On 150th anniversary of Morrill Act, continuing Nevada’s land-grant legacy

Even before the first shovel dug into the earth to build Nevada’s first institution of higher learning, the authors of the state’s constitution recognized an important opportunity.

In 1862, the Morrill Land Grant Act had been passed by Congress and signed into law by President Abraham Lincoln on July 2, 1862, creating an endowment fund for America’s land-grant colleges and universities.

“It is fascinating to look back and consider that Congress and President Abe Lincoln took time during those war-weary days to establish higher education as a fundamental pillar of economic development and westward expansion in our nation,” said University President Marc Johnson, whose career has included roles at several notable land-grant universities.

“This kind of college was having trouble with its finances and its image on the eve of the Civil War. It was not training men in the practical skills essential for a developing society.”

The new Nevada constitution noted that its proposed university “shall encourage, by all suitable means, the promotion of intellectual, literary, scientific, mining, mechanical, agricultural, and moral improvement. The Legislature shall provide for the establishment of a State University, which shall embrace departments for Agriculture, Mechanic Arts, and Mining, to be controlled by a Board of Regents, whose duties shall be prescribed by law.”

Morrill himself, in an address to the Vermont State Legislature in 1888, noted: “The fundamental idea was to offer an opportunity in every state for a liberal and larger education to larger numbers, not merely to those destined to sedentary professions, but to those much needing higher instruction for the
Morrill Hall restoration provides link to the past and pride for Nevada’s future

Efforts are underway to preserve historic Morrill Hall, named for the Morrill Land Grant Act of 1862. Funded through the Bertha M. Standfast Morrill Hall endowment, private gifts, the Nevada Alumni Association and the University, improvements include fresh exterior and interior paint, asbestos removal, updated restrooms, new flooring and a seismically reinforced balcony.

“Our goal is to preserve this building as a symbol of Nevada’s past and present,” says project architect Mercedes de la Garza.

Morrill Hall was the first building constructed on campus when the University was moved from Elko to Reno in 1885. Designed by Reno architect M.J. Curtis and built for $12,700, Morrill Hall housed the entire University: offices, classrooms, living quarters, a museum, library and a gymnasium.

As the University expanded past the Quadrangle, Morrill Hall had many lives and uses. But by the mid-1900s, the building had fallen into disrepair and was deemed uninhabitable.

In 1965, the Nevada Alumni Association approached University President N. Edd Miller with the request to raise funds to restore Morrill Hall. Through the support of private donors, matching grant-in-aid from the Department of the Interior and the National Park Service, Morrill Hall was rededicated in 1979 and placed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Today, Morrill Hall is home to the University’s division of Development and Alumni Relations and the award-winning University of Nevada Press. A second phase of restorations, contingent upon fundraising, include updates to the Prupas Family Study and the Walter Van Tilburg Clark Room.

To learn more about supporting the restoration of Morrill Hall, please contact Lynda Buhlig ’84, executive director of development, (775) 682-6013 or lbuhlig@unr.edu.

—Roseann Keegan

ABOUT THE MORRILL ACT AND LAND-GRANT INSTITUTIONS:

What: A land-grant university is an institution designated by the state legislature or Congress to receive the benefits of the Morrill Acts of 1862 and 1889. The original mission of the institution, as set forth in the first Morrill Act, was to teach agriculture, military tactics and the mechanic arts, as well as classical studies, so members of the working class could obtain a liberal, practical education.

Where: There is one land-grant institution in every state and territory of the United States, as well as the District of Columbia.

Who: Justin Smith Morrill, a representative and later senator from Vermont, sponsored the land-grant legislation that bears his name.

Today: America’s land-grant universities continue to fulfill the democratic mandate for openness, accessibility and service to people, and many of these institutions have joined the ranks of the nation’s most distinguished public universities.

—Source: Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities

world’s business, for the industrial pursuits and the professions of life.”

It took nearly 27 years—and a path that included the establishment of a college preparatory school and forerunner of the modern University in Elko in 1874—before the institution’s land-grant mission came into a clearer focus.

America’s land-grant institutions gradually came to embrace a mission that included three key aspects: teaching, research and outreach. Today, the University of Nevada, Reno serves these missions with a wide-range of programs representative of the evolving interests of the state, and the institution also stays true to the roots of the Morrill Act with programs in engineering, agriculture and the military arts.

“It is remarkable to consider that what those visionary leaders created 150 years ago is even more relevant today,” Johnson said.

—By John Trent ’85/’87, ’00M.A