



PHOTO COURTESY OF WABASH COLLEGE TWITTER

The Senior Bench stands resolute behind Center Hall, but many Wallies do not know the history behind the many traditions surrounding it.

AN INHERITED PRIVILEGE

THE HISTORY AND TRADITION OF THE SENIOR BENCH

AUSTIN RUDICEL '20 | OPINION EDITOR • Standing (four/five) feet tall and twelve feet long, the “Senior Bench” is one of the most notable landmarks at Wabash. The limestone bench is a symbol of tradition and unity as illustrated by the numerous layers of paint coating the bench from various organizations on campus. Students and faculty know exactly where to find the bench on campus and the tradition that only seniors may sit on it, but much of the history of the bench is unknown to many students.

Firstly, the “Senior Bench” is not the official name for the stone bench; its real name is The Thomson Memorial Seat (Bench). The Thomson Memorial Bench was erected on June 13th, 1905 by Col. Chester G. Thomson in recognition of the members of the Thomson family who made significant contributions to the founding and early years of Wabash College. The bench was sculpted by Rudolf Schwartz, who is also known for

his contributions in designing the Soldiers and Sailors Monument in Indianapolis.

The inscription on the front of the bench, which is now barely visible with all the layers of paint, lists the six members of the Thomson family along with the name of the family member who erected the bench. There are three names on the left panel and three on the right which list each Thomson family member along with their position during the early years of Wabash. From founders to trustees and even librarian, the Thomson family was crucial to the development of Wabash College for many years.

The tradition for seniors to be the only ones who may sit on the bench developed quickly after the bench’s installment. The Thomson Memorial Bench almost immediately became the possession of the senior class with the rights to sit on it first given to the class of 1906. Violation of this right by vandalizing or sitting on the Thomson Memorial Bench by non-

seniors would result in a trial and often punishment from the Senior Council. In one particular instance in 1957, the Senior Council punished a freshman responsible for vandalizing the stone seat with a not too pleasant haircut.

Although the practice of painting the bench has no official beginning, the tradition has a rich history dating back over a century ago. With various events on campus along with different organizations, students have found numerous reasons to paint the bench. From wishing each other good luck on finals to fraternities taking turns painting the bench, the Thomson Memorial Bench established itself as an essential part of the Wabash experience. Painting the bench has also served as a way to honor members of the Wabash community who have passed away and reflect on their impact on the college.

Many of the traditions of the Thomson Memorial Bench are still upheld to this

day. Dating back to the 1970’s, Phi Delta Theta has an annual tradition to paint the bench “Fire Engine Red” the night before the first home football game. As part of the tradition, Fiji challenges the Phi Deltas and attempts to paint the bench white in the battle for control of the bench. Many fraternities and clubs on campus have since developed their own traditions to paint the bench.

Although many layers of paint on the bench have been removed in an attempt to clean the bench, it is only a matter of time before new layers of paint are coated onto the Wabash landmark. The Thomson Memorial Bench is a centerpiece of campus unity and honor and continues to serve as a unique aspect of Wabash. In her post on Dear Old Wabash from March 2, 2009, Beth Swift writes that “It is a lightning rod for student interaction and it is a blank canvas awaiting the next message... delivered in paint.”