The McDade Collection’s Unique Grand Tour Album

Historic Images of Brandeis University’s Castle Revealed

Architectural Photography: Taking a Stand
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FIGURE 1. The people gathered in this courtyard provide a vivid sense of the Castle’s scale. The window details on the left and right suggest this is the courtyard between Tower C on the left and Tower B on the right. See figure 4 on page 35 for a diagram of the Castle. The arches and covered second-floor walkway between the two buildings might have offered a great view to the east and south. 5 x 7 glass negative.
The Wondrous and Eclectic Brandeis Castle

THE STORY BEHIND ITS CONSTRUCTION AND PHOTOGRAPHIC MYSTERY

by Maggie McNeely

“THE CASTLE,” ONE OF BREANDEIS UNIVERSITY’S original buildings, stands atop a rocky hill at the edge of the school’s Waltham, Massachusetts, campus. Said to be the site where John Winthrop first surveyed his Boston settlement in 1632—“Boston Rock”—it is a fitting location for a castle. As the name suggests, it has rock-studded walls, square and round keeps, lookout towers, and crenellated walls around the top (figure 1).

While closely identified with Brandeis, the Castle predates the University’s opening in 1948 by some twenty years. Outside of the greater Brandeis community, the story behind the creation and purpose of this unusual structure is not well-known.

The Robert D. Farber University Archives & Special Collections staff at Brandeis recently cataloged and digitized numerous photographs and other materials relating to the history of the Castle. These offer more clues about its construction and other features, and at the same time, present a new mystery to be solved.

From Worcester to Cambridge to Waltham: The Middlesex College of Medicine, 1914-1939

First, some history of the school and area: In 1914, Dr. John Hall Smith (1872-1944) (figure 2, overleaf), a successful Boston surgeon, along with other trustees of the defunct Worcester Medical Institution, reopened their medical school with training facilities in Cambridge and Boston, calling it the Middlesex College of Medicine and Surgery.

Like Dr. Smith himself, the new institution can best be described by one word: eclectic.

By the late 1920s, Dr. Smith’s vision for his institution had outgrown its Cambridge location. He acquired a stretch of rocky farmland along the Charles River in Waltham in fall of 1928 and began building a new home for his institution—a rare and emblematic structure (figure 3).

Middlesex was not a typical medical school. The 1929 course catalog invited matriculation by “the poor but worthy student,” at a time when high social class was favored
Middlesex was not a typical medical school. The 1929 course catalog invited matriculation by “the poor but worthy student,” at a time when high social class was favored in medical school admissions.

in medical school admissions. A 1933 catalog identifies Middlesex as “now the only eclectic medical school in the United States,” going on to define eclecticism as “the refusal to follow blindly only one set of formulae or conventions, no matter how sanctified they may be by tradition.”

The 1938 catalog reported the newly expanded and rebranded Middlesex University had “achieved a high reputation for its freedom from bigotry and intolerance, and from racial and religious discrimination.” By this time, the School of Medicine, as well as the newly established School of Veterinary Medicine, were both open to men and women on equal terms.

Institutional Challenges in the 1940s
The medical education landscape was changing just as the new Waltham campus met its expansion goals. In 1944, the same year its visionary founder and funder Dr. Smith died, Massachusetts began requiring approval of medical schools by the American Medical Association (AMA) before their students could obtain a license to practice medicine.

After a long battle for accreditation with the AMA, the AVMA, and years of financial hardship, Middlesex was forced to gradually close its doors between 1945 and 1947. Middlesex’s reputation was tarnished by this failure, and graduates from the final years faced roadblocks in licensing and employment.

Transition to Brandeis University
The school’s charter was reborn in 1946, when Middlesex officials reached out to a group of Jewish leaders in New York who were planning to build a campus for the first and only Jewish-sponsored nonsectarian university. The Middlesex board was pleased with the anti-quota mission of what came to be called Brandeis University, which opened in 1948.

The Castle, later refurbished and named for donors Irving and Edyth Usen, was quickly repurposed by Brandeis as student space, used for housing, events, and special lectures. Vast circular medical laboratories became undergraduate common rooms and lecture halls, visited by the likes of Eleanor Roosevelt and Martin Luther King Jr. The structure was designated a national historic landmark in 1979.

Constructing a National Landmark
The Castle, a sprawling structure of connected circular and rectangular towers, was built over a twelve-year period starting in 1928. The main buildings were designated for Anatomy, Chemistry, Lecture Halls, and Administrative offices (figure 4).

