



## Megaron

<https://megaron.yildiz.edu.tr> - <https://megaronjournal.com>  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14744/megaron.2025.33169>

M G A R O N

### Article

## Building a mission in Ottoman Empire: A research on Istanbul Robert College gymnasium building in the light of new documents

Tuğba YILMAZ<sup>1</sup>, Zeynep Gül ÜNAL<sup>2</sup>

*Department of Architecture, Yıldız Technical University, Istanbul, Türkiye*

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history

Received: 05 December 2024

Revised: 14 June 2025

Accepted: 14 June 2025

#### Key words:

American board; gymnasium;  
missionary buildings; Robert  
College; Rumeli Hisarı.

### ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the strategic and operational framework of building a mission in a foreign country within the standards of local, international, and associated systems. The anatomy of the activities of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM, American Board), the largest missionary organization of the 19th century, is examined through the construction of Robert College and its educational system in the Ottoman capital. The construction journey of Robert College's Gymnasium Building and its architectural changes through time illustrate how the mission's visibility was achieved within the framework of Ottoman laws and the social environment in which it was situated.

In this study, previous works within this scope were first examined. Then, documents accessed for the first time through research conducted at Columbia University, Rare Books and Manuscript Library, Boğaziçi University Architectural Drawings Collection, and the Ottoman Archives of the State Archives Directorate were compiled (archival research continued from 27.05.2022 to 26.06.2024). Based on these documents, the Gymnasium Building was documented, and the construction process was interpreted through the existing traces and alterations on the building. In the light of the data obtained, the first section of the article will describe the permission and the construction process of Robert College. The second section will examine the environment that created the necessity for a Gymnasium building within the school and the sports activities in the Ottoman Empire in a comparative manner. In the third section, the documents obtained from various institutional archives will be published for the first time, and the processes of obtaining permissions, project planning, construction, and the material procurement for the Gymnasium Building will be analyzed. Additionally, this section will evaluate the prepared survey project and the restitution proposals concerning the archival data.

**Cite this article as:** Yılmaz, T., & Ünal, Z. G. (2025). Building a mission in Ottoman Empire: A research on Istanbul Robert College gymnasium building in the light of new documents. *Megaron*, 20(2), 247-262.

#### \*Corresponding author

\*E-mail adres: [yilmaztugba271@gmail.com](mailto:yilmaztugba271@gmail.com)



Published by Yıldız Technical University, İstanbul, Türkiye

This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>).

## INTRODUCTION

The 19th century stands out as a period when missionary organizations increased their activities in many parts of the world to spread their religious beliefs. The vast geographical area covered by the Ottoman Empire and its multi-ethnic structure attracted the attention of missionary organizations. Among these organizations, the American Board was the most prominent.

The American Board, particularly from 1839 onwards, operated in many regions of Anatolia, constructing schools, orphanages, and hospitals. Thanks to the organization's meticulous reporting system, all activities were recorded through diaries, periodic and general reports, and projects with detailed drawings, with a significant portion of these documents surviving to the present day. One of the Board's most important undertakings, Robert College, was meticulously documented from the design phase, mainly due to the buildings constructed and the educational system established in Istanbul. These documents were shared with relevant institutions (Ottoman state institutions, the U.S. government, the American Board, and the Robert College Board of Trustees). From the documents currently housed in various archives, it is possible to identify the school's founding, the permission, the construction processes, and its architectural and material characteristics.

Within the scope of this study, the permission and the construction process of the Gymnasium Building, one of Robert College's structures, thoroughly researched both on-site and in archives, could only be clarified through the comparison of various archival sources. As a result of the archival research, the construction process of the building, the implementation of the projects, its original condition, and its current state have been compared using photographs obtained from the archives and the projects prepared during the permission process. In the light of these newly discovered documents, the historical development of the structure has been examined and presented.

## METHODOLOGY AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Archival data constitute the primary source for this original study. The most comprehensive and systematic archives of Robert College are housed at the Columbia University Rare Books and Manuscripts Library in New York. Covering a period from the 1850s to the 1980s, this archive contains over 200,000 written and visual documents related to Robert College and the American College for Girls. Boğaziçi University acquired a digital copy of this archive through a protocol signed in 2013 (Kırlı & İleri, 2015). The correspondence, reports, and photographs contained in this archive were used as a source to clarify the college's founding process and the construction of Gymnasium<sup>1</sup>.

The Boğaziçi University Architectural Drawings Collection includes 397 architectural drawings related to Robert College and Boğaziçi University, produced between the 1870s and the 1990s. The collection contains original project drawings on

tracing paper, sketches, measured drawings on various paper types, and blueprint reproductions (Kırlı & İleri, 2015). As this archive, accessed through the Boğaziçi University Archives Directorate, is still being catalogued, the documents do not yet have file numbers. The original architectural projects in this collection were used to prepare the restitution proposals for two different periods of the Gymnasium.

Another archive utilized in this study is the Ottoman Archive of the State Archives Directorate. Through documents submitted by the Robert College administration or the U.S. Embassy to the Ottoman Empire, the permission and construction processes of the Robert College buildings could be traced. Among the documents submitted by the college to the state are architectural projects, which have served as the basis for restitution and provided an opportunity to compare with other projects in the Boğaziçi University Architectural Drawings Archive.

The autobiographical "My Life and Times" (1893) by Cyrus Hamlin offers a detailed account of Hamlin's own life, including his educational background and his works as a missionary in Istanbul, where he founded the Bebek Theological School and later established Robert College. Aksu (2017) translated the book of Hamlin as "Robert Kolej Üçünde Bir Ömür". This translation includes an introduction written by the translator.

"The Anatomy of a Tradition: 150 Years of Robert College 1863-2013", published in 2013, and this catalogue has been prepared for an exhibition at Suna and İnan Kıraç Foundation, Istanbul Research Institute. "The Campus, The City, and The Empire: The Early Architecture of Robert College and The American College for Girls" (2013) by Zeynep Çelik is a valuable resource for evaluating the Ottoman Archive data on the College.

"Fifty Years in Constantinople and Recollections of Robert College" (1909) was written by George Washburn, the second president of the College. The book offers comprehensive information regarding the construction processes and architectural development of the college buildings. "A Bridge of Culture: Robert College-Boğaziçi University" (2009) by John Freely is another vital source that provides detailed examinations of the school's permission and construction processes.

Several graduate theses have been produced in Turkish universities that address the history of Robert College and the development of sports activities in the Ottoman Empire. Among them, "*The Robert College: The Building of an American School in Istanbul*" (2023) by Zeki Furkan Arılcı, completed in the Department of Architecture, focuses on the architectural formation of the college. Similarly, "*Istanbul Robert College in the Light of American Archive Documents*" (2015) by Refika Yavaş, submitted to the Department of Education, examines the institution through American archival sources. Another significant work is "*Conservation Project of the Kurtuluş Sports Club Building (Tatavla Hercules Gymnastics Association)*" (2018),

authored by Gizem Şenel under the supervision of Prof. Dr. Deniz Mazlum. This thesis presents a detailed investigation of sports-related activities within the Ottoman context, with a particular focus on minority communities.

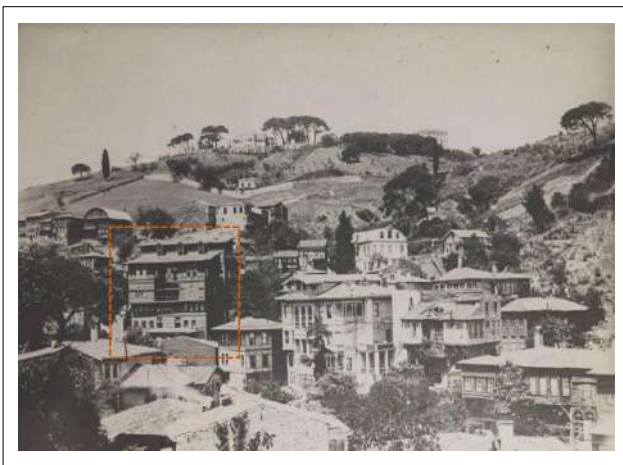
In addition to these theses, relevant periodical sources have also contributed to the field. Nejla Günay's article "*Osmanlı Devleti'nde Kurulan Spor Cemiyetleri ve Jimnastik Derslerinin Milliyetçilik Hareketlerindeki Rolü*" (2017), published in *Belleten*, offers valuable insight into the political and cultural significance of sports in the late Ottoman period.

