Monuments to Their Skill:
Urbana-Champaign Carpenters, Contractors, and Builders, 1850-1900

by Allison Carls Funkhouser
Part I

By all accounts, the earliest housing in Champaign County consisted of crude oak log walls and floors of logs split from ash, oak, or linden trees. The roofs were of bark peeled from linden trees in nearby Big Grove. Window openings were covered with greased muslin, and the fireplace was fashioned from mud, cement, and boulders. Jacob and Margaret Beatty Smith, newlyweds from Shelby County, Kentucky, came to Illinois in October, 1833, and settled about one mile east of modern-day Urbana where they built a sixteen-foot-square log cabin. They built their second house in 1837.

The population of Champaign County grew quickly. The U.S. Census of 1850 recorded 2,649 inhabitants in 480 dwellings; of that number, 252 resided in the town of Urbana. Along with the increasing population came the demand for more and better housing. Local historian J.O. Cunningham noted in 1876, “As the ability of the Inhabitants increased the character of their houses changed for the better and soon the presence of saw-mills and brick yards made frame and brick dwellings possible.” No doubt the construction of frame dwellings was facilitated by close proximity to Big Grove, “a fine body of timber, containing about 12,000 acres” and yielding oak, walnut, hickory, linden, elm, ash, and sycamore, but no poplar or beech. Later, oak, cypress, black walnut, and poplar would arrive by rail from the forests of southern Illinois. In addition, Chicago was one of the largest lumber markets in the country, and all kinds of specialty woods were available there. Pine, if needed, could be shipped down from Wisconsin.

The 1850 federal census lists six carpenters in Urbana even before the city was chartered in 1855. Included in the group were Thomas Lindsey and Moses D. Harvey, both from Pennsylvania. Lindsey, later a cabinetmaker, came to the area in 1841 and worked there through 1891. Harvey had arrived in 1839 and “assisted in building nearly all of the early dwellings and business buildings of Urbana.” Although he briefly dabbled in other occupations over the next 55 years, the city directory for 1895-1896 listed Harvey as a carpenter residing on West California Street. In addition, the 1850 census lists New York native Calvin Higgins as a house joiner. John Cantner, carpenter and cabinetmaker, worked in Urbana through 1883. Another cabinetmaker, David Cantner, settled in 1842 and continued working in Urbana until his death in 1879; among his commissions in 1856 was the Masonic Temple. William Park is reported in 1850 to have owned the first steam-driven saw and gristmill in the county.

During the following decade, at least seven other carpenters settled in Urbana-Champaign. John C. Denton arrived in 1851 from Somerset County, Penn., to begin a 36 year career. In the March 17, 1860 Urbana Clarion, Denton advertised that he had teamed up with Martin W. Kaucher to practice the trade of a carpenter and joiner. In addition to building structures for homes and businesses, Denton is said to have built at least 38 schoolhouses in Champaign County. Zachariah E. Gill arrived from Shelby County, Kentucky, about 1852. He “was the builder of several of the finest blocks in the city of Urbana,” and he also constructed the roundhouse of the Indianapolis, Bloomington & Western Railway as well as freight houses along the line. Noting his death on August 10, 1884, the Champaign County Gazette identified him as an architect by profession and announced that he had accumulated a fortune of $25,000.

Among the other early settlers was J.L. Auten of West Urbana, who listed house
repairing and building among his skills. On November 23, 1859, Auten advertised in the *Central Illinois Gazette*: "Plans for Dwellings and other Buildings drawn according to the most correct and approved styles, ancient and modern." Architect and civil engineer Alexander Bowman had arrived in the area about 1858; he likewise offered to furnish plans, specifications, and estimates. Another who could furnish plans and specifications was contractor and builder W.P. Satterwhite, who had a shop on Main Street in Urbana and noted in his advertisement that he would accept country produce in exchange for his work. In 1861, Satterwhite advertised that he had gone into practice with another builder and contractor by the name of Martin.

Two extant houses reflect the architecture of those early years of settlement. The Greek Revival Cottage, was built between 1840 and 1860. A rare example of the Greek Revival style in east-central Illinois, the house illustrates the continued use of the style beyond the period in which it was fashionable in the eastern portion of the nation. On the other hand, the Ater/Jacques house, built about 1857, is an early example of Italianate design. Popular during the mid-nineteenth century, that style is characterized by asymmetrical massing, a low-pitched roof, and overhanging eaves supported by carved wooden brackets. Edward Ater, who lived in the house from about 1857 to 1864, served as sheriff, country judge, mayor, and bank president. In 1864, he sold the house to attorney Frank Jacques, who lived there until his death in 1896. Jacques added an office, dining room, and kitchen wing in the rear. The present house exhibits several twentieth-century alterations, including the removal of a porch that originally flanked the front entrance. Unfortunately, the name of the builder of neither residence is known.

