Unbuilt Sweet Briar
February 3-March 27, 2011  Benedict Hall Gallery

The selection of 13 plans, plots, and drawings represents but a tip of the iceberg that is the Sweet Briar collection of architectural documents from the firm of Ralph Adams Cram. Saved from obscurity 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, these materials document the long, multifaceted association that Cram enjoyed with Sweet Briar College. The Art Collection and Galleries staff also cares for hundreds more plans and blueprints related to later campus buildings designed by other architectural firms.

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, the Boston-based Cram had never before designed a college campus. Eager to establish himself in this field, Cram first envisioned a grand Beaux Arts scheme of monumental buildings, ceremonial spaces, and formal gardens for what was then called “Sweet Briar Institute.” As the realities of time, funding, and location came to bear on the young school, Cram adapted his concepts. Today’s Sweet Briar community will recognize his original quadrangle at the heart of campus, crowned by the cupola of the Refectory (now called the Pannell Center), and the Georgian Revival style of the original brick buildings at the core of the Sweet Briar historic district. Included in this brief survey of Cram’s unrealized plans are presentation drawings for a chapel, an entryway for pedestrians, a library, and such landscape features as gardens and an amphitheater.

Cram worked with Sweet Briar from 1901 into the early 1940s (he died in 1942). The materials on view here document his firm’s earliest 1902 drawings (from reproductions in a precursor of Architectural Digest) to work he did at the behest of President Meta Glass from the mid-1920s to the late 1930s. While these schemes went unrealized, more recent buildings do in some sense follow his initial plans. The 1964 chapel, for example, occupies the spot Cram originally selected for a place of worship, and newer dormitories such as Dew (1956) and Glass (1960) were placed in some general relationship to Cram’s first thoughts on the campus plan.

Evident throughout these documents and the hundreds more in our care is the fact that Cram and Sweet Briar’s first trustees and administrators struggled with the same issues we do today: how to create a community and integrate buildings into the beautiful landscape; how to inspire and enable learning; how to provide for practical matters such as automobile traffic and residential life. While unbuilt, Cram’s grand schemes can still resonate with and inform the College’s 21st-century planning as the campus continues to evolve.

Karol A. Lawson
Director, Art Collection and Galleries

* On the strength of his work for Sweet Briar, Cram would win commissions for the U.S. Military Academy at West Point (1904), Princeton University (1906), Rice University (1908), and the University of Richmond (1910).
Checklist of the Exhibition

Cram Goodhue & Ferguson
Swetbriar [sic] Institute, Block Plan  ca. 1901
copy of an ink on linen original
42 x 60 inches
A.S.002

Cram Goodhue & Ferguson
original perspective drawing by Bertram Goodhue
Bird’s Eye View: Sweet Brier [sic] Institute, Virginia  1902
reproduction, from The American Architect and Building News, 23 August 1902
13 ¾ x 22 inches
Gift of Virginia Hamilton Ammons ’62
DC.2003.048.a

Cram Goodhue & Ferguson
original perspective drawing by Bertram Goodhue
Commencement Hall: Sweet Brier [sic] Institute, Amherst Co. Va.  1902
reproduction, from The American Architect and Building News, 30 August 1902
14 ¾ x 9 7/8 inches
Gift of Virginia Hamilton Ammons ’62
DC.2003.048.d

Cram Goodhue & Ferguson
original perspective drawing by Bertram Goodhue
The Group Plan: Sweet Brier [sic] Institute, Virginia  1902
reproduction, from The American Architect and Building News, 23 August 1902
11 x 15 5/8 inches
Gift of Virginia Hamilton Ammons ’62
DC.2003.048.b

Cram Goodhue & Ferguson
original perspective drawing by Bertram Goodhue
Science Hall and Industrial Building: Sweet Brier [sic]
Institute, Amherst, Co. Va.  1902
reproduction, from The American Architect and Building News, 23 August 1902
9 1/8 x 15 1/8 inches
Gift of Virginia Hamilton Ammons ’62
DC.2003.048.c

Cram & Ferguson
Plot Plan, Sweet Briar College  1928
pencil
24 x 33 inches
A.S.003
Cram & Ferguson
*Proposed Auditorium, Exterior* 1928
pencil
16 x 21 inches
A.AUD.001

Cram & Ferguson
*Proposed Entrance to Campus* 1928
pencil
19 x 14 ½ inches
A.E.001

Cram & Ferguson
*Proposed Library, Exterior* ca. 1926-1928
pencil
14 ½ x 12 inches
A.L.001

Cram & Ferguson
*Proposed Chapel, Exterior* 1938
pencil
21 x 17 inches
A.CH.004

Cram & Ferguson
*Proposed Chapel, Interior* 1938
pencil and watercolor
21 ½ x 19 inches
A.CH.003

Cram & Ferguson
*Proposed Chapel, First Floor Plan* 1938
blueprint
15 x 22 inches
A.CH.001.a

Cram & Ferguson
*Proposed Fine Arts Building* 1938
pencil and watercolor
15 7/8 x 22 ¼ inches
A.FA.002
Suggested Reading


Registrarial Assistant Nancy McDearmon and students Kate Gorman ’11, Caitlin Playle ’13, and Ashley Rust ’13 prepared and installed the exhibition.

Ms. McDearmon, Sandi Prentice ’10, and Caitlin Playle ’13 developed the exhibition concept and chose the works shown.

Marc C. Wagner, of the Virginia Department of Historic Resources, and Vincent T. Brooks, of The Library of Virginia, served as visiting speakers for the exhibition opening.

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