## ROBERT COLLEGE CONSTRUCTION PROCESS

In his autobiography, Cyrus Hamlin (1893) describes in detail how he founded an American school in the Ottoman capital in 1863, with the support of C.R. Robert. Hamlin was born in 1811 in Maine, USA. He entered Bridgton Academy and spent two years there. His education then continued at Bowdoin College, where he constructed a steam engine and joined three religious groups, taking leading roles. He decided to become a missionary at the College and became closely associated with the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) during his theological studies. After graduation, he was a member of the ABCFM and was sent to Istanbul in 1839 by the Board, where he decided to establish a theological school to support missionary activities (Hamlin, 1893). The ABCFM's choice of Hamlin for Istanbul was a highly appropriate one. His creative intelligence, problem-solving skills, and perseverance—consistently demonstrated throughout his student years—were the primary reasons for assigning him to a challenging field.

Hamlin began teaching two Armenian students in a rented house in Bebek. As the number of students grew, he moved the school to a larger house in 1843 (Figure 1) (Hamlin, 1893).

The house was suitably large, in line with the American Board's standards. Properties rented or built by the Board across Türkiye typically shared two key features: they were located far from city centers and were large in size (Figure 2).



**Figure 1.** Bebek Theological School (Columbia University, n.d.a).



**Figure 2.** American Board Mission buildings in Harput (Salt Research, 1902).

In *My Life and Times* (1893), Hamlin explains that the Bebek Theological School operated until the 1860s, when it was relocated to Merzifon. He states that his views no longer aligned with the Board's, leading him to part ways with the organization in 1860 (Hamlin, 1893). But the true story was different. Establishing an American College in the Ottoman Capital wouldn't be an easy task. The college had to be secular and entirely independent from the American missionaries operating within the Ottoman Empire. Such institutional independence was considered essential to avoid provoking prejudice or resistance among the Ottoman population. In this way, the school would be able to attract students from various national and religious backgrounds (Greenwood, 2003).

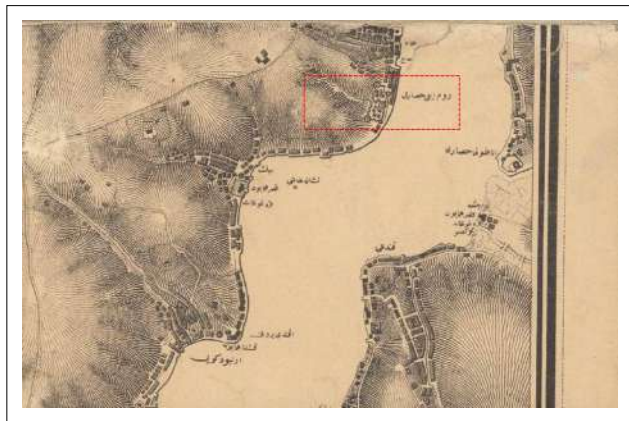
So, Hamlin parts ways with the Board, but he describes himself as more of a missionary than ever. He then began discussions with Christopher R. Robert, a New York merchant, about the college he had long dreamed of establishing. He secured the necessary funds for the school from America (Hamlin, 1893).

## Robert College Site Selection and Initial Building Permission Process

The land Hamlin desired (Figures 3; Figure 4) was located on the hills of Rumeli Hisarı and belonged to Ahmet Vefik Pasha. He chose this site primarily because it overlooked the Bosphorus (Figure 5) and had a nearby stone quarry, which eliminated the need for costly and difficult stone transportation (Washburn, 1909).

In 1859, when Hamlin selected the site at Rumeli Hisarı for the establishment of the college, he was unable to acquire the land from Vefik Pasha, who was unwilling to sell it for the purpose of founding an American institution (Freely, 2000). However, following the death of Sultan Abdülmecid in 1861 and the accession of Sultan Abdülaziz, Vefik Pasha's position (he was serving as ambassador in Paris) also shifted. After he was removed from his position, Vefik

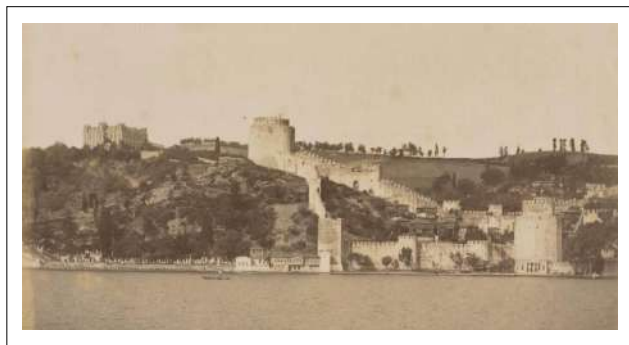
Pasha, in need of money, offered Hamlin the opportunity to purchase the site (Washburn, 1909). Hamlin made deals with Pasha in 1861 and officially purchased the land in 1862, but was unable to construct the school



**Figure 3.** Rumeli Hisarı (Moltke, 1852).



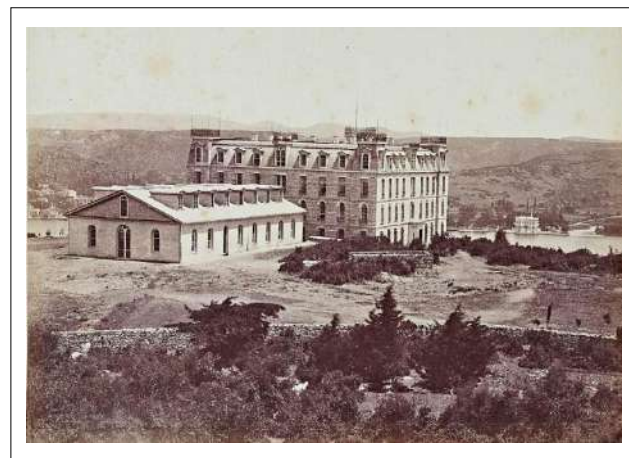
**Figure 4.** Robert College map (Ottoman Archives, 1910).



**Figure 5.** Hamlin Hall is located on the hills of Rumeli Hisarı (Eskiistanbul, 1890).

because he hadn't obtained a building permit from the government (Aksu, 2017). In 1861, Hamlin prepared a historic statement of the origin of the proposed college for the Trustees' review. The report provides insights into the institution's educational philosophy, its qualifications, and the instructional methods to be employed. This report was also sent to the Ottoman Empire to obtain permission to establish the school (Ottoman Archives, 1861). The Ottoman government granted permission for the establishment of the school, but not for the construction of its buildings. This was primarily because the selected site wasn't located within a Christian neighborhood, which was considered inappropriate for a Christian institution. Moreover, the Muslim residents of Rumeli Hisarı expressed discontent with the idea of an American school being built on what they regarded as a sacred site (Ottoman Archives, 1866).

Hamlin repaired the vacant building in Bebek and established Robert College there in 1863. He obtained the building permission for Rumeli Hisarı seven years later, in 1868 (Aksu, 2017). After Admiral Farragut visited Istanbul and had meetings with the Pashas, the permission to construct at the Rumeli site was given as the Sultan's Irade. With the acquisition of the building permission in 1868, construction of the first building began immediately and was completed in 1871 (Hamlin, 1893). In recognition of Cyrus Hamlin's significant efforts to establish Robert College in Istanbul, this building was named "Hamlin Hall." Since the education previously provided in the house in Bebek would now continue in Hamlin Hall, which included classrooms, a dining hall, a kitchen, dormitories, and other facilities (Aksu, 2017). As the school expanded, new functional buildings were added over time, contributing to the growth of Robert College. A large single-story study hall was later built behind the first building (Figure 6) (Çelik, 2013).



**Figure 6.** Robert College Hamlin Hall, 1870s (Abdulhamid II Photograph Archives, 1870).

After founding Robert College and constructing its first building, Cyrus Hamlin recognized the need for housing for the teachers instructing at the College. To address this need, construction began on two residences. The first, Van Millingen House (also known as Huntington House or Scott House), was built and opened in 1880-81 by Alexander Van Millingen, an expert in Byzantine history and architecture (Freely, 2000). In 1891, Kennedy Lodge was completed as the president's residence (Figure 7). The building was named after John S. Kennedy, who provided the donation that funded its construction and was, at the time, the Chairman of the Board of Trustees of Robert College. Around the same period, Science Hall (later renamed Albert Long Hall) was also opened (Figure 8). Theodoros Hall was completed in 1902. Designed as a preparatory building, its construction was funded by a donation from Olivia Egglestone Phelps Stokes (Çelik, 2013).

