Once home to a university-run high school, nearly century-old KU building demolished

August 13, 2013

Nearly 100 years old, the University Relations building on the far northeast end of the Kansas University campus had lived several lives throughout its history.

Before being home to University Relations, the house-like structure across Oread Avenue from the Kansas Union was a high school, a faculty lounge and then offices for the KU Endowment. In its final incarnation it was an especially good-looking storage facility with an antique facade.

Last week, the building went through the final phase of its life: demolition.

Paul Graves, deputy director for Construction and Design Management at KU, said the University Relations building had become structurally unsound in its old age, to the point where it posed a safety hazard. The Kansas Board of Regents rated the building's condition as “poor” in its 2012 facilities inventory.

Demolition of the building took most of last week, with some preparatory work starting before then. The demolition was contracted out to Lawrence-based B.A. Green Construction at a cost of about $80,000.

Built in 1915, the structure originally housed the Oread High School, a teaching lab for KU School of Education students.

Educators in training at the Oread school put in an hour each day teaching a student body made up largely of the children of faculty, according to a history of the building from a 1985 University Daily Kansan article.

Students at the school had the advantage of using university facilities for their extracurricular activities. Gym class often was often conducted at Robinson Gymnasium. Student thespians performed plays at the campus theater.

The name changed to "University High School" in 1941, with more dramatic changes on the way. In the years following World War II, enrollment rose so dramatically that the school quickly outgrew the space on Oread Avenue. However, the high school was underfunded, and the School of Education wanted to provide more professional training for its students by having them teach at public schools in the area.

In June 1950, the school closed for good. That same year, a donation from Roy A. Roberts, a KU alumnus and editor-turned-president of the Kansas City Star and Kansas City Times, helped convert the building into a faculty club.

Roberts' donation went toward outfitting the building with spiffy new furnishings, while the state put up money to build a two-story addition, all of it to give faculty a place to unwind after classes. The refurbished clubhouse sported a lounge, cafeteria, dining hall with oak floors and pine paneling, and a even pool room.

The faculty club moved off campus in the late 1960s, and the KU Endowment took up residence in the building. Within just eight years the Endowment, too, outgrew the Oread Avenue building.

University Relations then claimed and renamed the building and occupied it for the next 20 years.

When, in 2000, the department moved to the the Marketing Communications building just next door, the building kept the University Relations name but functioned as auxiliary storage space for the university.

Graves said it held paper files and computer accessories, among other university-owned detritus, all of which was carted off to other locations around campus in the weeks leading up to the building’s demolition.
For now, Graves said, there are no plans to build anything on the site. Once the hill where the building stood is regraded and landscaped, the spot that once held a campus high school will be a quiet little patch of grass at the northeast edge of campus.

But the space is there if the university ever wants it. “It may be an appropriate site in the future for a new building,” Graves said.