Photograph of the newly-opened Mary Helen Cochran Library from The Briar Patch yearbook 1929-1930.

“A Beautiful Building, Spacious and Well Designed”: Selected Architectural Plans for Cochran Library
This selection of 11 blueprints and drawings represents a small segment of the Sweet Briar collection of architectural documents that comprise an archive of the evolution the campus. The whole collection cared for by art gallery staff exceeds 700 documents, salvaged from misadventure by individuals such as Ann Marshall Whitley ’47, founding director of the Sweet Briar Museum; Carma Fauntleroy, first director of the campus art gallery, and her successor Rebecca Massie Lane; Charles Kestner, long-time head of the buildings and grounds department; and Aileen H. Laing, professor of art history emerita. This particular installation, harkening back 85 years to the 1928-1929 construction and dedication of the Mary Helen Cochran Library, has been developed to honor the building’s 2012-2014 renovation and enhancement.

Architect Ralph Adams Cram was initially invited to Sweet Briar in 1901 by John McBryde, a member of the new school’s board of directors and president of Virginia Tech. Cram envisioned a grand Beaux Arts scheme of monumental buildings in a Georgian Revival style in keeping with Virginia’s architectural heritage. Today’s Sweet Briar community will recognize his original 1902-1906 quadrangle at the heart of campus, crowned by the cupola of The Refectory (now called the Pannell Center).

Cochran Library was built during the tenure of President Meta Glass, who led the College 1925-1946. She and Cram enjoyed a productive working relationship and Cochran Library was their crowning achievement together. Cram’s partners on site were Clark and Crowe Associates, an architectural firm based in nearby Lynchburg that was founded by Pendleton Scott Clark and Walter Rogers Crowe in 1921.
The Library, one of several critical needs identified for a major endowment and capital campaign in 1928, was funded by Fergus Reid in memory of his mother. A well-to-do cotton merchant from Norfolk, Virginia, he served as a member of the Sweet Briar board of directors from 1905 to 1941. Reid Dormitory, built in 1922, was named in his honor. According to President Glass’s recollections, Reid was a long-time and very generous supporter of the College. Glass noted that, “No one really knows how generous he was to her [Sweet Briar]...He often lent money and later refused payment.” At the time of his gift for the library, Reid’s fellow board members acknowledged “his belief in the value of education for women” and “his sound judgment, his sweet reasonableness and his kindly sense of humor.”

In 1922 the College library—growing fast and crowded for space—had moved out of Academic (now called Benedict Hall) and into a wooden building constructed during World War I to house the campus chapter of the YWCA. This building’s capacity was soon overwhelmed and by 1926 President Glass and Cram had begun discussing a new library building. By the winter of 1928 Cram’s firm had produced a new plot plan for the campus, indicating a future location for a library, centrally placed between Academic (Benedict) and Fletcher. By October 1928 the firm had delivered a presentation drawing to the College, which depicts the proposed building in what would essentially be its final form. Construction soon began and was well underway by the time a cornerstone was laid at graduation in June 1929. The building was dedicated in October 1929, on which occasion the portrait of Mary Helen Cochran was hung in the Browsing Room, and students began using it later that semester.

In Cochran Library, a structure that greatly enlarged and modernized the academic capacity of the school, Cram and his associates introduced much more elaborate details than in earlier buildings—

“...in any write-up of the year...the Library looms large... —it’s purely swell. Thanks so much, Mr. Reid.”

from The Briar Patch yearbook 1929-1930.

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1 Mary Lou Lemon Stohlman, The Story of Sweet Briar College, p. 165.
2 To make way for Cochran Library the much maligned “wooden shack” was moved to Elijah Road and, dubbed “The Music Box,” became home to the music department.
3 That plan also filled in possible locations for a chapel, and buildings dedicated to the fine arts and to science which would never be built in those locations. The current chapel and buildings for art and science, Babcock and Guion, were constructed in the 1960s.
for example, the lush Corinthian pilasters on the facade, heavily decorated embrasures at the two main doors on the front of the building, and the elegant plaster relief that decorates the ceiling of the main reading room. In addition to providing room for the College’s 20,000-volume book collection to grow (which it would do with gratifying speed in subsequent decade), the building offered students study rooms, a browsing room, specialized facilities for news publications and an art library. The structure’s size and sophistication would have indicated to a visitor the significance of a library to the life of an academic community and would also have signified to the larger world the College’s vigorous growth and scholastic aspirations.

