofline of Marsh Lounge and the window placement similar to that in Billings.

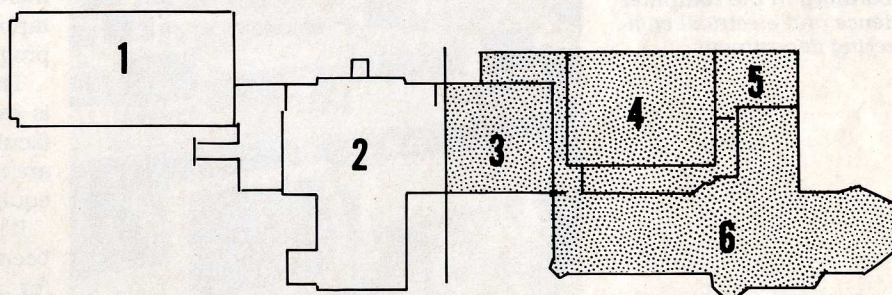
Specifically:

1. The basement of Ira Allen Chapel will be converted into a production area where the Vermont Cynic, Ariel and the Burlington Review will be published.

2. WRUV's production studios will be moved from Pomeroy Annex to Billings.

3. The chapel will be fitted with theatrical lights, the stage enlarged and additional fire exits provided. When renovated, the chapel will be used for concerts, lectures and other programs that are too large for the new lecture hall and too small for Patrick Gym.

4. Offices currently located in Billings will become study and meeting areas. **L.G.**



KEY PLAN FOR BILLINGS/IRA ALLEN CHAPEL RENOVATIONS: Shaded areas indicate old and new Billings. 1. Lecture hall/movie theatre (new construction); 2. Ira Allen Chapel; basement will house a production area for the Vermont Cynic, Ariel, and other media organizations. The Chapel will be used for small concerts and special programs; 3. Terrace/connector between Billings and Ira Allen (new construction); 4. Level 1: Dining area. Level 2: student offices (new construction); 5. Level 1: Terrace. Level 2: conference room (new construction); 6. Billings Center: study and meeting space. Food will be prepared and served in the basement.