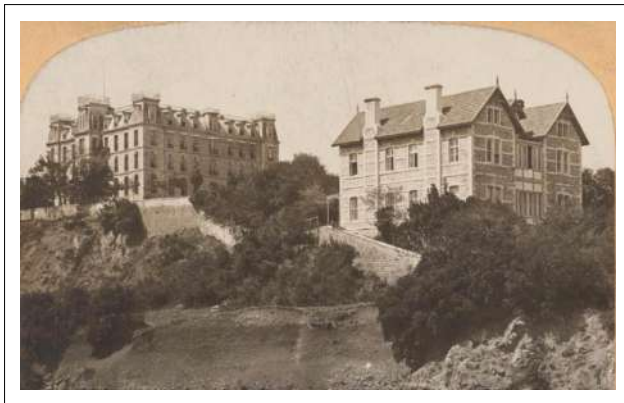
With donations from William E. Dodge and his son, Cleveland Dodge, the Dodge Gymnasium (Gymnasium Building) was completed in 1904. In 1906, Washburn Hall,

designed by Hamlin's son Alfred Dwight Foster Hamlin<sup>2</sup>, was also completed. In 1912, the Engineering Building, or Gates Hall, was finished, followed by Anderson Hall in 1913, which Alfred Dwight Foster Hamlin designed as a classroom/dormitory building. An addition was made to Dodge Hall in 1914. The Henrietta Washburn Hall, intended as a meeting hall and auditorium and named after Hamlin's daughter, was completed that same year (Freely, 2000). In 1925, Sloane Hall (John Sloane Infirmary) was completed, funded by a donation from William Sloane, a Robert College Board of Trustees member, in honor of his late father, a former trustee. In 1932, the Alexander van Millingen Library (Figure 9) was completed, further expanding the Robert College campus (Figure 10) (Çelik, 2013).

In 1871, while classes were still being held in the Bebek building, the number of students was 99; however, this number rose to 195 in the same year following the relocation to Rumeli Hisarı. While the majority of students were initially Bulgarian and Armenian, the number of Jewish, Turkish, and Greek students also increased over time (Washburn, 1909).

### THE CONSTRUCTION PROCESS OF THE GYMNASIUM BUILDING

Before founding Robert College, Hamlin ensured that Robert College was established as a secular educational institution (Aksu, 2017). The presidents who succeeded Hamlin continued this vision, providing students with opportunities to gain practical skills through humanities courses and workshops. Physical activities were included in the curriculum from the school's early years. As a result, structures were later built to accommodate students' participation in sports and social activities (Freely, 2000).



**Figure 7.** Hamlin Hall (left) and Kennedy Lodge (right) (Library of Congress, 1901).



**Figure 8.** Robert College on the Bosphorus (Library of Congress, 1910).



**Figure 9.** Alexander van Millingen Library (Columbia University, n.d.b).

### Sports Education in the Ottoman Empire and Robert College

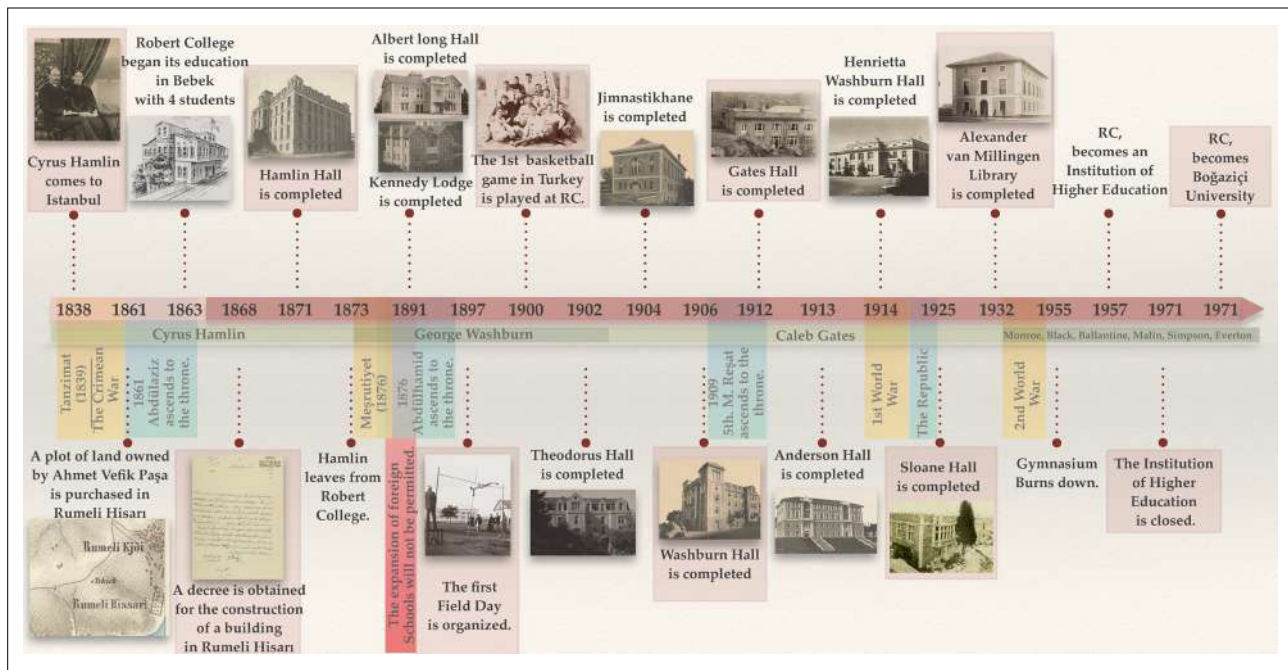
Sports activities in the Ottoman Empire during the 19th century were primarily conducted in military barracks and schools as part of military drills. Physical training, gymnastics, or physical education classes were first introduced outside of military schools at Galatasaray Mekteb-i Sultani (Günay, 2017). With the introduction of gymnastics education during the Tanzimat Era, schools with gymnasiums began offering apparatus gymnastics and weightlifting exercises. Instructors were brought from abroad to teach these activities in the early stages. Beyond the gymnastics education provided in schools, from 1880 onward, instructors began to open private gymnasiums in Beyoğlu. By the end of the 19th century, sports clubs started to form (Soyer, 2004). The transition from traditional

Ottoman sports structures to formalized club organizations also took place during this period. The first sports clubs in the country were established by Greek communities, in the form of minority associations centered around athletic activities (Günay, 2017).

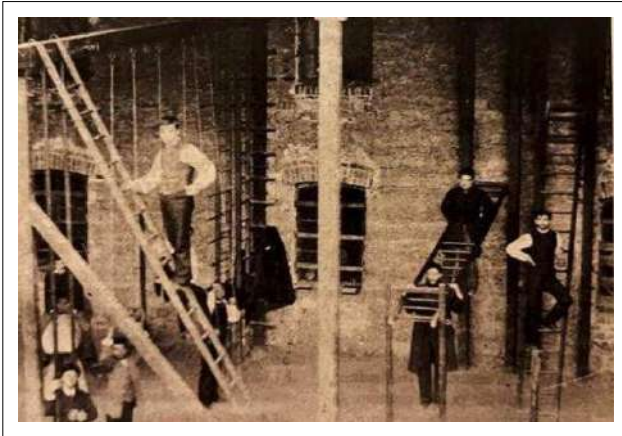
While these developments were unfolding within minority associations in the fields of sports and the arts, the first Modern Olympic Games were organized in Athens in 1896. However, the Ottoman Empire was not able to officially participate in the event until 1912. During the reign of Sultan Abdulhamid II, Muslims were not permitted to establish clubs. This restriction was lifted with the proclamation of the Constitutional Monarchy, after which the number of sports clubs and associations in the Ottoman Empire rose to over fifty. One of them, and the first established in the Ottoman Empire, is the Tatavla İraklis Gymnastics Society, which dates back to 1896 (Şenel, 2018). Some of the legally established sports clubs of the Ottoman period include Galatasaray, Fenerbahçe, Süleymaniye, Vefa, Beykoz, and Nişantaşı. The development of sports clubs coincided with the establishment of Robert College (Günay, 2017).

In 1871, Robert College moved to Rumeli Hisarı, continuing its educational activities. The large, open spaces of the area allowed students to engage in various outdoor sports easily. However, when weather conditions didn't allow, indoor spaces became necessary. To address this need, temporary facilities were used for sports classes and activities as early as the 1870s (Figure 11) (Çelik, 2013).

