

*The placement of the new Roberts Chapel was a critical element of the project and the campus master plan.*



# Waynesburg University Expansion

**T**he change from college to university can be recognition of how a higher education institution has already evolved into many colleges over its history. In the case of Waynesburg University, the process was part of an intentional strategy to grow the institution's enrollment and matched up to a master plan that would re-shape the campus and the town that surrounds it.

Waynesburg University's transformation started in the late 1980s and over the

years the school has worked with several architects and contractors, usually seeking competitive bids. Since 2005, Waynesburg has relied primarily on a team led by Volpatt Construction and VEBH Architects. Two of those projects, Willison Residence Hall and the Stewart Science Building, had challenging circumstances that motivated Waynesburg's leadership to think outside the box. As with most successful programs, Waynesburg University's evolution was led by a strong and committed leader. The university's president, Douglas Lee,

is quick to refer discussion about the campus expansion to his predecessor, Timothy Thyreen, who is now chancellor of the university.

"What we were trying to accomplish was to move the university back to its founding mission," explains Thyreen, who was president of the university from 1990 until 2013 and guided Waynesburg through its transition from college to university. "Waynesburg was founded by abolitionists and the Cumberland Presbyterian Church."

*The Center for Research and Economic Development.*



*Waynesburg University's growing enrollment dictated a new men's dorm be planned and built in less than 18 months.*



**T**hyreen says that the college had two beautiful buildings in Miller Hall and Hanna Hall that were part of the campus since nearly its founding in 1849. By the 1980's, when enrollment was as low as 675 students, Waynesburg's campus was home to numerous private single-family homes and streets that weren't part of the college's property. Part of Thyreen's charge was to create a unified campus that could act as a magnet for the enrollment growth that was planned.

"I had the good fortune to meet Carl Johnson of Johnson Johnson & Roy," recalls Thyreen. He explains that Johnson taught him the role that architecture could play in creating a sense of community and place. Johnson also had a presentation quirk that played into the hands of a college president.

"[Johnson] liked to do water colors of the plan. Master plans are drawn so that you're looking at them from above. Donors don't understand that," he says. "I rolled up his paintings and took them to meet with alumni and

donors. The paintings allowed them to see what the campus would look like."

Over the course of the next 15 years a number of projects were done to move Waynesburg University into its master plan. After the economy recovered from the 2001 recession, however, the pace of construction and change accelerated.

Volpatt Construction had identified Waynesburg as a campus on which it would like to work. The college's vice president at the time, Roy Barnhart (since retired), liked Volpatt's resume of university experience and added the contractor to its list of qualified bidders. In early 2005, Volpatt was included on the list of bidders for a new building to support the college's business and economics education, the Center for Research and Economic Development (CRED). Volpatt succeeded in submitting the lowest proposal and completed the 15,000 square foot CRED building in 2006.

As the university's plans unfolded, enrollment began to grow significantly. A new Pollock Residence Hall had added 70 beds in 2005, but two years later the need was growing more rapidly. During the winter of 2007,



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*Such an aggressive schedule required more certainty during planning and a different way of hiring the contractor.*

then-President Thyreen began planning for a much larger expansion of living space. In February of that year, he approached the university's board of directors about the project. With the board informed, Thyreen set about getting VEBH on board to do the early planning so that he could get final approval of a more concrete program by May 2007. His plan was to have the additional 150 beds ready by the fall of 2008. Such an aggressive schedule required more certainty during planning and a different way of hiring the contractor.

"[Willison Hall] was in my head and no one else's still in April of 2007 and we had to open in 14 months," Thyreen recalls. Because of past projects, both Thyreen and the architect believed that Volpatt Construction should be involved during the earliest stages if the project was to succeed. Although Waynesburg had bid most of its projects, Thyreen had no concerns about

negotiating with Volpatt. "They had worked on some projects in other buildings that we felt very good about and their on-site person was someone I was very comfortable working with."

"Prior to this, everything at the college had to be bid, and due to the number of incoming freshman and the number of beds that they needed, Waynesburg needed it done for the following fall," recalls project architect John Reid. "By the time they notified us that they needed a new dorm the only way we could do it was by fast-tracking it and picking a contractor up front. I think they chose Volpatt because of the success of CRED. At that same time there were other construction projects going on that we were not the architects and Volpatt wasn't the contractor and from the owner's standpoint those jobs weren't going as well."

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"CRED was a very good project from our standpoint. We had the right superintendent on the job. The owner got along with him very well. We had minimal change orders on the project," says Ray Volpatt Jr., the company's president. When discussion started on the dorm, Roy came to me and said they had to have this done for August of 2008 and hadn't even started the drawings on it. We gave them a fee proposal and told them we would be up front with the general conditions and that any savings would go back to the owner, but that we would break out the line items and get competitive subcontractor bids. Roy's response to me was that he wanted the same superintendent as on CRED and that if that was the case, we would get the job."

