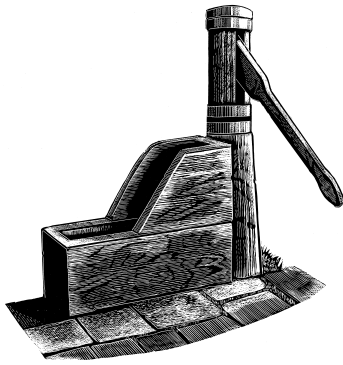


# Stair Trek



*"Your wooden arm you hold outstretched  
to shake with passers-by."*

**P**HILIP M. WILLIAMS '57 dropped by Primus's third-floor office to wish him a happy birthday (they have the same birthday) and to discuss his 21-page manuscript submission, "Stairs at Harvard." "There has been a deterioration in stairs," said Williams, "and people tend to accept what they're given."

After 13 years teaching at private secondary schools, Williams took a job as a carpenter on Cape Cod, eventually going into business for himself, "buying land, designing and building ever-more-up-scale houses, and selling them," until a real-estate bust ended that. Now living in Falmouth, Massachusetts, he began studying alma mater's stairs when one of his four children, Manley, J.D. '92, was earning her law degree and he came often to visit.

Primus thought the treatise on stairs a bit rarefied to appear in full in the magazine, but he requested and obtained permission to sample it here. Williams begins by writing of some elderly stairs of which he greatly approves.

"Start at Harvard Hall, just inside the west gate of Harvard Yard. The building features a pair of stairs opposing each other, ending at a spacious landing. Each



Harvard Hall

of the pair has nine risers and eight treads, the final tread being the landing itself. Each riser is six inches high; each tread is 16¼ inches deep, giving a combined score of 22¼ inches. Adding the riser height to the tread width is one way a builder scores a staircase. Nowadays, a comfortable riser-tread score of 22¼ is rarely observed. When designers put a dollar value on space, stairs are sacrificed. Here, the stairs are a keynote. The staircases themselves are two inches shy of six feet in breadth. The steps are made of a fine-grained sandstone of a yummy texture. Their mass exactly delineates the main body of Harvard Hall. These stairs have generous enough proportions for students attending lectures to loiter about in companionable confusion, taking a little sun. Oh to linger once again upon/Those broad and well worn treads that welcome all/To Harvard Hall. With grace, they course along/The wall. Their mighty wings do hold in thrall/The cheerful, chatting throng, who in delight/Reach up in flight to scale the distant height/Of Learning's light...."

The stair maven goes on to write approvingly and in detail, bursting periodically into verse, of stairs at University Hall ("strict propriety"), Sever Hall ("imposing if not grand"), Widener Library ("engages the mind as well as the body"), the Faculty Club ("style and grace"), Dillon Field House ("what glorious proportions"), and others, including the stairs/seats of the Stadium ("perfect and dependable measurements").

He excoriates the School of Design's



Gordon Track

Gund Hall, where the stairs to a series of work-station levels, even though made of prefabricated steel, are of unequal heights and thus offer "deviltry afoot": it is one's subconscious memory of making the first step that guides one's feet for those that follow, which had better be the same. Williams scoffs, "The intent in this building might have been to show architects how *not* to build stairs."

Exterior steps at Blodgett Pool are "unrivaled for stairs that lack sensible design, conscientious supervision, and competent workmanship, unless, of course, one looks across the parking lot to the steps leading up to...Gordon Track." "What blue sky above! What firm ground below! Within, a wondrous racing center,/and between all/This monument to the slovenly, where most must enter./No two treads alike, no two risers of equal height./Narrow, treacherous, virtual blight,/To sully the name of racing's great friend./No craftsman touched this job, merely greenhorns without end...."



"RACING'S GREAT FRIEND" is, of course, Albert H. Gordon '23, M.B.A. '25, LL.D. '77, who turned 102 in July. "The College Pump" for May-June 2002 (page 76) cited an article by Helen Hannon about the Soldiers Field Monument, which stands just inside the grounds of the athletic complex near Anderson Bridge. Its marble is disintegrating. Hannon now reports that Gordon has provided the funds to replace it with an exact copy in granite and to move the original to a protected spot out of the elements.

~PRIMUS V