In 1896, the Robert College Athletic Association was established to organize sports activities and promote sports



**Figure 10.** Robert College chronology (Created by the Authors).



**Figure 11.** The temporary gymnasium in Hamlin Hall, 1870s (Çelik, 2013).

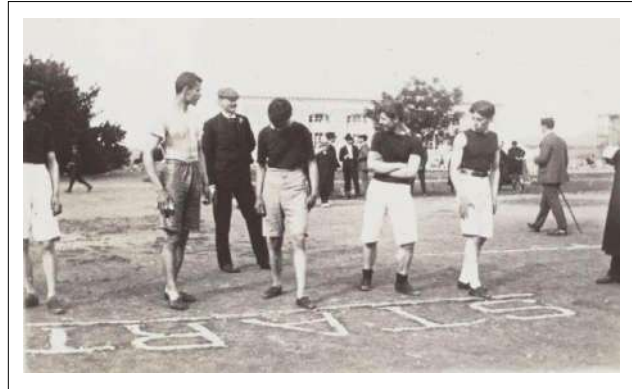
within the city and the country. Reflecting the rapid spread of Olympic culture in Europe and America at the time the tradition of Field Day began in 1897 (Figure 12). Even in those early years, Robert College organized the most comprehensive sports event in Türkiye, encompassing various sports disciplines (Çelik, 2013).

Thanks to its Anglo-Saxon connections, Robert College could stay informed about developments abroad more quickly. During that period, the school followed sports-related developments in England and America, enabling it to form teams for basketball, football, baseball, and cricket, many of which were the first of their kind in Türkiye. The Robert College basketball team, established in 1900, was the first basketball team in Türkiye (Figure 13) (Çelik, 2013).

Due to the high importance placed on sports at Robert College, there was a need for an indoor sports facility to provide students with systematic training. Up until that time, the following buildings had been constructed within the College: Hamlin Hall, serving as classrooms, laboratories, student dormitories, and faculty residences; the Study Hall, serving as a study and recreation room; the Alexander van Millingen House and Kennedy Lodge, serving as residences; Albert Long Hall, serving as a science building; and Theodorus Hall, serving as a preparatory building and dormitory. The following structure was built in 1904: the Gymnasium (Figure 14). This building was the seventh structure constructed for Robert College and was one of Europe's first indoor sports facilities (Çelik, 2013).

#### **The Building Permission Process and Material Procurement**

When the decision was made to construct the Gymnasium Building, the donation was made by William E. Dodge and his son, Cleveland Dodge, both members of the board of trustees (Çelik, 2013). Upon examining the documents submitted to the Ottoman government for the construction,



**Figure 12.** Field Day, 1904 (Columbia University, n.d.c).



**Figure 13.** RC Basketball Team, 1900 (Columbia University, n.d.d).

the first document, dated 1902, indicated the intention to build two lodges and a gymnasium (Ottoman Archives, 1902). On June 3, 1903, it was noted that a document was submitted to request permission for the construction of the Gymnasium (Ottoman Archives, 1903a). In a document dated September 18, 1903, permission was requested for the construction of the Gymnasium. However, upon discovering that the foundations of the building had been laid without authorization, the Ottoman government informed that permission needed to be obtained (Ottoman Archives, 1903b). In another document dated September 30, 1903, when the school administration was informed that an official permission was needed for the Gymnasium, the embassy stated that the matter was being processed at the Babiali (Sublime Port) and that construction should be allowed to continue until the procedures were completed (Ottoman Archives, 1903c). In a document sent from the Şehremaneti (municipality) to the Ministry of the Interior on February 22, 1904, it is stated that the Gymnasium was “*large and made of masonry, rising three stories high*” (Ottoman Archives, 1904). A document dated August 22, 1905, lists the materials brought for the Gymnasium and the classroom (Washburn Hall) and those to be brought. When



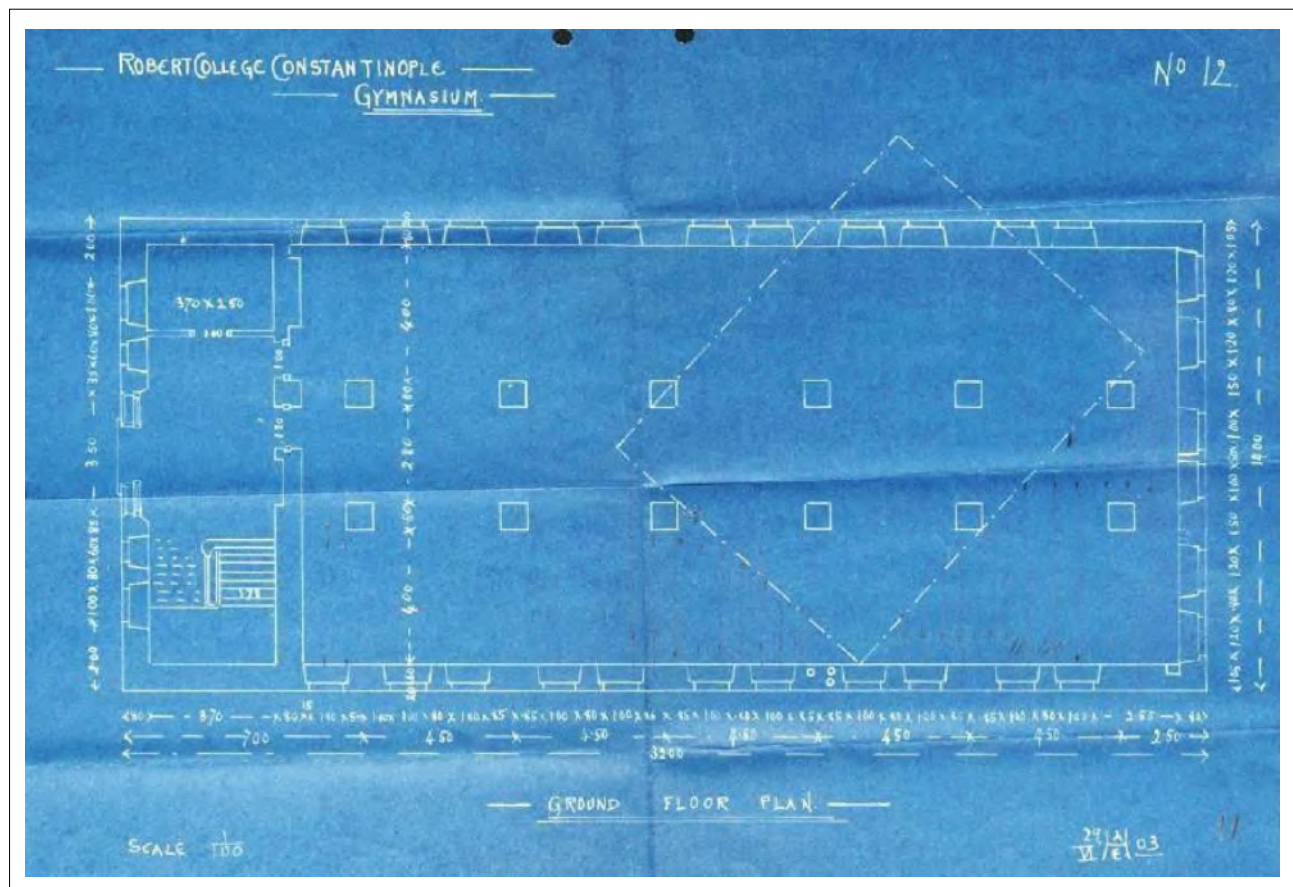
**Table 1.** The list of materials requested to be exempt from customs duties (Ottoman Archives, 1905). Materials are color-coded as follows: orange for the gymnasium, green for Washburn Hall, and blue for materials allocated to both structures.

Date	Material	Origin	Quantity	Price
November (Teşrinisani) 18, 1903	Iron girders and columns	Glasgow	90 units	20 para, 1154 kuruş
May 1, 1904	Metal roof tiles	Canada/Toronto	75 packages	1650 kuruş
March 30, 1905	Iron girders, columns, and cast columns	Sevik	55 units	3732 kuruş
April 20, 1905	Iron column	Galatya	616 units	2752 kuruş
May 5, 1905	Iron girders and bolts		67 units	10 para, 1049 krş
May 6, 1905	Iron girders	Antwerp	350 units	1661 kuruş
April 6, 1905 (ship departure date)	Metal roof tiles	New York	46 crates	968 para, 64 kuruş (4262 dolars)
April 6, 1905 (ship departure date)	Door and window	New York	120 units	246 para, 93 krş (47 dolars)
April 6, 1905 (ship departure date)	Locks, keys and iron door sets	New York		102 para, 27 krş (450 dolars)
April 6, 1905 (ship departure date)	Wooden lumber	Swiss/Dramer		5832,09 frank

been accurately documented (Figures 17, 18). Additionally, when the ground floor plan survey of the building is compared with the archival data, it is evident that the identified plan for this floor is entirely accurate (Figure 19).

