Orton Hall was built at a time when many new land-grant universities, such as Ohio State, were seeking their own identity in an academic world that had been dominated by private institutions of higher learning. While many of these institutions had a large imposing building such as University Hall that originally housed the entire university, as these campuses grew they came under the strong influence of Frederick Law Olmsted, a nationally prominent landscape architect who felt that learning was best served in romantic environments consisting of small buildings casually placed in natural, garden-like settings.

The location and design of Orton Hall reflected Olmsted’s influence directly through Herman Haerlin, a “landscape gardener” who was an advocate of Olmsted’s principles. A campus plan he proposed in 1889 shows Botanical Hall, which was finished in 1884, at the architectural focus of a landscape composition that included an informal, staggered row of buildings enclosing a romantic campus landscape between University Hall and Mirror Lake Hollow.

When Orton Hall was designed and built between 1891 and 1893, its location next to Botanical Hall was very likely influenced by Haerlin’s plan and its heavy, Romanesque Revival style was clearly consistent with the romantic, building-in-landscape philosophy of Frederick Law Olmsted. Many late nineteenth century architects shared Olmsted’s design philosophy which, in fact, was a natural architectural reaction to the spirit of this time.

By far the best known architect working in this spirit was Henry Hobson Richardson, who, at the time of his death in 1885, had five of his designs included on a list of the ten best buildings in United States. His work in the Romanesque Revival mode was so well known that buildings such as Orton Hall are often referred to by architectural historians as Richardsonian Romanesque. Trinity Church in Boston remains one of his best known works.

Orton Hall was designed in the “Richardsonian Romanesque” style by a local architect, J. W. Yost, whose firm of Yost and Packard was responsible for many collegiate and public buildings throughout Ohio around the turn of the twentieth century. For detailed information about the construction of Orton Hall, see the Herrick Archives.

Even the most casual observer notices that Orton Hall is a special building. Like all really great works of architecture, it offers aesthetic pleasure while it invites questions such as, “Why is it made of different colored stone? What is the significance of the faces, flora, and fauna carved into the column capitals and other architectural ornament? Why is each column in the vestibule made from a slightly different type of stone? Why is that large boulder standing on end in front of the building?

Orton Hall is a learning tool for the intellectually curious. The Ohio building stone with which is it constructed is placed in the same stratigraphic layers as occur naturally in the state. While some of the
architectural sculpture may be traced to the creative license of architect and sculptor, most of it refers to geological and archaeological concepts of the time. Column in the vestibule, which is a very good example of a Romanesque Revival interior, are carved from very every type of building stone found in Ohio. The large boulder, known to geologists as an “erratic,” was carried to Ohio from Canada by the glacier of the last ice age. When one considers the impact of finding such a huge stone lying around as if dropped by ancient giant, it is easier to understand the mind of prehistoric people who built monuments such as England’s Stonehenge.

Orton Hall is a quintessential university building. Given the role that it plays on the campus, one can logically ask questions such as, “how did Orton Hall come to be designed this way?” Who was responsible for its design? While our society routinely separates professional activities such as campus planning and architectural design from academic activities such as teaching and learning, and fiscal activities such as fund raising and budgeting, buildings such as Orton Hall are created only when all three activities are integral components of an overall University decision-making process.

While the creative skill of architect J. W. Yost was essential to the design of Orton Hall, the active participation and deep academic commitment of the building’s namesake, Edward Orton, resulted in its becoming a unique teaching tool that continues to be recognized and appreciated by visitors, as well as generations of students and faculty members. Written and oral University history makes frequent references to the role that Orton had in the design of this Geology building and the museum collection that it houses.

Almost certainly Orton directed the sculptor to carve the stone grotesques that ring the top of the towers as depictions of prehistoric creatures that once lived in Ohio. There are sixteen figures representing eight different species. Each species has its counterpart on its diametrically opposite side; however, no two are exactly alike—a tribute to the handcrafted skill of the sculptor.

