More than 100 years after he graduated from the University with a degree in civil engineering, John F. Cushing’s presence is alive and well at Notre Dame. Students attend classes and work in many of the laboratories of the John F. Cushing Hall of Engineering every day. What they may not fully appreciate is Cushing’s vision of the future — their future. It was one of the reasons he gifted the University $300,000 toward the construction of a new hall of engineering.

In a letter to University President Rev. Charles L. O’Donnell, C.S.C., dated April 16, 1931, Cushing outlined his hopes and purpose for the donation. He said: “Engineering has written a glorious chapter in the history of progress in our time. The glory is not all of the past, it has not all been won. There are still great opportunities for those prepared to seize them. The field of service, indeed, is constantly broadening. ... The native genius, inventor or discoverer is, no doubt, born and not made. But he alone would not get very far. Our best hope is the high level of professional intelligence and professional character developed in the colleges and technical schools of the land. It is there the thought needs to be instilled that men owe it to their profession not to lay it down, finally, exactly as it was when they took hold of it, but to pass it on a finer thing, enriched and advanced and more valuable to the world because of the use they made of it.
“Being deeply impressed with ‘The Needs of Notre Dame’... and because I find at Notre Dame the conditions that make for the twofold training of great engineers in all the departments of engineering, ... and because I feel I owe Notre Dame a debt of gratitude which I can never fully discharge, I ask you to accept from me a gift of three hundred thousand dollars toward the erection of a Hall of Engineering to serve the immediate needs of the College of Engineering and to meet the expectations of older men like me who confidently look back to Notre Dame to produce the men that are to carry on.”

Cushing’s expectations for future students’ leadership and vision were those he had been living as the fourth president of Great Lakes Dredge & Dock Company of Chicago. He knew how to plan, and build, for the future. The Cushing years at Great Lakes were full of significant activity, which enabled the company to become a leader in the American dredging industry, with projects such as construction of the foundation for the Randolph Street Naval Armory in Chicago and building the Peoria Lock on the Illinois River.

Cushing died October 7, 1935, when a United Air Lines plane in which he was traveling crashed near Cheyenne, Wyoming. He had been returning to Chicago from a business trip on the West Coast. (It is said that several years earlier — March 1931 — Cushing had cancelled another flight reservation but that Knute Rockne, Notre Dame’s football coach at the time, had taken his seat. It was the flight on which Rockne died.)

As it often seems when lives are tragically cut short, there is a compelling story. Cushing’s is no exception. Born in Arapahoe, Neb., he was the son of a blacksmith. He worked his way through the University of Nebraska at Lincoln, spending two years there, and then entered Notre Dame.

At the end of his junior year, Cushing apparently told President Rev. Andrew Morrissey, C.S.C., that he would be unable to return for the final year due to a lack of funds. Morrissey told him not to worry about the money, that he was to come back and finish his studies. Cushing graduated from the University in 1906. He began work for Great Lakes shortly after that and, by 1922, was named president of the company.

John F. Cushing’s children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren celebrated the 100th anniversary of his graduation from the University during a family reunion in June 2006. Of the 115 descendant families contacted, 100 family members were able to attend. A total of 16 family members have attended the University. In addition to John F. Cushing, they are: Paul J. Cushing (B.S., CEGEOS ’31); Jerome J. Cushing (B.S., CEGEOS ’35); Gregory P. Cushing (B.S., AME ’39); Vincent J. Cushing (B.S., Physics ’45; M.S., Mathematics ’46); Robert P. Cushing (B.S., Commerce ’58); Paul J. Cushing Jr. (B.S., CEGEOS ’59); Vincent J. Cushing Jr. (B.S., EE ’70); David J. Cushing (B.S., EE ’73); Brian J. Cushing (B.A., Economics ’75); Michael F. Cushing (B.S., Physics ’80); Daniel P. Cushing (B.S., EE ’81); James R. Braun (B.S., AME ’86); Elizabeth A. Cushing (B.F.A., Art Studio ’02); Erin C. O’Brien (B.A., Psychology ’03); and Kenneth A. Cushing, who will graduate in May 2007 with a bachelor’s degree in psychology. Although he did not attend the University, James T. Cushing served as a professor of physics and philosophy at Notre Dame from 1966 until his death in 2002.

Left photo: Graduating in 1906 with a degree in civil engineering, John F. Cushing was ready to take on the world as he posed atop the pedestal on which Father Edward Sorin’s statue now stands. Middle photo: The John F. Cushing Hall of Engineering was dedicated in 1932. Today, its auditorium is home to the Engineering Learning Center (see the inside front cover). Right photo: Cushing Hall, shown here, is attached to Fitzpatrick Hall, dedicated in 1979. Both house most of the facilities of the College of Engineering, although construction on a new engineering building will soon begin to meet the growing needs of the college for teaching and research space.