The accuracy detected in the plan wasn't observed in the section and elevations. In the drawing of the building's rear

elevation, no windows are shown in the basement; however, a 1910 photograph from the Columbia University Archives shows that the window arrangement broadly matches the current survey (Figure 19). Additionally, it was found that the large-sized frames and facade trimming levels on the elevations do not correspond with the archival photographs.



**Figure 16.** Gymnasium project proposal (Ottoman Archives, 1905).

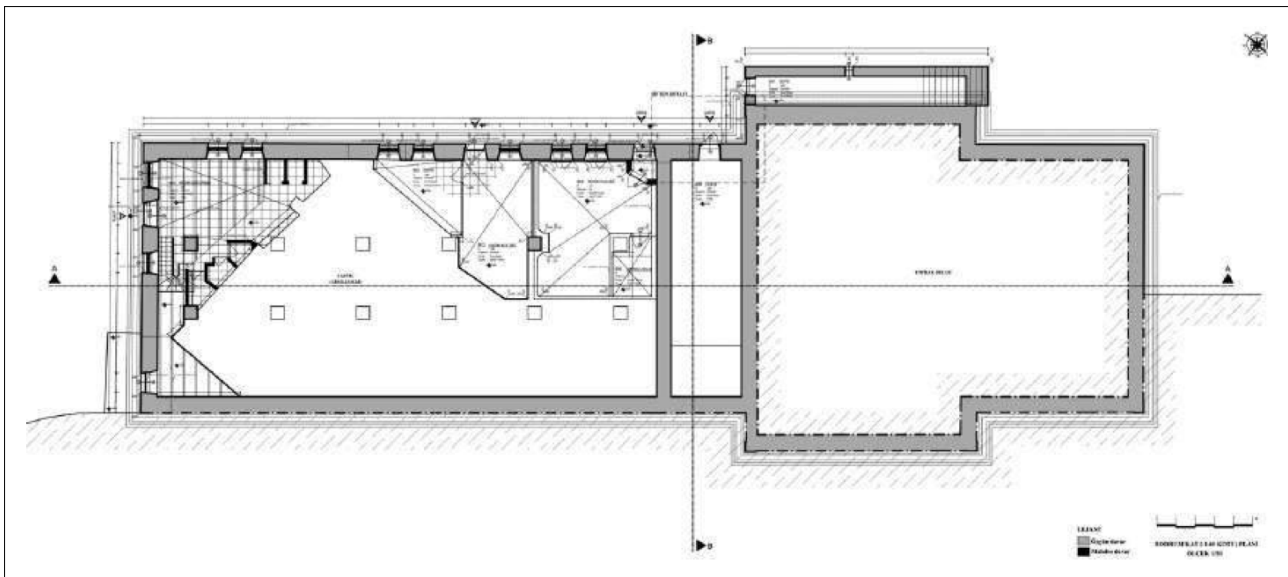


Figure 17. Gymnasium basement floor survey plan (Created by the Authors).

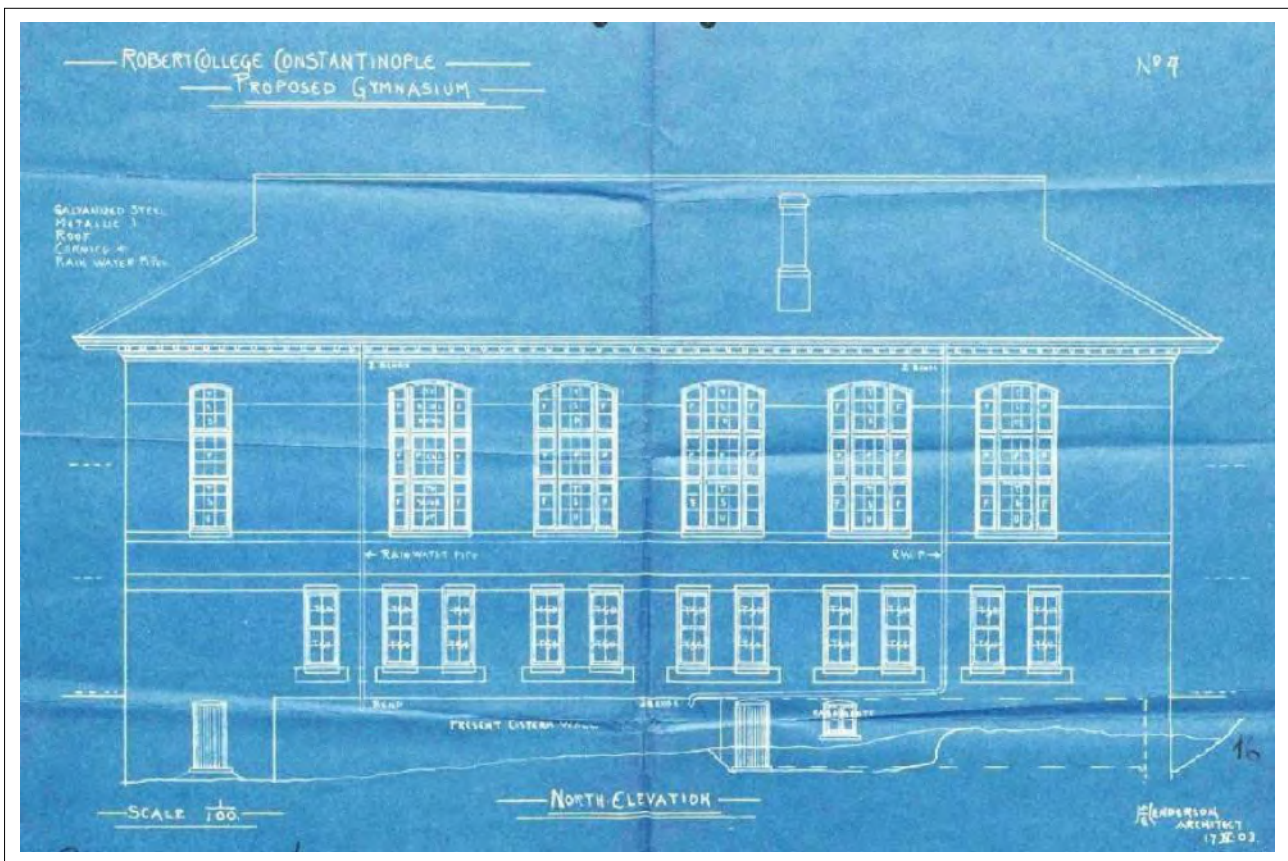


Figure 18. Gymnasium project proposal, northern facade (Ottoman Archives, 1905).

The most significant discrepancy in the section is that the floor between the basement and ground floor is drawn as wooden rather than using iron girders (Figure 20). Aside from this, other details (roof, first floor, etc.) correspond with photographs from that period (Figure 20-22).

#### Permission and Construction Process for the Gymnasium Annex (Social Hall)

The Gymnasium was used in its original form until 1914, after which expansions were made to the building. In a letter dated December 3, 1910, sent from the American

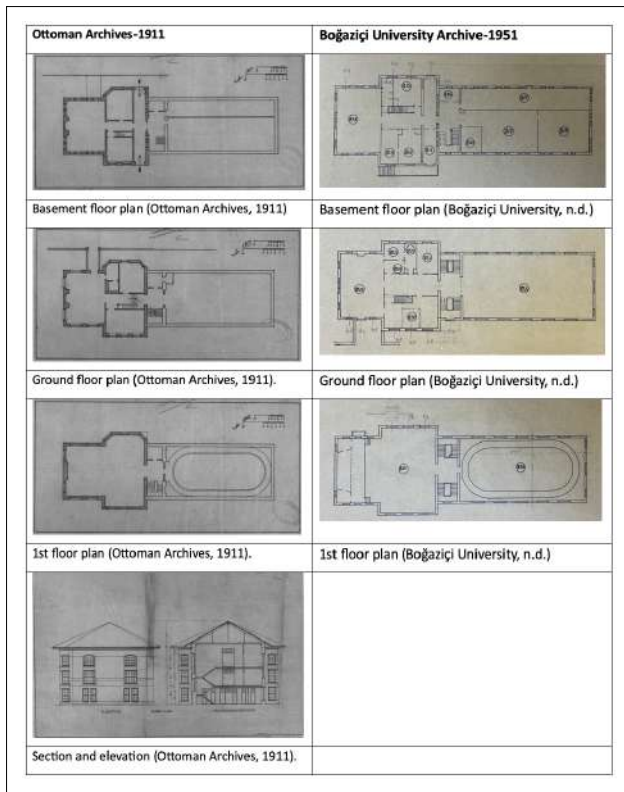


Figure 19. Comparison of the projects found in the archives.