FIGURE 2. Dr. John Hall Smith (1872-1944); undated photograph ca. 1910-1920. The stiff, tall, rounded, and detachable collar is a clue to the approximate date,
A Middlesex College catalog simply states the design as Norman, a specific type of medieval structure normally erected for defense. A senior honors thesis by Amy Finstein, Brandeis class of 1989, called Unlocking the Doors to the Past and Future: An Architectural and Social Exploration of the Irving and Edyth Usen Castle, is the best resource on the structure.

Finstein carefully examined an array of possible inspirations for Dr. Smith, stating in her thesis:

The style of the Brandeis Castle is difficult to characterize. It has been argued that the building is a haphazard conglomerate of diverse historical precedents; others maintain that it is the complete invention of John Hall Smith’s imagination. In reality, the Castle appears to be a combination of both of these approaches.

The Castle was built with many colorful decorative accents and elements, which in color photographs (figure 5) reveal a more playful, lighthearted, and much less serious and ominous-looking structure. For inspira-
tion, Dr. Smith looked to the past for a model that conveyed prestige and substance, but also displayed his unique “eclectic” stamp.

The resulting construction process was itself a creative mix of modern and innovative building techniques to achieve old-looking structures. To save money in the midst of the Great Depression and with an extremely limited budget, much of the hardware material, including window frames, was purchased secondhand from demolished industrial buildings.6

The structure is primarily reinforced concrete (figure 6), with the stones—harvested from the “Boston Rock” site (figure 7)—embedded in its exterior surface. It is widely reported that Smith did not hire an architect to carry out his vision, and this has yet to be disproven.

**The Mystery of the Photographs: Their Provenance and Who Made Them**

Provenance, the investigation and documentation of the origins and chain of custody of an object, is of primary importance in photographic, as well as all archival, research. The provenance of Middlesex University materials held at Brandeis University is complicated and, in many cases, unclear.

The photographs include both prints and gelatin dry-plate glass 5 x 7- and 8 x 10-inch negatives, which came to the Archives at different times from different sources over the years, most of them undocumented. The provenance of objects is tracked in control files, and documentation is kept by museums and archives on their collections. Unfortunately, none of these files identity the acquisition of old Castle photographs specifically.

When did the glass plates and other photographs come to the library? There are at least two possibilities:

- In a letter dated 1971, Dr. Smith’s adopted son, C. Ruggles Smith (1903-1993),8 who took over the presidency at his father’s death in 1944 and later served administrative roles at Brandeis, mentions Middlesex materials he sent to the Brandeis library. He also wrote a letter in 1973 regarding the transfer of student records and course catalogs.

- In 2011, the author learned from a Brandeis alumnus, who was part of the first graduating class in 1952, that some six decades before, he rescued a portion of the Middlesex material near his Castle dorm room from the trash. We have no written records of this transaction, though a letter from the same alumnus from the 1990s does mention photographs among the items he rescued.

Little information exists about the photographs themselves: Who took them? When, and for what purpose? And most strikingly, why were gelatin dry plates sometimes used for this purpose?

From the types of cars pictured to the levels of completeness of the structure, as well as rates of vine growth on the exterior, we can tell the glass negatives likely span the decade of the 1930s (figure 8). Gelatin dry plates, in wide use since the 1880s, had
largely dropped out of use by the late 1920s, when cellulose nitrate and cellulose acetate film became widely used. However, glass plates have a wonderful tonal range that some photographers continued to favor. Did the photographer prefer glass for commercial or artistic purpose, or both? Does the use of glass plates and the images themselves suggest a professional or an amateur?

The enclosures in which the 8 x 10 glass negatives came to the Archives were retained, giving us some clues about the materials. Two items were likely contemporary to the negatives. One is a Defender Photo Supply Photographic Paper box, a company out of Rochester, New York. The other is the cover of a box from Defender Photo Supply Company labeled “The Stanley Dry Plates,” which is 8 x 10 in size. The former item has a “use before” date of “8-33.” There is writing in pencil on the dry plate box cover, which is unfortunately illegible.

The Basement Moment
While the 8 x 10 negatives and various sizes of print photos have been in the collection for many years, there is now a new opportunity for discovery. During a review of University records in 2017 in a 1960s-era academic building basement, the author found a group of 5 x 7 glass slides inside a box of unrelated public relations material. Trying not to get too excited after initially spotting some commercial slides, the ones underneath showed the distinct craggy rock formations of the castle walls.

Today, each image of the castle is priceless. The photographs are full of beauty and drama, displaying a surprising variety of...
angles from which to view this complex structure. In 2017, a significant portion of the Castle was demolished to make room for a newer, more practical structure to house students. But for countless earlier students, this eclectic building was the center of life and learning.

Towers A and B, the most imposing parts of the Castle, were retained and can still be seen on the hill. The glass-plate negatives featuring views of the Castle are some of the most strikingly beautiful images the Brandeis Archives preserve today.

