

WSU/Wilner Auditorium – Additional Remarks
Wichita New Deal
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The University of Wichita had plans for expansion that were crushed with the onset of the Great Depression. Several of the buildings were outdated, and enrollment kept rising during the 1930s in spite of the difficult times. However, federal programs, part of Franklin Roosevelt's "New Deal," were available to fund public works projects. The state university system in Kansas was generally reluctant to take advantage of New Deal programs, in part due to partisan political stances. In spite of the University's president Republican politics, there were no qualms about applying for federal funds to insure that the expansion plans for the University were not delayed by the Depression years. The Public Works Administration was a program designed to "jumpstart" the economy with construction of large public projects. The labor did not have to come from the relief rolls, and private contractors were hired to supervise the work, instead of the federal government, as with WPA projects. Furthermore, WPA projects were restricted to a \$25,000 limit. Although the University used the WPA for several smaller projects on campus, such as road grading and paving, the PWA was used for the construction of several large buildings.

In May 1935, plans for a new auditorium and student recreation center, to be built on the site of the old Fairmount Hall, were sent to the PWA district supervisor in Kansas for approval. The original estimate was \$160,000 for a building which would seat 1800; later these estimates were revised to around \$180,000, with actual final costs totaling \$191,000. The federal portion was a grant of \$82,800, while the city issued bonds for approximately \$100,000 to pay for the remainder. As a cost-saving measure, the Board of regents voted to save construction costs by changing the stone trim from Carthage limestone to Bedford limestone. Work started in December 1935, with plans prepared by architect Glen H. Thomas. The building was formally opened on December 16, 1936. The building was used by both the university and the community for plays, performances, and special events. Today it is used as a performance auditorium, offices, and classrooms.

The Georgian Revival building was featured in a volume which detailed the work of the Public Works Administration, *Public Buildings: Architecture Under the Public Works Administration, 1933-39*, Volume I. The authors felt that the PWA contributed to the field of architecture in many ways with projects exhibiting innovations in construction techniques and engineering. One of the areas of improvements in design was the treatment of auditoriums and college buildings. PWA projects strove to eliminate waste with economical plans and improved light and ventilation over previous buildings. The vast majority were fireproof, with steel or reinforced-framed construction, reinforced-concrete floor slabs, and exterior walls of brick or stone. The general overview of PWA architecture was followed by good examples of a building type or style in the region – at least in the opinion of the authors – of which the auditorium was included.

The original portion of the building has a side gable central portion with two gable-front wings, with a hip roof over the auditorium section on the south. There is a full-height porch between the two side wings. Georgian details include classical cornices with dentil bands, quoins, Palladian and multi-paned windows, roof urn decorations, engaged columns, classical swag panels, and accentuated doors. Doors were added on the south side in the 1950s to meet fire code requirements; otherwise, the exterior retains a high degree of integrity.