Another example of Orton’s presence in the design is found in column capitals on the south side of the vestibule where one finds a sequence of carvings that evolve from animalistic to human form. Realizing that Orton Hall was designed about thirty years after the publication of Darwin’s, *On the Origin of Species*, one can read in this sculpture a kind of “petrification” of the intellectual and religious debates that were going on at the time and, to an extent, continue today. Thoughtful observers of Orton Hall will also find traditional classic ornament that is subtly modified to incorporate carved images of trilobites and other Ohio fossils.

At this point one may logically ask, “who was Edward Orton?” and “why were the relatively scarce financial resources of this emerging state university dedicated to a building exclusively for the use of the discipline of Geology.” Taking the second question first, historians of the late nineteenth century point out that geology was probably the “most fashionable” science of the day. Likely due in part to the debate over natural evolution versus divine creation, people on both sides of the argument were turning to geology and to a lesser extent botany and zoology, to support their positions. It was relatively common for rocks and minerals to be displayed in drawing room cabinets and lectures on the subject were in demand. The interest began to fade only when discoveries and scholarship led the subject to depths beyond the grasp of the non-professional.

Who was Edward Orton and how was he prepared to serve as president of Ohio State, to serve as chair and Professor of Geology and as Director of the Geological Survey for the State of Ohio.

Edward Francis Baxter Orton was born in the state of New York in 1829 and was graduated from Hamilton College in that state at age 17. The following year, he attended Lane Theological Seminary in Cincinnati where he studied under Dr. Lyman Beecher. Subsequently, he taught for several years at an academy in New York, attended Lawrence Scientific School at Harvard University, and studied theology at Andover Theological Seminary. Between 1856 and 1859, he was professor of Natural Science in the State Normal School at Albany and in, 1859, he was elected principal of Chester Academy in New York, where he remained until 1865 when he was called to Antioch College at Yellow Springs Ohio; “an institution then alive with the inspiration and impetus given it by the seven years presidency of Horace Mann.” After serving as Professor of Natural History at Antioch, he was appointed president in 1872. In the following year he accepted the presidency at Ohio State. While today, it may appear that Orton had little preparation for his pioneering career in geology, his experience was not unusual during this time when formal

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1 Thomas C. Mendenhall, ed. History of The Ohio State University (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 1920) p. 575. Most of the information related to Edward Orton comes from this reference.
education was generally a privilege for the wealthy and when disciplines such as geology were just beginning to emerge, primarily in land-grant institutions where pioneers, such as Orton introduced them as part of the wave of popularity they were enjoying. It is this popularity that not helps to explain his invitation to the presidency but also to explain the attention given to the design and construction of Orton Hall.

In 1881 “after repeated attempts to be relieved from administrative duties,” Orton’s resignation as president was accepted by the Board of Trustees. He retained his professorship in Geology and, in 1882, was appointed Director of the Geological Survey for the State of Ohio. Because of the national interest in geology and the industrial and economic implications of this geological survey, it could be said that this directorship was the most important post that Orton held.

The spirit of Edward Orton is perhaps best illustrated by the fact that despite a stroke that left him partially paralyzed in 1891, he continued to teach and serve as Director of the Geological Survey. At the same time he completed his life’s ambition to mark, number and prepare descriptions, “in his own hand, of more than ten thousand specimens (in the Geological Museum).” His last entry, completing this work, was dated October 2, 1899 and he died two weeks later, on October 16, 1899.

Orton Hall also bears the mark of President Orton’s son Edward Jr. whose interest in Ohio Geology and especially Ohio clays and ceramic industry, led him to an academic and professional career included Geologist of the State of Ohio and Dean of the Ohio State College of Engineering. After the University Library moved into its new building, he founded the Edward Orton Memorial Library and initiated a collection of paintings related to Ohio geologists and the discipline of Geology. Among the paintings are works by well-know artists such as Thomas Moran and Albert Bierstadt.

Orton Hall was conceived as part of a romantic, informal campus planning strategy; however, within ten years it became part of a much more classic, formal campus. As with all great buildings, Orton Hall continues to serve not only as the academic hearth of Geology but also as a major component of the architectural definition of the Oval—the defining space of The Ohio State University.

Mendenhall 1920, p. 576.