The schedule on the dormitory was the key to the success of the project. Waynesburg was going to accept 150 additional students in Fall 2008 and there had to be a place to house them. Volpatt prepared a schedule and told Waynesburg that it had to get started on construction by June 1 or it couldn't ensure that the building would be ready in time. Even at an accelerated pace, VEBH couldn't finish the full design by June so Volpatt worked from the site and structural design and began construction through the foundations for the building. As might have been expected, those first stages of construction produced the project's major surprise.

"There was supposed to be a storm drain running through the center of the site but when [Volpatt excavated] it was more like a river. It was an open sewer that carried the stormwater for the whole borough," explains Reid. "What was supposed to be a pipe had to be a six foot by ten foot high stone culvert. We had to redesign the foundations around it and build a structured slab for the floor above it."

Through the stressful planning process, the university leadership would form a strong working relationship with the architect and contractor. As owner, Waynesburg University set the tone by quickly evaluating situations as they arose and providing timely decisions. Often times in fast track projects, both the architect and contracting teams can produce the work in an accelerated fashion but delays come from slow decisions. That wasn't the case with Willison Hall.

Willison Residence Hall opened on time for new students in Fall 2008. The successful working relationship between the team was appreciated but like most institutions, Waynesburg felt a measure of comfort by encouraging competition. Even as construction was wrapping up on Willison, the college returned to a design-bid-build model and put an addition to its Eberly Library out to bid. A year later, the same was true for the new Roberts Chapel.

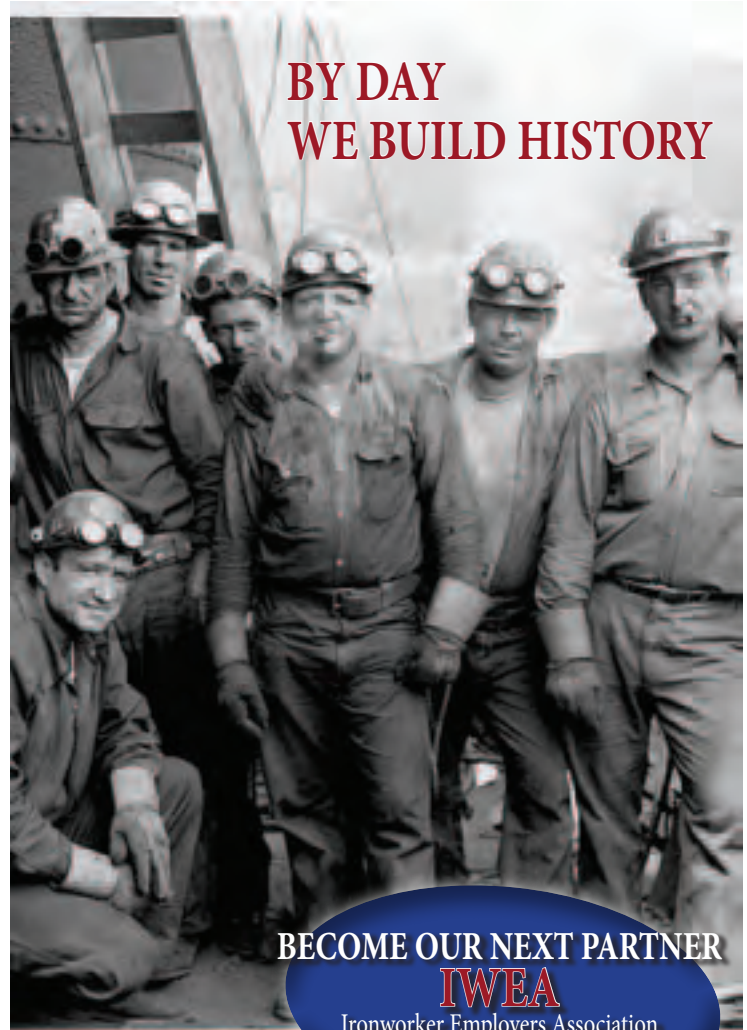
Roberts Chapel was an important architectural element to the campus master plan. The building was sited at the top of a hill near the highest point on campus. With its exterior lighting, Roberts Chapel is a central nighttime landmark in the Williamsburg-like architecture of Waynesburg University, yet the site was the project's principle obstacle.

"Roberts location was the challenge. It sits on a hillside in the heart of campus," explains Mike Uhren, Volpatt's senior manager. "The difference in grade from the steps in the front of the building to the floor level at the back of the chapel has to be 30 feet."

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In addition to the grade change, test borings showed the presence of pyrite and coal seams from past mining. To mitigate those conditions, the design called for overexcavation of eight feet beyond the depth of the foundations, with concrete poured to fill in the void. The project gave Volpatt a chance to demonstrate its craftsmanship and it gave VEBH the challenge of blending colonial form with 21st Century function.

"If you go into that building the quality of the construction speaks for itself," marvels Dan Engen, VEBH principal. "If you touch the woodwork in the chapel you can feel the quality. And yet it's a high tech building. We have ice storage in the building. It's a very green building."