Embassy to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Ottoman Empire, a request was made to add a hall, a reading room, and classrooms to the previously constructed Gymnasium, which had been built with the Sultan's decree. The letter also mentioned that the existing Gymnasium Building was marked in black in the four-sheet project, while the new building to be constructed was marked in red. A construction permission was also requested for these new structures, along with a request for customs exemption on the imported materials (Ottoman Archives, 1911). The building permit was granted on January 31, 1911, by Sultan Mehmed Reşad (Ottoman Archives, 1911).

The newly added building was referred to as the Social Hall. Drawings of the Social Hall have been identified in various archives. The drawings from the Ottoman Archives date back to 1911, while the project found in the Boğaziçi University Archives is a 1951 plan survey. In the project found in the Ottoman Archives, the mass form of the new building is different. The section protruding on the front façade has two corners chamfered at a 45-degree angle, with a window in each section. The degree to which the project submitted to the Ottoman State was implemented can be tracked through the Boğaziçi University Archive drawings. It is observed that the project submitted to the State is quite simplistic. While the general mass size

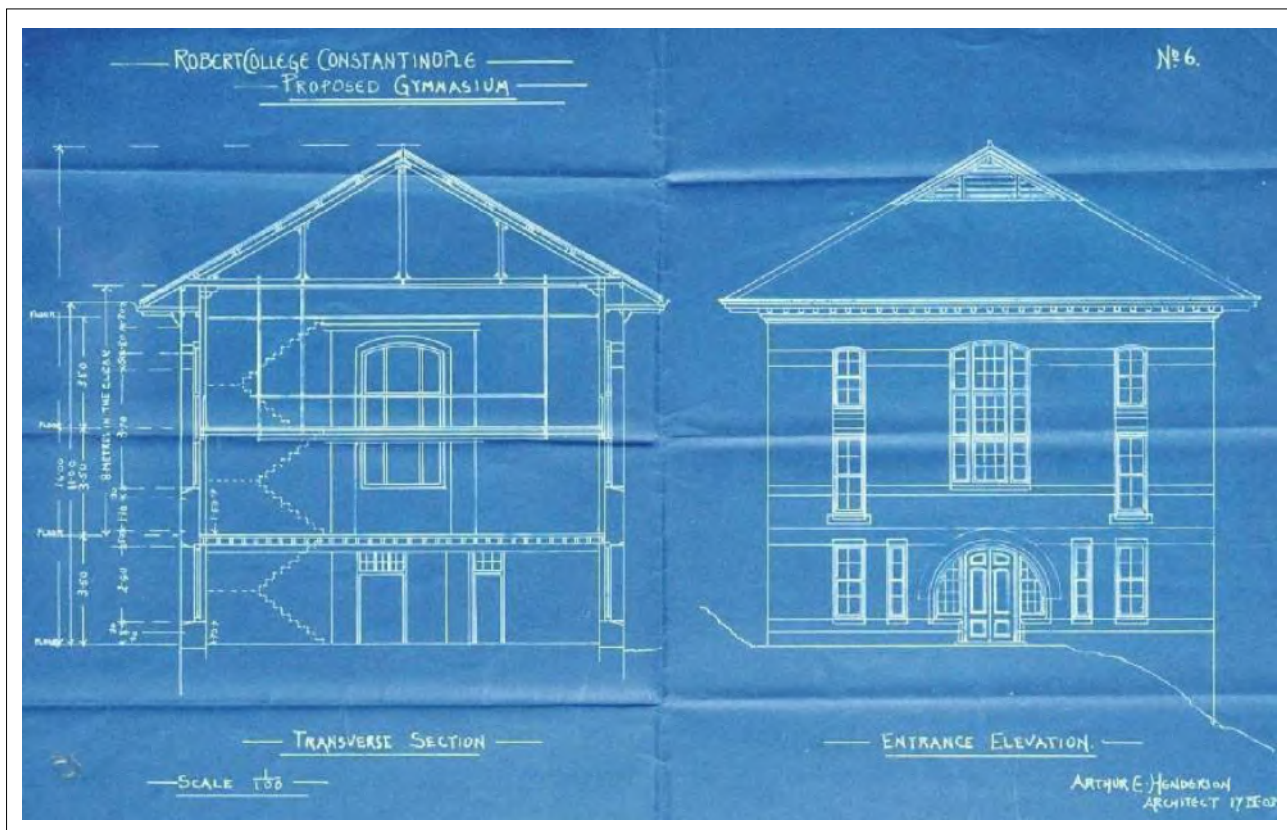
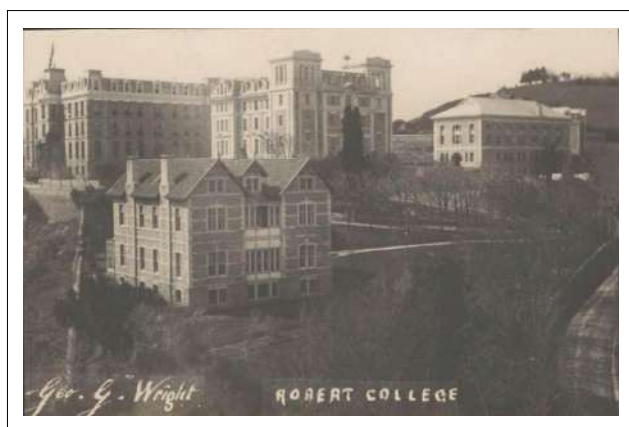


Figure 20. Gymnasium project proposal, 1905 (Ottoman Archives, 1905).



**Figure 21.** Robert College, 1908 (Columbia, n.d.e).

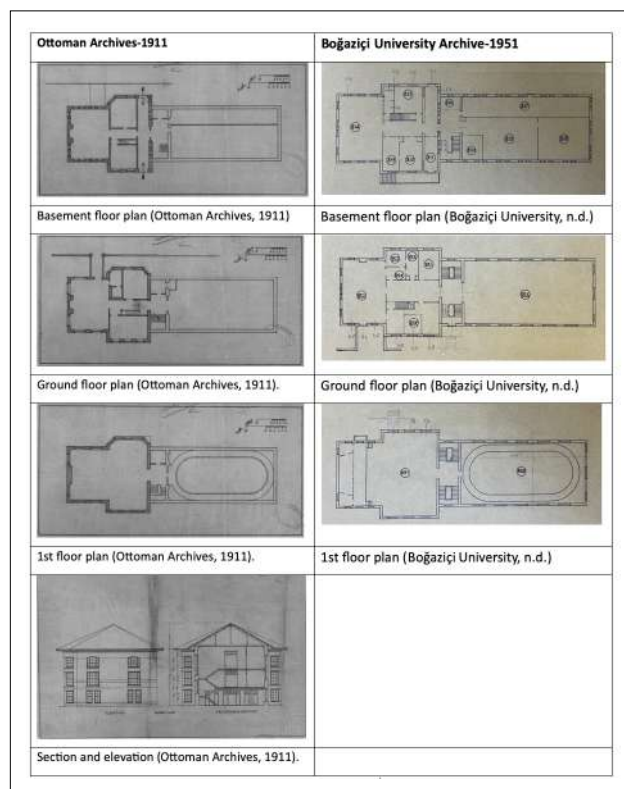


**Figure 22.** Robert College, before 1927 (Columbia University, n.d.f).

of the building is accurate, the spatial divisions and the placement of the stairs do not accurately reflect reality (Figure 23).

This building was totally for the students' social activities. The basement floor included a club lounge/game room, a billiard room, a janitor's room, and a kitchen. The first floor housed a lounge, a monitor's room, a private office, a social director's office, a student council room, and a ping-pong room. The second floor featured an auditorium and a stage (Boğaziçi University, n.d.).

In addition to these projects, more detailed plans and two alternative east façade proposals for the Social Hall were found in the Boğaziçi University Architectural Drawings Collection. Although undated, these are understood to be pre-construction proposals by A.D.F. Hamlin. The first design aligns with Washburn Hall, featuring a central arched window and roof overhang, and continues the Gymnasium's dormer motif can be seen on Figure 24, left figure. The second, implemented version is more consistent with the final building form, incorporating cornice-level windows and a prominent lower cornice aligned with the Gymnasium's roofline can be seen on Figure 22; Figure 24, the right figure; and Figure 25.



