THE COPLEY STORY

Our beautiful Copley Quad residence hall is the third Park University dormitory to bear the name “Copley.” The story of the first Copley Hall had its beginning in 1870 at Highland University in Highland, Kansas. Although Highland had been founded in 1857, it had suffered through hard times and had never achieved the status of a true university. John A. McAfee, who later became a co-founder of what was then named Park College, had been hired by the trustees of Highland in 1870 “… to develop a university program” and, after moving his family from Pardee College in Louisiana, Missouri, immediately went to work. (Parish, Arland, History of Highland Community College, 1983, p.24)

His official title was “Chairman of the Faculty,” a position which required him to teach as well as manage the operations of the fledgling school. Later, he was named President of the small Presbyterian affiliated University.

John A. McAfee had always wanted to put into practice his theory of educating needy youth by allowing them to work for their educations and he found fertile ground for his methodology at Highland. The area had been decimated by the Civil War, by a lengthy period of drought and even by plagues of grasshoppers; farmers were barely producing enough food to feed their families and had little or no money to pay tuition. McAfee and his wife Anna took these young people into their own home where they all lived as a “family” and performed all the tasks necessary to maintain themselves including farming, cooking, fuel gathering, laundry, construction, house cleaning and animal husbandry.

A collage of Hufford Home students and helpers circa 1874; John A. McAfee is the bearded man in the center, Anna McAfee is to the right of him.
By 1873, McAfee had a “family” composed of his own six children and more than thirty young men. The students who lived in the McAfee Household had the opportunity to show off some of their skills when they built themselves a new house in Highland. They did nearly all the construction work including the manufacturing of the brick. The new building, which was completed in 1873, was named the Hufford House in honor of a friend of McAfee’s from Missouri who had donated money for the project.” (Parish, p.30).

Although his family work program helped increase enrollment, it did not add any money to the struggling school’s coffers. When trustees complained, McAfee simply stated that God had chosen him to do this work and that God would provide. “Because of financial problems, many members of the board became unhappy with McAfee, some also felt he was spending too much time working with the students at Hufford Home. In the summer of 1874, he was asked to resign as president pro temp of the university. He did, however, continue teaching and operating Hufford Home. Finally, in March, 1875, the executive committee of the board ‘resolved that the chair recently held by professor McAfee be declared vacant.’” (Parish, p.32).

Josiah Copley

There was, however, one member of the Highland Board of Trustees who had given his full support to McAfee and had tried to save the Hufford Home idea. His name was Josiah Copley, a newspaper editor from Kittannig and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania who
was a staunch Presbyterian and community servant. According to John McAfee, Copley was the one who warned him of the board’s desire to eliminate Hufford Home. He did, however, firmly believe in McAfee’s “Family” plan and pledged to support him should he decide to practice his idea in another location and, after the family move to Parkville, MO, he kept his word.

Why Parkville? For several years, land speculator and business man George S. Park had dreamed of a college in the town that bore his name. Park had settled in this area of the Platte Purchase in 1838 and had worked diligently to build up a center of commerce; most of his efforts were thwarted by the turbulent border war between Kansas and Missouri and, later, by the Civil War. Regardless, he saw the need for a school in what was, then, part of the American Frontier.

After being introduced to John McAfee by a mutual friend, the Reverend Elisha B. Sherwood, Park struck a bargain with the educator and offered him the use of his hotel building and some farm land to begin “Park College for Training Christian Workers.” If, after five years, the school was showing progress under McAfee’s leadership, George Park pledged to donate the hotel and land, develop a charter, organize a board of trustees and support the school in various ways. The school began class work on May 12, 1875 (known thereafter as “Founders’ Day”) and in 1879, one year before the deadline, graduated its first class of seniors, three women and one man in 1879.

Josiah Copley’s support was in the form of letters and visits to various Presbyterian Church leaders and wealthy Pennsylvanians. One of those leading Presbyterians was millionaire William Thaw who had made his fortune in railroads and who, coincidentally, was married to one of Copley’s daughters, Mary Sibbet Copley. As a result, the combined Copley and Thaw families became long time friends of the struggling little Park College.

McAfee continued his “Family Work Program” which became so popular that hundreds of students had to be turned away for lack of room. Mr. Park’s old hotel, named “Old Number One,” had served as dormitory, classroom building, kitchen, dining hall, chapel and rooms for the McAfee family. By December 1883, after the loss of another dormitory to a disastrous fire, it was too small to house the growing number of prospective students who were literally pounding at its doors. John McAfee immediately began seeking funds for a new building and used his weekly newsletter, the *Park College Record* to call for help.

Money trickled in, but at a faster rate than normal and by February 21, 1884, the *Record* announced that the building was “provided for” by money and pledges amounting to $3,265.00. Although it was not stated in print, Mr. Copley was most likely responsible for raising the bulk of the fund because the amount attributed to Pennsylvania was $1008.25, almost one third of the total.

The new building, which was to be a dormitory for eighty young men, was to be constructed entirely by student labor. After a carload of lumber arrived on campus,
student carpenters went to work but because of the extremely harsh winter, were able only to prefabricate window frames, gable ends and other sections of the building which were stored in a small shed on the campus. The dormitory was not finished and occupied until late fall, 1885.