Between 1850 and 1870 the populations of both Urbana and Champaign continued to grow at a rapid rate, stimulated by the building of the Illinois Central Railroad in 1853-1854 and the founding of the state university in Urbana in 1867. A total population was recorded in 1870 of 4,641 (924 dwellings) in the city of Champaign and 2,288 residents (431 dwellings) in Urbana; the county had 32,804 inhabitants. A review of local newspapers, county directories, and business directories reveals at least 141 carpenters and builders working in Urbana-Champaign in 1870. The more specialized workmen included four architects and builders, two carpenters and joiners, two woodturners, and one stiarbuilder. Many of the craftsmen were listed in the county directory for only one year, which suggests that they may have come for the building boom and moved on with the westward expansion.

Seeley Brown advertised in 1870 that he was an agent for dressed and undressed Joliet stone and would make drawings and measurements for iron columns. Among his many commissions was the Champaign County Building, completed in 1889. Brown continued to live and practice in the area through the end of the century.

Another craftsman working in the area in 1870 was Lyman D. Chaddon, who first advertised himself as a carpenter, architect, and builder. In 1867, he opened with Clarence Hesse a planing mill, which employed about 15 men. They also manufactured flooring, weatherboarding, siding, shutters, and doors as well as cornice brackets; scroll sawing was done to order.

One of the most notable early residences was that of Colonel W.N. Coler. An attorney and real estate broker, Coler hired Seeley Brown to build the $30,000 house on the southwest corner of Church and Elm streets in Champaign. It had two stories plus an attic and an English basement; the mansard roof was surmounted by an observatory enclosed by windows of green, blue, crimson, and lilac colored glass. The frame structure stood on a heavy stone foundation and was in the shape of an elongated cross; porches filled the corners. Harvey and Jesse Burson of Champaign did the plastering, William Price of Champaign did the painting and glazing, and the tin roofing was supplied by Dodson and Hodges, hardware dealers in Champaign. The factory of C.J.L. Meyer of Chicago provided the doors, sash, and inside blinds; the marble mantles throughout were cut by Sherman, Cole & Co. of Chicago. The most modern conveniences in heating, lighting, and ventilation graced the home. The Coler house on the southwest corner of Church and Elm streets in Champaign did the plastering, William Price of Champaign did the painting and glazing, and the tin roofing was supplied by Dodson and Hodges, hardware dealers in Champaign. The factory of C.J.L. Meyer of Chicago provided the doors, sash, and inside blinds; the marble mantles throughout were cut by Sherman, Cole & Co. of Chicago. The most modern conveniences in heating, lighting, and ventilation graced the home. The Coler house at 501 West Church Street later became the residence of H.H. Harris and was demolished in 1955. Although numerous other residences were built during that time period, none attracted the attention of the press like the Coler house.

This article was reprinted with permission from the *ILLINOIS HISTORICAL JOURNAL*. Spring 1992. Part II will be published in the next newsletter.

Virginia Theatre: A personal memory

PACA member James Russell Vacky sent the following personal note about some of his memories of the theatre.

"In 1921, my fifth grade classmate (the late Bob Shewalter) and I used to visit the construction site on Sunday afternoons - no restrictions prevented us from doing so. I recall two outstanding (in my opinion) stage productions. 'Faust' the prison scene in which Mephistopheles suddenly appears on stage, having exited from a trap door, and the Denishawn Dance Company.

My late uncle and aunt, Mr. & Mrs. James Harris, owned and managed the Virginia Confectionary for many years. I still have the pair of mantel vases by mother bought (c. 1924) at the Rose Shop, a distinctive gift shop located where Younger Realtor is now." PACA would like to collect other memories of important building around town—theaters, city halls, train stations, restaurants. Please take a moment to send us your favorite memory. All information will be deposited with the Champaign County Historical Archives for future generations.

Salvage Warehouse Update

Party-goers at the annual spring warehouse "party" really "cleaned-up" this year. The entire warehouse was organized and cleaned. In addition, windows were washed, displays made, doors measured, and nails pulled from all the woodwork! PACA has rented additional space in the building, so there is lots more room for storage and for customers. Come see the newly organized and expanded salvage facility.

A special PACA thank you goes to our "die-hard" salvage volunteers: Bob Swisher, Dick Elkin, Al Friederick, and Rich Cahill. Their devotion to this activity goes way beyond the traditional volunteer role. Additional thanks goes to the following volunteers who attended the "party."