There are more than forty 8 x 10 and 5 x 7 glass negatives of the Castle and its surroundings in the Brandeis archives, a sample of which are displayed in print here. More are available for public viewing online in the Middlesex University Collection at: https://bir.brandeis.edu/handle/10192/26250

The Castle Challenge
The challenge is this: Who took them? If any PHSNE member or other interested party has an idea who might have been photographing in Waltham using 5 x 7 or 8 x 10 glass plates from the late 1920s through the 1930s, please contact The PHSNE Journal at journal-editor@phsne.org. Your suggestions may help solve the mystery.

Any findings will be published in snap shots and in next year’s Journal, as well as immortalizing your contribution in the Robert D. Farber University Archives & Special Collections at Brandeis University.

1 Historical evidence from John Winthrop’s diary (entry for January 27, 1632) and other sources suggests, but does not confirm, that the site of the Castle was the location from which Winthrop chose to survey the western portion of the Massachusetts Bay Colony—the so-called “Boston Rock.”

2 Charter established in 1849 and the institution closed in 1859.

3 The school proceeded through name changes, designated Middlesex College in 1935, and Middlesex University in 1937. It was also briefly associated with and shared some Board of Trustees members with the University of Massachusetts, specifically a premedical program, but this UMass has no relationship to the current University of Massachusetts.

4 Middlesex had made efforts to meet approval by the AMA since the mid-1930s.

5 Amy Finstein’s senior honors thesis on the Castle is available from the Robert D. Farber University Archives at Brandeis, but is not online. Dr. Finstein received an MAH and PhD in Architectural History from the University of Virginia and is a visiting lecturer on the History of Art at the Massachusetts College of Art and Design in Boston.

6 From an online exhibit about the Castle: https://omeka.lts.brandeis.edu/exhibits/show/photographs-of-the-castle-from/castle-under-construction

7 The library housed records and primary source materials prior to the founding of the Robert D. Farber University Archives & Special Collections, which opened in 1997.

8 Charles Ruggles Smith was born on May 20, 1903, in Newton, Massachusetts, and adopted by Dr. John Hall Smith and his wife, Ida Stacy Smith, as an infant. According to Newton, Massachusetts, birth records, C. Ruggles’ birth parents were Ida Smith’s younger brother Joseph Stacy and wife Dagmar, who died eight days after their son’s birth. From Ancestry.com sources.


10 The Stanley Brothers, of later “Stanley Steamer” automobile fame, invented a dry photographic glass plate in the 1880s; opened a factory in Watertown, Massachusetts, in 1888; and then moved to Newton in 1890. The Stanley Company produced Stanley Dry Plates and was acquired by Kodak in 1905. Following a consent decree in 1921, Kodak was forced to divest some of its film brand names, including Stanley Dry Plates, to Defender Photo Supply Company, which distributed them under the same brand names while Kodak continued to manufacture the plates themselves. Citation: David O. Whitten, editor. “Handbook of American Business History: Manufacturing.” Greenwood Press, New York, 1990.
A Castle Portfolio

EDITOR’S NOTE The following pages present “A Castle Portfolio,” which includes images from the recently-discovered 5 x 7 glass negatives (figures 1 (main article), 9, 10, and 12). The negatives were scanned at Brandeis in 2017 and are published here for the first time.

The rest of the images in this portfolio (figures 11, 13-19) are drawn from the Middlesex University Collection at Brandeis, and present the architecture and people who created, taught, and studied in this remarkable structure. All images for this article and portfolio are courtesy of the Robert D. Farber University Archives & Special Collections at Brandeis University, and are used with their permission. The PHSNE Journal and its editorial staff are most grateful for the support and cooperation received during the preparation of this article.

FIGURE 9. A carefully composed image of one of the Castle’s many covered doorways. The window detail on the right suggests it may be an entrance to Tower C or Tower D. 5 x 7 glass negative.

FIGURE 10. This image includes construction scaffolding and a vehicle for scale and is looking southeast. The walkway runs between the student Locker, Trophy, and Laundry areas on the left and the Chemistry Laboratory and Library on the right. 5 x 7 glass negative.

FIGURE 11. View from outside the Castle looking north. The three gatehouse towers are visible in this image; the wall connecting two of them is the “Reading Room,” according to the diagram (figure 4). A parked car suggests this is the mid-1930s. A portion of Tower D is visible to the right of the tree. 8 x 10 glass negative.
FIGURE 12. A view of the walkway from the other end looking northwest. At right center, behind and to the right of the truck (could it be a Model T?), is the “eclectic” entranceway to the Laundry, complete with a door and, perhaps, a red roof as seen in figure 5. 5 x 7 glass negative.