Many readers of the Record suggested names for the new dormitory. One that was popular was “Phoenix” -- an allusion to the burned dormitory “rising from the ashes.” That building had been located on Main and Mill Streets in Parkville, however, and the new structure was located a bit above and to the north of today’s Graham Tyler Memorial Chapel. John McAfee apparently made the decision to name the new men’s home “Copley Hall.” Here is his reasoning:

“Years ago, when Hufford Home – an early and partial development of this family idea – was working in connection with Highland University there was a member of the board who … saw with concern the difficulties that were developing and about to destroy, the work there. He foresaw that if success was to be obtained at all it must be in some other place. His warnings and friendly advice were of incalculable value and helped us to meet the pressure and demands of conservatism which threatened the Home. What he saw of promise in the plans of the Home attached him to it as a friend and supporter, while his clear judgment and ripe experience soon taught us to appreciate and love him, who has ever since been known to us as Father Copley.

As a slight expression of our respect and love for this aged servant of our Master and as a monument to his fatherly concern and never failing interest in this family, we have taken the liberty of connecting his name with the first house built by students’ hands.”

(Park College Record, August 21, 1884)

Mr. Copley died on March 4, 1885, but Copley Hall stood and served hundreds of male students for 35 years. As mentioned earlier, Josiah Copley’s daughter Mary was married to Philadelphia millionaire Henry Thaw, and she maintained her father’s interest in Park
College. Based on voluminous correspondence between both Mr. and Mrs. Thaw and the McAfees, the relationship was close, but cautious. The Thaws were great philanthropists but were extremely careful in deciding which entity was truly worthy of their generosity. After Henry Thaw’s death in 1889, Mary Copley Thaw remained attentive to Park College and other Presbyterian institutions until her own death in 1929.

By 1917, the original Copley Hall was in bad condition and needed to be replaced. It had survived generations of students and one or two fires, caused by sparks from the wood stoves that once heated each room; it had simply outlived its usefulness. Then president, Dr. F. W. Hawley, turned his fundraising efforts towards Mrs. Thaw, and after a long courtship, secured $60,000.00 for the construction of a brand new dormitory.

Her gift was formally recognized by the board of trustees in the minutes of their October 24, 1918 meeting.

Cornerstone Ceremony, Copley Hall II

By that time, the foundation had been completed and the cornerstone for the building had been put into place on May 10, 1918, with an appropriate ceremony.

“The gift was made some months ago and the building begun and has been pushed as rapidly as possible. The contractors assure us it will be ready for occupancy by December 1st. The building is of stone and concrete, three stories and with slate roof; modern, fireproof and of beautiful, simple lines. The stone has been taken from one of our own quarries.

It will accommodate 114 men, has spacious halls, living room, committee room, etc. It will bear the names of Mrs. Thaw’s father and husband, two men who did so much for Park in its early days and who believed so thoroughly in its mission.
On the completion of this building old Copley Hall which has been the home of 80 and 90 men each year for the past 35 years will be torn down. It has served its day and generation well, having furnished a home during college days for hundreds of men now out in the world doing well their part in this world’s work.” (Park College Record, Aug. 17 and 24, 1918).

However, in September, 1918 Park College accepted the conditions laid down by the War Department which inducted young men into the Army but allowed them “…to attend school, subject to army discipline and immediate call to active service. Accordingly, on October 1, 1918, one hundred and thirty-four Park Boys and some were inducted into the Student Army Training Corps (SATC).” (Park College Narva, 1920).

The building was used as a barracks for the young men who signed up, even though the interior was unfinished and partitions had not been installed on the third floor. Their training was interrupted by the influenza epidemic and finally rendered unnecessary by the Armistice on November 11. The War Department officially disbanded the SATC program on December 14, 1918. It had existed on the Park campus for only two and a half months.

Even though Old Copley had been torn down in September, 1918, work did not fully resume on the new dormitory until the summer of 1919 but it was quickly finished and furnished by October. Oddly enough, there is no information on where the Copley residents were housed during those few months.

The school held an elaborate dedication ceremony as well as an open house at the new Copley-Thaw Hall on October 21, 1919. The interior and its furnishings were the design of Mrs. Hawley and reflected a definite Craftsman style – particularly evident in the woodwork in the large dormitory lounge which was, and still is, crowned by a classic and beautiful stone fireplace.
Copley – Thaw was initially used as a dormitory for men and for a time in the late 1940s and early 50s, for women. One of its most beautiful features was, again, the commodious lounge containing the large fireplace, a piano and comfortable, Mission style furniture.
Inhabitants During the Dormitory Years:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year Range</th>
<th>Description</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1918</td>
<td>Barracks for Student Army Training Corps.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1919-1944</td>
<td>Dormitory for Men</td>
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<tr>
<td>1944-1945</td>
<td>Barracks for Navy V-12</td>
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<tr>
<td>1945-December 1957</td>
<td>Dormitory for Women</td>
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<tr>
<td>December 1957-1970</td>
<td>Dormitory for Men</td>
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<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>Leased to VISTA during the Summer</td>
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<tr>
<td>1970-1974</td>
<td>Dormitory for Men (Partially Occupied)</td>
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After 1974

Copley-Thaw was renovated in the mid-1970s and converted into offices and classrooms. Today it houses the English Department and Media Services among other Park tenants. It has, however, retained some of its original charm.

Happy Centennial, Old friend!

Carolyn McHenry Elwess, ’71, Park University Archivist
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