The core campus buildings, including the Mary Helen Cochran Library, are part of the Sweet Briar College National Historic District, having been placed on the Virginia Landmarks Register and the National Register of Historic Places in 1995.

The current installation was framed and installed by Nancy McDearmon, with the aid of student workers Mariah Miller ’16, Samantha Cochran ’16, and Abigail Schutte ’17.

Karol A. Lawson
Director, Art Collection and Galleries and the Sweet Briar Museum

SUGGESTED RESOURCES
Ralph Adams Cram’s papers and plans are held by the Boston Public Library. The hundreds of Cram plans at Sweet Briar today are the working blueprints and reference copies of original ink on linen drawings that were used by architects and engineers on site.


CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION
All works are held in the care of the Sweet Briar Art Collection and Galleries.

Cram and Ferguson Architects, Boston, MA
*Plot Plan, Sweet Briar College* January 30, 1928
pencil on paper mounted on board
24 x 33 inches
Transfer from Sweet Briar College administration A.S.003

C. S. Clapp, for Cram and Ferguson Architects, Boston, MA
*Exterior, Proposed Library* October 16, 1928
pencil on paper mounted on board
15 x 27 inches
Transfer from Sweet Briar College administration A.L.002

H. T. Poston, for Clark and Crowe Associates, Lynchburg, VA
*Proposed Reflecting Pool, Mary Helen Cochran Library* 1932
pencil on paper
16 x 25 inches
Transfer from Sweet Briar College administration A.L.003

Cram and Ferguson Architects, Boston, MA
*General Plot Plan, Sweet Briar College* October 11, 1950
pencil and colored ink on paper
23 x 29 inches
Transfer from Sweet Briar College administration A.S.012

Cram and Ferguson Architects, Boston, MA
Clark and Crowe Associates, Lynchburg, VA
*South Elevation, Mary Helen Cochran Library*, 1928
blueprint
31 x 47 inches
Gift of the Jones Memorial Library, Lynchburg, Virginia A.L.010

Cram and Ferguson Architects, Boston, MA
Clark and Crowe Associates, Lynchburg, VA
*East and West Elevations, Mary Helen Cochran Library* 1928
blueprint
31 x 47 inches
Gift of the Jones Memorial Library, Lynchburg, Virginia A.L.018

Cram and Ferguson Architects, Boston, MA
Clark and Crowe Associates, Lynchburg, VA
*Typical Bay and Entrance, Mary Helen Cochran Library* 1928
blueprint
47 x 31 inches
Gift of the Jones Memorial Library, Lynchburg, Virginia A.L.015

Cram and Ferguson Architects, Boston, MA
Clark and Crowe Associates, Lynchburg, VA
*First Floor Plan, Mary Helen Cochran Library* 1928
blueprint
31 x 47 inches
Gift of the Jones Memorial Library, Lynchburg, Virginia A.L.007

Cram and Ferguson Architects, Boston, MA
Clark and Crowe Associates, Lynchburg, VA
*Transverse Section through Reading Room, Mary Helen Cochran Library* 1928
blueprint
47 x 31 inches
Gift of the Jones Memorial Library, Lynchburg, Virginia A.L.019.a

Cram and Ferguson Architects, Boston, MA
Clark and Crowe Associates, Lynchburg, VA
*Transverse Section on Line BB, Mary Helen Cochran Library* 1928
blueprint
31 x 47 inches
Gift of the Jones Memorial Library, Lynchburg, Virginia A.L.020.a
“Work has gone forward on the library all during the summer and it is now almost completed and will be occupied in the very near future. It is a beautiful building, spacious and well-designed, and more than lives up to Sweet Briar’s architectural standard. The first official occasion will be on Founder’s Day, when an oil painting of Mary Helen Cochran will be hung over the mantel in the Browsing Room. And if any alumnae who read this do not know what the Browsing Room is, let them come back to Sweet Briar and see for themselves. It is worth the trip.”