

# Culbertson Gives Ground

**After 10 years of planning and construction—and 50 years of service—Culbertson Hall makes way for a new laboratory of geophysics and planetary science.**

It took a wrecking crew only a few days in mid-February to make the walls of Culbertson Hall come tumbling down. The demolition was not solely for the sake of progress but also to make room for a new laboratory of geophysics and planetary science. And Culbertson's hollow clay tile walls were, like those of Throop Hall and Gates Laboratory, somewhat shaky from the effects of last February's earthquake.

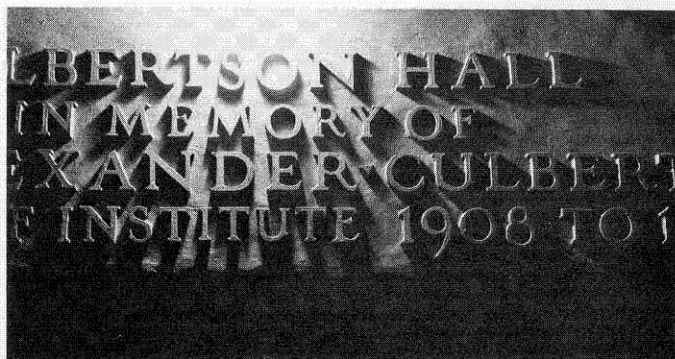
Culbertson Hall, the fourth building to be erected on the present Caltech campus, was the culmination of a town-and-gown dream. As early as 1910, trustees and influential members of the community were making plans for an auditorium here, and fund-raising for it continued for a decade. Much of the \$80,000 cost was raised by members of the old Pasadena Music and Art Association through a series of public lectures, cultural events, and extension courses in science, literature, and music. Among those whose performances helped the cause were President Theodore Roosevelt, ballerina Anna Pavlova, and violinist Gabriel Ysaye. The finished building was named in honor of James A. Culbertson, one of Caltech's early benefactors and a trustee from 1908 until his death in 1915.

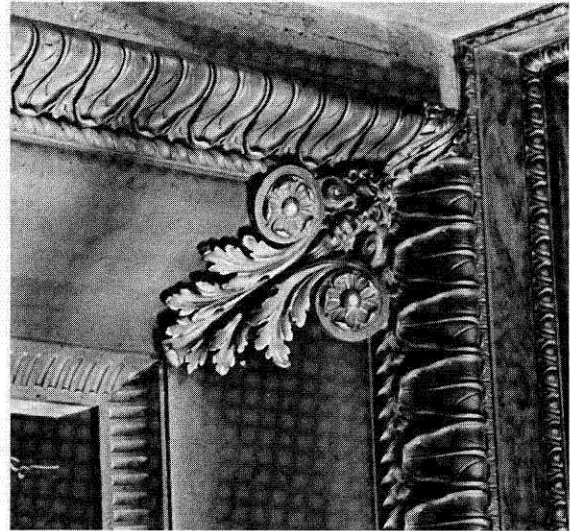
Designed by architect Bertram Goodhue in an adaptation of Italian Renaissance style, the auditorium featured an elaborate coffered ceiling with a central skylight (long since blacked out), a colonnade of wooden



columns with decorative capitals around the balcony railing, and ornate moldings almost everywhere—all richly painted and gilded. What appeared to be natural wood grain or the veining in stone in many instances was plaster “staff” work, an architectural embellishment much used in exposition buildings. (Examples can still be seen in the buildings designed by Goodhue for the San Diego Exposition of 1915.) One memorable ornament from Culbertson Hall has been preserved: the bas-relief (also of plaster) of the nine Muses that hung at the top of the proscenium arch. Using a light touch and lots of padding, workmen removed this in one piece, and it will be stored until a suitable new location is found.

Upon its completion in 1922, the auditorium was described as a “building of wonderful charm” and as a community and college center for “assemblies, social gatherings, concerts, and exhibitions.” For many years students were required to attend the assemblies—and each one began with “devotional exercises” conducted by a local minister. The original equipment for the building included several hundred hymnals.





Culbertson has, in fact, been a home for a wide range of activities—classical dramas that utilized all-male casts, modern comedies, and musicals about faculty achievements; folk dancing classes for the children of the faculty, ballroom dancing classes for students, and modern dance classes for anyone with an interest and the necessary agility; Glee Club rehearsals and concerts; an occasional student wedding; and a succession of film series. One of the last exhibits in Culbertson was a display of moon rocks from the Apollo 11 mission. Thousands of people visited it.

The bench that ran around the perimeter of the auditorium was the only permanent seating, so it took a certain amount of stamina to attend the Culbertson offerings. Anything that lasted too long tended to induce anatomical agonies from the slatted wood seats on the main floor or the vision-blocking pillars in the balcony. Nevertheless, Culbertson's official 500-seat capacity was often taxed, and a really popular speaker was likely to have 50 to 100 people clustered behind him on the platform in addition to a full house out front.

Originally the lower level of Culbertson included stage dressing rooms, rest rooms, a kitchen, and a six-table billiard room. Beginning in 1941 this part of the building was for 17 years the home of the Caltech Industrial Relations Center, except during World War II when the whole building was taken over by the Air Force.

After completion of Beckman Auditorium in 1963 there was less and less need for Culbertson, and eventually the space it occupied became more valuable than the building itself. Baxter Hall—with its Ramo Auditorium, humanities lecture hall, and its exhibit rooms—opened in 1971 and almost eliminated use of Culbertson's increasingly shabby and outmoded facilities. Earthquake damage and Caltech's need to house its expanding program in geophysics and planetary science supplied the final push in the decision for demolition.