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"The acoustics in Roberts are unbelievable," says Volpatt. "They can have their orchestra rehearsing in the basement and you don't hear it in the sanctuary right above."

Both Volpatt and the principals at VEBH view Waynesburg University as a repeat client, even though neither expects to be handed work. Like most businesses, each would enjoy having no competition, but each realizes that is unrealistic and immaterial to how their working relationships should function. Ray Volpatt says that attitude has guided their approach since his company's first projects at Waynesburg.

"The feeling in our office was that if we were negotiating this \$8 million dorm, we better be the low bidder on the library,"

The interior of Roberts Chapel combines colonial architecture with 21st Century technology.

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laughs Volpatt. He says Roy Barnhart regularly told him that other contractors had visited the campus marketing their services. He also understood why Roy told him about the visits. "That's part of the story. We had to continue to be successful bidding the projects at Waynesburg to keep the work on campus. And then when this Stewart Science Building came along it seemed to make sense to them to continue to working with us because of the success we had with them on the other projects."

Stewart Science Hall is a 1960s-era, 60,000 square foot building that had become obsolete as a teaching laboratory. Its architecture is of its time, rather than that of the balance of campus. Waynesburg University asked VEBH to study the feasibility of renovating versus building a new

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building. Like in past, the architect believed that a contractor's input was critical to the planning process.

"It was similar to [the dorm] in that they needed someone on board very early. Once the decision was made to renovate the Stewart Science Building we did a master plan for the phasing and we needed to talk with someone who understood construction sequencing so we could figure out what could be accomplished when," says Reid. "That whole process of how we can keep people in this building over five years when we have such a short duration over the summers to get a lot of work done was extremely difficult. "

The decision to renovate Stewart Hall or to build a new building turned on a variety of factors. Mike Uhren points out that Volpatt's estimates for each option were close but that the cost of new construction would have been less. But taking a new construction direction also would have created an up-front funding need and likely would have delayed construction while more than \$20 million was arranged. A multi-year phased project was more easily managed from

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a fiscal perspective. And ultimately, not all of the factors were objective.

"When a building is named for a former president who served faithfully from the 1920s to the 1960s, you can't just tear it down," notes Thyreen.

Summer 2014 marks the second year of renovation for Stewart. A stair tower/elevator addition of 5,000 square feet was done during the first year and the building will ultimately be gutted and rebuilt from systems to finishes. Each summer brings new problems that could not have been foreseen but the team – which includes virtually the same subcontractors who have bid on all of Volpatt's projects at Waynesburg – continues to solve them in the same manner.

It's clear from speaking to both Reed and Uhren that the two are comfortable solving problems together. Working on projects like Stewart can strain an architect-contractor-client relationship because of the many opportunities to dispute unforeseen issues that arise. Reid says that that kind of friction doesn't exist.

## PROJECT TEAM


|                                  |                                         |
|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|
| Waynesburg University .....      | <b>Owner</b>                            |
| Volpatt Construction Co. ....    | <b>General Contractor</b>               |
| VEBH Architects.....             | <b>Architect</b>                        |
| Commelec Inc. ....               | <b>Electrical Contractor</b>            |
| SSM Industries Inc. ....         | <b>HVAC Contractor</b>                  |
| McKamish Inc. ....               | <b>HVAC Contractor (Roberts Chapel)</b> |
| Bruin Roofing.....               | <b>Roofing Contractor</b>               |
| J. J. Morris & Sons.....         | <b>Interiors Contractor</b>             |
| Patrinos Painting.....           | <b>Painting Contractor</b>              |
| Southwest Aluminum & Glass ..... | <b>Curtain Wall</b>                     |
| River City Glass .....           | <b>Glazing</b>                          |

"By the time that there's a question or a problem, their superintendent has already figured out a way to solve it that is cost effective. There isn't any 'the architect got this wrong' in those meetings," he says. "Volpatt comes to those meetings prepared to be part of the solution."

Volpatt Construction and VEBH have several repeat clients in common and the cooperation between the companies goes back to working relationships between Ray Volpatt Sr. and Lou Valentour. At the center of the working relationship is a shared value that each company, and its leaders, places on assuming their clients problems and solving them. At Waynesburg University, neither company has been a lock for the next job. While Volpatt has been asked to bid on projects, VEBH has found other architects handling projects at the same time it was designing the Willison Hall or Roberts Chapel. Each year seems to have brought another opportunity back to VEBH.

"I think the reason we have remained is that we listen. We've tried to respect the design aesthetic of the campus, weaving our projects into the existing architecture so the whole campus looks unified," notes Engen. "We didn't try to build our own personal monument to ourselves and what's inside the building is designed with intelligence. That's ultimately what we're about anyway. Everybody says they provide service but [John] has spent virtually his whole career working at Waynesburg."

Volpatt doesn't have 15 years experience working at the university but Ray Volpatt Jr. believes the administration at Waynesburg University has come to rely upon his people.

"They trust that we're going to give them the right answers. That we're going to treat them well. They know they're going to get quality construction," he says. "In the end they like our people that work there." 



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