**Figure 23.** Comparison of the projects found in the archives.



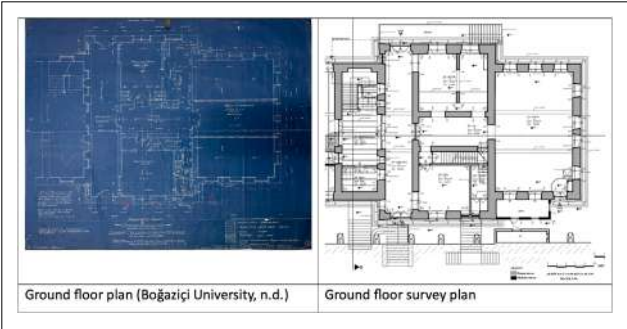
**Figure 24.** Comparison of the east façade's drawings.

Another project related to the Social Hall is a blueprint containing a plan and section, prepared by A.D.F. Hamlin in collaboration with C.P. Warren and G. Mongeri. A comparison with the current measured drawings reveals a high level of consistency in terms of window dimensions, overall layout, and construction system. Only minor discrepancies are observed, such as slight shifts in door placements and variations in shaft locations (Figure 26).

The legend in the lower right of the blueprint outlines the construction system (Table 2). The building incorporates cut stone, rubble stone, brick, reinforced concrete, and plaster over perforated brick. Load-bearing walls are rubble stone; interior partitions are brick. Cut stone is used as cladding and profiles on the façade, while reinforced concrete is employed in the WC area, between window frames, and



**Figure 25.** Left: Washburn Hall west façade; right: Washburn Hall North façade (Photos by the Authors)



**Figure 26.** Comparison of the plans of the ground floor.

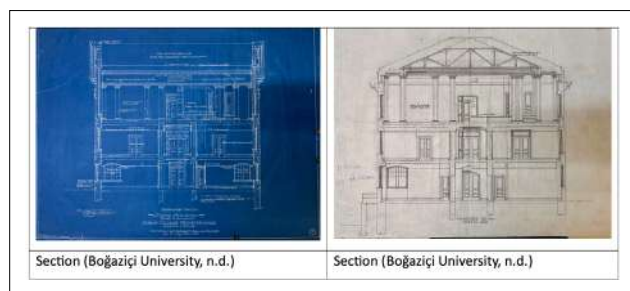
decoratively on the façade. Plaster over perforated brick is seen in WC partitions and the front of rubble walls (Figure 2; Figure 26).

Two façade sections found in the Boğaziçi University Architectural Drawing Archive exhibit similar ground and first-floor details, while differing at the second floor due to variations in the roof. Archival photographs confirm that the section on the right in Figure 27 was implemented at the time (Figures 28-30).

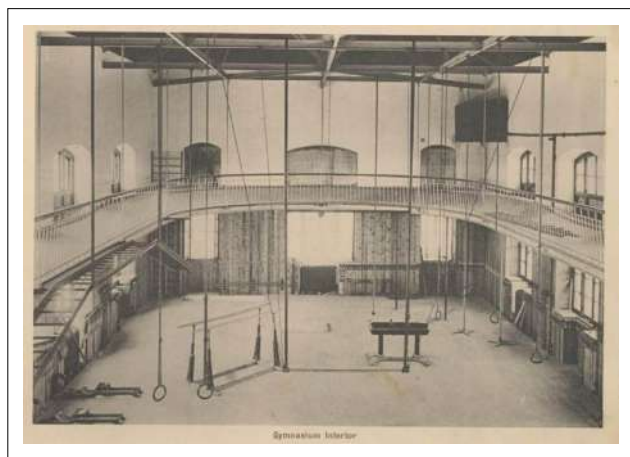
This study used archival photographs to determine the accuracy and degree of implementation of the Gymnasium’s archived projects. As a result, two restitution proposals were prepared, covering the periods 1904-1914 and 1914-1955. The ability to trace every detail of the building from archival data has increased the reliability of these restitution proposals (Figure 31).

**Table 2.** Legend included in the blueprints (Created by the Authors)

Legend	English	French	Original Drawing
	Dressed stone	Pierre de taille	
	Rubble stone	Pierre bleues-moellons	
	Brick	Briques	
	Re-enforced concrete	Beton arme	
	Furring plaster-hollow brick	Briques creuses et platre	



**Figure 27.** Comparison of the sections.



**Figure 28.** Gymnasium 1910, (Columbia, n.d.g).



**Figure 29.** Gymnasium, 1924 (Columbia University, n.d.h).

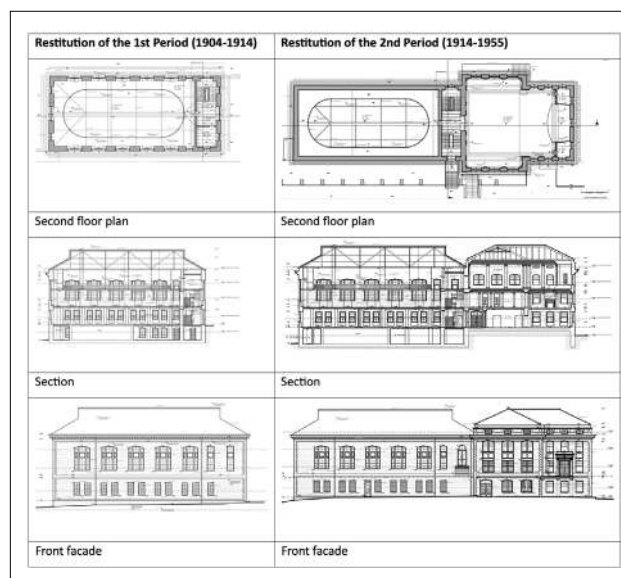
## CONCLUSION

Documentation constitutes the fundamental first step in conserving cultural heritage. Written and visual records of the construction processes of historic buildings contribute to a more accurate understanding of their original state. However, archival data must be critically evaluated, as historical building projects often reveal discrepancies between design and execution due to the period-specific conditions of the time. These differences may appear as unexecuted plans, programmatic changes, or material substitutions. Therefore, a detailed assessment of the current condition based on available documents is essential.

This study presents original archival findings on the Gymnasium Building (now known as the Student Activities Center and the building currently includes a gymnasium,



**Figure 30.** Gymnasium Back Elevation, 1924 (Columbia University, n.d.i).



**Figure 31.** Comparison of the proposed restitutions (Created by the Authors).

student club rooms, a cafeteria, study halls, an auditorium, and office spaces) constructed in two phases at Robert College (founded in 1863), and publishes them for the first time. While examining archival documents, an analytical survey of the building was concurrently carried out in 2023 using laser scanning and manual measurements, with permission from Boğaziçi University. This enabled a comparison between the archival drawings and the actual structure, facilitating an evaluation of the project's implementation. The Ottoman Archives provided records on construction permissions, material procurement, and correspondence between the American Embassy and the Ottoman State, including issues related to customs facilitation. Additionally, detailed project plans were retrieved from the Architectural Drawing Archive of Boğaziçi University. Photographs, reports, and correspondence among trustees, directors, and architects were consulted from the Robert College archives (via Columbia University). These materials were compared

with the current state of the building to verify the accuracy of archival data. Based on this, the construction process was documented, and restitution proposals were prepared in two phases.

The Gymnasium, built in the early 20th century, is examined in the context of sports and missionary activities. Archival analysis sheds light on the working principles and interests of missionaries within the Ottoman Empire, offering insight into broader socio-political dynamics. It also reveals how construction projects initiated by foreign actors were shaped by planning, bureaucratic procedures, material supply, and field practices in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Although direct missionary involvement in the Gymnasium is not immediately evident, letters indicate that their primary concern was fundraising and providing materials. The Board had numerous missionaries stationed across Anatolia, whose needs were met mainly through overseas shipments coordinated via the Bible House and regional stations.

Robert College was the second American college established in Ottoman territories, following the establishment of Syria Protestant College. Due to the sensitivity of founding a Christian institution in Istanbul, Robert College was explicitly declared to be unaffiliated with missionary activities. However, after its foundation, similar institutions began to emerge across Anatolia, adopting comparable curricula and administrative models. Unlike Robert College, these schools did not distance themselves from the Board. The fact that these colleges were established and operated with the same educational objectives indicates that the Board's activities gradually shifted in nature over time.

This study highlights the value of archival research in interpreting both Robert College buildings and foreign-constructed structures in the Ottoman Empire. It also emphasizes that archival documents (particularly historical architectural projects) may not always reflect the built reality and should be critically assessed when developing restitution proposals. Future studies can build on this approach by applying similar methods to other undocumented buildings within the Robert College campus or foreign institutions of the period.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Access to the Columbia University Rare Book & Manuscript Library Robert College Archives was obtained through The Boğaziçi University Archive and Documentation Center.

