

Starry Skies and Stewardship

Aug. 03, 2023

It has been a time of mixed emotions for us this week on campus as workers began the process of removing the familiar dome-roofed west wing of the James C. Wicker Science Hall that once was home to one of the few planetariums in the nation to be found on a high school campus.



Completed in 1970 and named after the Academy's sixth President, James C. Wicker, Wicker Science Hall serves as the home of Fork Union's science department. The laboratories and classrooms in the building were completely renovated and updated with new equipment in 2016. The Planetarium sat at the end of the building, and, at the time of the 2016 renovation, the equipment that had once been state-of-the-art five decades before was no longer even operational and was essentially obsolete.

Our Campus Master Plan, as approved by the Board of Trustees, envisioned retaining and reinvigorating the Planetarium. In fact, the Academy was well into the process of scoping the work and planning the renovation. Unfortunately, the domed roof had become cracked and damaged, creating a number of active leaks. Part of what made the dome special was that there are very few such structures...but that also contributed to the challenge of being able to efficiently repair the dome.

The Academy evaluated the various options, including covering the dome or retaining the building without the dome, but none of the available options were reasonable considering the cost to repair and renovate the space in a way that would elevate the cadets' experience. Ultimately, the right decision was made to do a controlled demolition that would remove the Planetarium but leave the remaining portion of Wicker Science Hall intact.

Stewardship...

That is the name we give to these kinds of choices. How can we best use the gifts and resources we have been given to best perform our mission today?

*"We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us.
If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith;
if it is serving, then serve;
if it is teaching, then teach;
if it is to encourage, then give encouragement;
if it is giving, then give generously;
if it is to lead, do it diligently;
if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully."*

Romans 12:6-8 (NIV)

In the years since that old Planetarium projector stopped working, Fork Union has installed digital projectors in our classrooms. We have constructed a movie theater inside Vaughan Hall. A fantastic digital flight simulator has been installed for cadets to enjoy in the social center as well. In just this past year, Retan Hall (or Flag Hall as it is also known) was beautifully renovated so our band could learn and practice in upgraded facilities.

These projects and many others have become a reality in recent years because donors chose to support them with their gifts.



The Planetarium was a distinctive marker as one entered campus. That look will change...but the important things at FUMA remain the same. FUMA remains an all-male, Christian school which uses a military structure and system to help instill traditional and life-changing values like respect, integrity, faith, character, and discipline into new generations of cadets. In today's world, developing young men in body, mind, and spirit has never been more important...or necessary...than it is right now.

While this change is very visible, and will take some getting used to, it is part of the broader invigoration of the campus and facilities that is ongoing. I remain excited about the planned outdoor cadet area, which will include an obstacle course, leadership reaction course and more. I am supporting that project personally because such facilities elevate and enhance our work as a military school.

As we prepare for the Academy's 125th birthday celebration this October, we have a big list of important projects for your consideration, each one of which would directly benefit our cadets and position us for the next 125 years! Will you please look at our [125 for the 125th Campaign](#) and choose if you would like to support any of these efforts with your own gifts?

It is all about stewardship. What choices will you make to help the Academy better perform its mission?

In Christ,
Colonel David L. Coggins, USMC (Ret.)
President
Fork Union Military Academy

THIS ARTICLE APPEARED IN AUGUST 2023, BY THE FORMER PRESIDENT, WHO ORCHESTRATED THE REMOVAL OF THE PLANETARIUM, AND IS, THANKFULLY, NO LONGER THERE.

A careful reading of this article reveals what really happened: the trustees wanted to retain the Planetarium (the correct answer); but due to substandard previous repairs to the dome, during a previous president's tenure, the leaking progressed. Yet, no effort was made to contact the Alumni or Friends of the Academy to ascertain if someone would come forward and provide the funds for a quality, and not 'contractor grade' repair.

The article states that the equipment didn't work; which was another surprise. Was Spitz Corporation contacted? What was their recommendation? Who was the Instructor assigned to the Planetarium? Certainly he would have been aware of needed repairs. Again, no concerted effort was made to inform Alumni and Friends before the date of the article, August 2023, when the demolition took place. It seems their only answer was to tear down the Planetarium.

Currently, the Academy has some notion of replacing the area previously occupied by the Planetarium next to the Science Building with an outdoor seating area for the Cadets. This is an unfortunate loss of a valuable teaching building; very few colleges and even fewer high schools have a Planetarium. This is so regrettable.