

# ARTS

## Union marks anniversary of architect's innovative campus design (with photos)

When school president Eliphalet Nott took office in 1804, he talked about how Union's students should

Bill Buell | April 14, 2013



North College was built in 1814 and is part of the original plan designed by Joseph Ramo. (photo: Schenectady County Historical Society)

By 1806, just a decade after its founding, Union College was graduating as many students as Harvard, Yale and Princeton. But if the Schenectady institution was to truly gain equal footing with “The Big Three,” school president Eliphalet Nott felt it needed a campus to reflect that status.

When he took office in 1804, Nott talked about how Union's students should be “separated from the great world,” and that the campus should provide them with “the decorum, ceremony, and politeness of refined

domestic life.” In January 1813, he found a man with the vision to deliver just that in French architect Joseph Ramée.

Union College is celebrating the 200th anniversary of its Ramée-designed campus, often referred to as the first fully planned college campus in American history. Author Paul Turner, a Schenectady native, a 1962 Union grad and professor emeritus of architectural history at Stanford University, will help commemorate the occasion at a special reception on Tuesday at the Mandeville Gallery. Author of “Joseph Ramée: International Architect of the Revolutionary Era,” and “Campus: An American Planning Tradition,” Turner also put together a catalog for the 200th anniversary celebration to go along with a series of Ramée materials on exhibition at the Mandeville Gallery inside the Nott Memorial.

“There were some college campuses that were planned in some ways, but not to the degree that Union was,” said Turner, who grew up on Baker Avenue in Schenectady. “The way I define it is that the Union campus was the first to have a comprehensive plan that integrated buildings with open spaces and some landscaping. It was very innovative, and by far the most ambitious plan for an American campus at that time.”

Union’s original building in 1795 was at the northern corner of Union and Ferry streets. School officials, however, realized immediately that they needed more space and plans were quickly made to construct a larger building on the eastern edge of the city near the corner of what is now Union Street and Erie Boulevard. That’s where the college was when Nott showed up in 1804, and in 1806 the president began purchasing land in the hills just east of the city’s boundaries as part of his long-range vision for a new campus. New construction got under way in 1812, but the buildings were never completed and the plans were scrapped. Then, Ramée entered the picture.

### **Sharing a vision**

“He had a very turbulent life, and a very interesting one,” Turner said of Ramée, who was born in Charlemont, France, in April 1764. “He was trained in architecture and had actually started designing some buildings in Paris, but then the French Revolution took place in 1789, and having been drawn into a plot to overthrow the revolutionary government he had to leave France.”

In January 1813, on his way from Montréal to Philadelphia, Ramée was introduced to Nott by a mutual acquaintance, and the two men spent the next few days sharing their vision. Ramée left Schenectady and went home to Philadelphia, but returned a few months later for a more extended stay and went to work creating Union’s campus. By 1814, two buildings were ready for occupancy, and while not all of Ramée’s plans were executed, his work on the project was done by March 1815.

“If Ramée were to show up today, he would recognize North and South Colleges, and he would recognize the spaces in front of them and between them,” said Turner. “He would also recognize the long terrace wall — the stone wall that runs in front of North and South College. That was the first thing that was built on campus, and it was basically a retaining wall to help create a large level space between the two buildings, and to raise up the campus so it could be seen from below.”

## Not in plans

Also, if Ramée came back today, he would probably look at the Nott Memorial, designed by Edward Tuckerman Potter in the 1850s, and wonder what happened.

“He did not design the Nott Memorial,” Turner said of Ramée, who died in 1842. “In his plan, Ramée had put a large open space between North and South College, and he did plan to put a building with a round dome in the center of that space. But part of what he planned was never executed, and by the time they got around to building the Nott Memorial in the 1860s and 1870s, the architectural styles were different. The fashion had changed a lot from 1813 to 1860.”

Ramée’s drawings were put on display Thursday by Mandeville Gallery interim director Marie Costello, and will remain on exhibit until May 26.

“We have about 30 of his drawings, and we’ve enlarged some of them so you can see some good detail,” said Costello. “They are facsimiles of the drawings mounted on aluminum, and they’re very impressive when they’re hanging. Framing them wouldn’t have worked because at times Ramée did draw on both sides of the paper. This way allows us to see both sides.”

For more than 100 years, little was known about Ramée and his work at Union until professor Codman Hislop recovered a portfolio containing Ramée’s drawings in the attic of the Old Chapel.

“The drawings for the campus had been, in a sense, forgotten,” said Turner. “They were cleaning out the attic above the Old Chapel, and they very easily could have been thrown out. Ramée did do some important work in Europe, but in terms of size and number of buildings, I think the Union campus is his major work, and it’s wonderful that these beautiful drawings were saved.”