FIGURE 12, DETAIL. Here’s a closer look at the vehicle and the entranceway. 5 x 7 glass negative.

FIGURE 13. Overall view of “The Quadrangle” inside the Castle. On the left is Tower D, with the round central core extending above the roof at the far left. This image is visible on the lightbox in figure 8. 8 x 10 glass negative.
FIGURE 14. This image shows scaffolding and a (temporary?) set of rafters atop the building called “College Lecture Rooms.” This structure does not display a pitched roof in any image, nor an additional floor added above the current level, so this photograph may have been taken during completion of the interior. 8 x 10 glass negative.

FIGURE 15. This high-level view, probably taken from the roof or the small side tower on Tower D, is looking north and west over the College Lecture Rooms in the foreground to the “Reservoir Lake,” part of Waltham’s water supply. The reservoir was filled in some years after Brandeis acquired the property. Contact print from 8 x 10 negative.

FIGURE 16. Information from the back of the photograph: “Middlesex College Second Year Paramedical School in Comparative Anatomy Cat Dissection Course in a lab in the Castle; Matthew J. Lappin is in the first row on left.” From a scanned photographic print or printed image.
FIGURE 17. Inside Tower D, students are working together. Men and women studying together, an important part of the college’s “eclectic” reputation. Contact print from 8 x 10 negative.

FIGURE 18. Another image of students studying together, also in Tower D. The square pillar in the center supports the floors and roof above. Contact print from 8 x 10 negative.

FIGURE 19. Empty laboratory in Tower D; possibly physiology. Image is from a scanned 8 x 10 print.
Contributors

Ruud Hoff is a PHSNE member and professional photographer based in the Netherlands. He collects Kodak and pre-1880 photographica.

Ryck Lent is the editor of the PHSNE Journal. He admires nineteenth-century professional photographers for the skills, enterprise, persistence, and hard work it took for them to produce and distribute their photographs. They also knew where to stand.

Maggie McNeely is University Archivist at Brandeis University’s Robert D. Farber University Archives & Special Collections since 2011. She earned a BA in Art History, Studio Art and Education from Seton Hill, and an MS, Library Science, Archives Management from Simmons College. She is a member of the Society of American Archivists, New England Archivists, and the Boston Library Consortium, Special Collections SIG.

Ross Nitkin is a PHSNE member and collects antique cameras.

Ron Polito is a longtime member of both PHSNE and the Daguerrean Society. He is coauthor of A Directory of Massachusetts Photographers: 1839–1900, author of several articles on early Boston photography, and compiler of an online bibliographic database regarding Boston photographers cited in nineteenth-century photographic journals. This database can be viewed in the Member’s Articles under the Activities tab: http://phsne.org

Peter Vanderwarker is a professional architectural and fine art photographer. He is the author of two books about architecture in Boston, and his prints are in the collections of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, the Addison Gallery of American Art, and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. Recent exhibitions include Sublimation at Gallery NAGA, 2017; Seaport Views at the US District Courthouse in 2016; and Vanderwarker’s Pantheon, at the Boston Athenaeum in 2009. Peter has a Bachelor of Architecture degree from University of California, Berkeley, and he was a Loeb Fellow at Harvard University in 1997. Visit: https://vanderwarker.com/

Acknowledgements

Many individuals and institutions contribute to each issue of The PHSNE Journal—directly and indirectly. We could not publish without their help and generosity. The members of PHSNE and the staff of the 2017 Journal gratefully acknowledge the following individuals and institutions: Bill Becker, Marc Belanger, Boston Athenaeum, Brandeis University and the Robert D. Farber University Archives & Special Collections, Philip Brooks, Clare Broomfield and Historic England, Desiree Butterfield-Nagy and the Raymond H. Folger Library, University of Maine (Orono), Cathy Chick, Ron Cosens, Sarah Dunbar and the Bostonian Society, John Felix, Eileen Herring and the Nashua (NH) Historical Society, the late Sinclair Hitchings, Michael Hoyt, Stephen Jerome, Nelson Lawry, George Layne, Adrian Levesque, Natalie Liberace and the Maine State Museum, Anna Luccarini and the Alinari Archive, Jim Luedke, Rob McElroy, Shanna McKenna and the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Whitey Morange, Rick Nowell and the Boston and Maine Railroad Historical Society, Sally Pierce, Dr. Michael Prichard, Bonnie Regelman, Aaron Schmidt and the Boston Public Library, Surella Seelig, Karen Shafts, Catharina Slutterback, Peter Stubbs, Glenn Williamson, and especially the Estate of Jim McDade.