<sup>2</sup>He was born in 1855 in Istanbul and received his architectural education at Columbia University (Hamlin, 1893).

<sup>3</sup>In 1955, the building suffered a major fire (Akaş, 2013).

**ETHICS:** There are no ethical issues with the publication of this manuscript.

**PEER-REVIEW:** Externally peer-reviewed.

**CONFLICT OF INTEREST:** The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

**FINANCIAL DISCLOSURE:** The authors declared that this study has received no financial support.

## REFERENCES

- Abdulhamid II Photograph Archives. (1870). *İstanbul Boğaziçiyle Saray-ı Hümayunlar'ın manzarası: Memalik-i Osmaniye şehirleri: Robert Koleji*. Retrieved, May 1, 2022, from <http://nek.istanbul.edu.tr:4444/ekos/FOTOGRAF/90763---0057.jpg>
- Akaş, C. (2013). Robert College Chronology [Robert Kolej Kronolojisi]. In *An Anatomy of a Tradition: 150 Years of Robert College 1863-2013 [Bir Geleniğin Anatomisi: Robert Kolej'in 150 Yılı 1863-2013]* (p.451-459). İstanbul Araştırmaları Enstitüsü Yayınları.
- Aksu, A. (2017). *Hamlin, Robert Kolej Uğrunda Bir Ömür*. Dergâh Yayınları.
- Arılcan, Z. F. (2023). *The Robert College: The Building of an American School in Istanbul*, [Unpublished master's thesis] Middle East Technical University.
- Boğaziçi University. (n.d.). *The Architectural Drawings Collection, Plans, sections, and elevations*. Retrieved Jan 27, 2023, from <https://bogazici.edu.tr/en/pages/the-architectural-drawings-collection/272>
- Columbia University (n.d.i). *Social Hall and Gymnasium, Henrietta Washburn Hall*. Columbia University, Rare Books and Manuscript Library, Robert College Records. Box 93, File 1, Document 58.
- Columbia University. (n.d.a). *Original Home & Robert College in Bebek*. Rare Books and Manuscript Library, Robert College Records. Box 71, File 1, Document 30.
- Columbia University. (n.d.b). *R.C. Library*. Columbia University, Rare Books and Manuscript Library, Robert College Records. Box 92, File 1, Document 16.
- Columbia University. (n.d.c). *Field Day*. Columbia University, Rare Books and Manuscript Library, Robert College Records. Box 67, File 1, Document 60.
- Columbia University. (n.d.d). *RC Basketball Team, 1900*. Columbia University, Rare Books and Manuscript Library, Robert College Records. Box 68, File 1, Document 1.
- Columbia University. (n.d.e). *Robert College*. Columbia University, Rare Books and Manuscript Library, Robert College Records. Box 100, File 1, Document 154.
- Columbia University. (n.d.f). *Hamlin Hall, Washburn Hall, Social Hall front: Kennedy Lodge*. Columbia University, Rare Books and Manuscript Library, Robert College Records. Box 100, File 1, Document 154.

- lege Records. Box 90, File 1, Document 101.
- Columbia University. (n.d.g). *Gymnasium Interior. Columbia University, Rare Books and Manuscript Library, Robert College Records*. Box 102, File 1, Document 6.
- Columbia University. (n.d.h). *Henrietta Washburn Hall - The Y.M.C.A. Building and the Gymnasium at Robert College. Columbia University, Rare Books and Manuscript Library, Robert College Records*. Box 93, File 1, Document 70.
- Çelik, Z. (2013). *Campus, City, and Empire: The Early Architecture of Robert College and the American Girls' College [Kampüs, Şehir ve İmparatorluk: Robert Kolej ve Amerikan Kız Koleji'nin Erken Mimarisi]*. In *Bir Geleniğin Anatomisi: Robert Kolej'in 150 Yılı 1863-2013* (p.211-252). İstanbul Araştırmaları Enstitüsü Yayınları.
- Eskiistanbul. (1890). *Rumeli Hisarı*. Retrieved Feb 10, 2023, from
- Freely, J. (2000). *A History of Robert College*. Yapı Kredi Yayınları.
- from <https://www.eskiistanbul.net/2194/rumeli-hisari-sebah-joaillier-1890-lar>
- Greenwood, K. M. (2003). *Robert College: The American Founders*. Boğaziçi University Press.
- Günay, N. (2017). The Role of Sports Societies Established in the Ottoman Empire and Gymnastics Classes in Nationalist Movements [Osmanlı Devleti'nde Kurulan Spor Cemiyetleri ve Jimnastik Derslerinin Milliyetçilik Hareketlerindeki Rolü]. *Belleten*, 81, 917–946. <https://doi.org/10.37879/belleten.2017.917>
- Hamlin, C. (1893). *My Life and Times*. Boston and Chicago: Congregational Sunday-School and Publishing Society.
- Kırlı, C., & İleri N. (2015). *From Suitcases to Catalogs: Towards the Bosphorus Archives [Bavullardan Kataloglara Boğaziçi Arşivleri'ne Doğru]*. Boğaziçi University.
- Library of Congress. (1901). *Robert College on the Bosphorus, founded by C. Roberts of New York*. Retrieved Nov 22, 2022, from <https://www.loc.gov/item/2022644458/>
- Library of Congress. (1910). *Robert College on the Bosphorus, Constantinople*. Retrieved from <https://www.loc.gov/item/2004672867/> Accessed November 22, 2022.
- Moltke, H. V. (1852). *Constantinople, Turkey*. Retrieved Mar 16, 2022, from <https://www.davidrumsey.com/luna/servlet/detail/RUMSEY~8~1~320546~90089708:-Constantinople,-Turkey?qvq=q:istanbul;lc:RUMSEY~8~1&mi=312&trs=1317>
- Ottoman Archives. (1861). *Presidency of The Republic of Türkiye Directorate of the State Archives*. HR.TO. 146/92.
- Ottoman Archives. (1866). *Presidency of The Republic of Türkiye Directorate of the State Archives*. HR.TO. 146/145.
- Ottoman Archives. (1902). *Presidency of The Republic of Türkiye Directorate of the State Archives*. MV. 104/71.
- Ottoman Archives. (1903a). *Presidency of The Republic of Türkiye Directorate of the State Archives*. BEO 2084/156233.
- Ottoman Archives. (1903b). *Presidency of The Republic of Türkiye Directorate of the State Archives*. BEO 2170/162692.
- Ottoman Archives. (1903c). *Presidency of The Republic of Türkiye Directorate of the State Archives*. BEO 2181/163545.
- Ottoman Archives. (1904). *Presidency of The Republic of Türkiye Directorate of the State Archives*. BEO 2279/170914.
- Ottoman Archives. (1905). *Gymnasium project proposal. Presidency of The Republic of Türkiye Directorate of the State Archives*. BEO 2859/214393.
- Ottoman Archives. (1910). *Robert College Map. Presidency of The Republic of Türkiye Directorate of the State Archives*. I.HR. 1328/5.
- Ottoman Archives. (1911). *Basement floor plan. Presidency of The Republic of Türkiye Directorate of the State Archives*. I.MMS. 136/30.
- Salt Research. (1902). *Harpoon Children's Orphanage Weaving Industry*. Retrieved Apr 8, 2023, from <https://archives.saltresearch.org/handle/123456789/43968>
- Soyer, F. (2004). *An Examination of Institutional Structures in Physical Education and Sports and Their Place in School Curricula in the Ottoman Empire (1839-1908 Tanzimat Period) [Osmanlı Devleti'nde (1839-1908 Tanzimat Dönemi) Beden Eğitimi ve Spor Alanındaki Kurumsal Yapılanmalar ve Okul Programlarındaki Yeri Konusunda Bir İnceleme]*. Gazi Eğitim Fakültesi Dergisi, 24, 209–225.
- Şenel, G. (2018). *Kurtuluş Sports Club Structure (Tatavla İraklis Gymnastics Society) Conservation Project [Kurtuluş Spor Kulübü Yapısı (Tatavla İraklis Jimnastik Cemiyeti) Koruma Projesi]* [Unpublished master's thesis]. İstanbul Technical University.
- Yavaşer, R. (2015). *İstanbul Robert College in the Light of American Archive Documents, Archive Documents*, [Unpublished master's thesis] Muğla Sıtkı Koçman University
- Washburn, G. (1909) *Fifty Years in Constantinople and Recollections of Robert College*. Boğaziçi Üniversitesi Yayınevi. <https://doi.org/10.2307/199547>