Steve Roemmel
Alice Edwards
Beth Woodside
Susan Appel
Wendy Laraway
Betty LaCrone
Julie Isgren
Jill Madsen
Joan Sozen
Kim Casino
Dave Ruder
Public Service Workers

Save the Date!

Kid's Building Fair

Saturday, June 20
11:00 - 4:00
Orpheum Parking Lot
343 North Neil Street, Champaign
(Volunteers Needed)
Illinois Preservation Conference
June 4, 5, 6

“Giving the Past a Future”

Peoria is the site for this year’s state-wide preservation conference and attendees will be welcomed in part by the Peoria Area Tricentennial 1691 Foundation, along with the Landmarks Preservation Council of Illinois, the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency, and the Illinois Association of Historic Preservation Commissions.

Historically, Peoria is the first European settlement in the state of Illinois. The French military erected a large fort and Jesuit mission three hundred years ago. The French lived among friendly Native Americans who for thousands of years enjoyed the bounty of the Peoria river valley, a place they called “Pimiteoui” (the land of great abundance).

The flags of France, Britain, Spain, and eventually the United States have flown over Peoria. The first American settlers arrived in 1819 and soon the small village experienced a great economic and population boom. With an abundance of natural resources, many strong early industries arose such as meat-packing, casting foundries, pottery-makers, wholesale warehousing, distilleries, earth-moving and farm machinery manufactories.

Ancient Indian trails were turned into solid roads. Canoes were replaced with hundreds of steamboats and ferries. The city became a massive railroad hub.

The fresh water, abundance of corn, and the ease of transport enabled Peoria to become the “Whiskey Capital of the World.” Distilleries and their related industries brought tremendous wealth to the city and Peoria produced the greatest amount of internal revenue tax of any district in the nation by the late 1800s. This prosperity initiated the building of magnificent private homes, lavish parks, massive churches, model schools, and state-of-the-art municipal buildings.

Today Peoria enjoy the artistry and splendor of these buildings. They struggle to preserve them all. Like all communities around the state, some battle are lost, some are won. But the reward is a piece of history, a portrait of the past, and a legacy we must strive to protect.

Preservation is “Giving the Past a Future.”

The following is a list of the workshops for the conference. For more detailed information or a conference brochure, contact PACA.

Track I: Preservation Technologies
Preservation Products and Services
Public Buildings
Accessibility and Historic Preservation
Historic Interiors

Track II: Getting Your Message Heard
Advocacy, Illinois Style
Media Relations
Express Yourself: Newsletters, Markers and Awards

Track III: Hometown Preservation
Preservation Partnerships: Negotiating with the Public and Private Sectors
Something to be Afraid Of?: Legal Challenges to Preservation
Legal Tools at Your Disposal

Track IV: Peoria Case Studies
Packard Plaza, Judge Gale House, Apollo Theatre, Peoria City Hall, Madison Theatre

Kid’s Building Fair:
A celebration of building crafts

Grab your kids or grandkids and come to the Kid’s Building Fair on Saturday, June 20, from 11 am to 4 pm in the parking lot of the Orpheum Theatre, 343 North Neil Street. The festival celebrates building craftsmanship with demonstrations and hands-on activities.

The festival will feature different building crafts including carpentry, plumbing, electricity, faux finishing, masonry, and ceramic tiling. Kids get to be the contractor as they build a brick wall or set up ceramic tile. Budding architects can help build a pneumatic structure or design a building on a computer. Hands-on science exhibits will be available for kids to try and CDDC is sponsoring a sand castle building contest for kids of all ages.

The Community Recycling Center and the building services departments of Champaign and Urbana will provide informational displays.

The Fair is sponsored by the Preservation and Conservation Association and The Discovery Place, Inc. and is part of the Downtown Champaign Fest 1992. If the Fair is successful, we hope to make it an annual event to help acquaint kids with the wonders of the building trades and architecture.

Volunteers are needed to help in the construction booths. Call PACA (328-7222) to sign up for a three hour shift.
Preservation Brings History to Life!
Preservation Week
May 10-16, 1992

Whether the action takes place in a one-room schoolhouse in Virginia or a landmark in Seattle, an Art Deco building in Miami or an inner-city church in Chicago, this year’s Preservation Week challenge is to show that history lives.

The 1992 theme, “Preservation Brings History to Life!,” carries a subtle but powerful message: America’s historic places contribute to the quality of our daily lives. Our heritage gives us a sense of identity in a rapidly changing world.

During Preservation Week, we can demonstrate to our neighbors and their families, young and old, that preserving—and using—the authentic evidence of our past enriches our lives and enhances the future for our children.

Each day we often pass by or visit historically significant places. An every time we do, we become a part of that place’s unique history. When we are actually in the setting where the historic event occurred, it is like dropping in on our ancestors! Such visits into our past focus our thoughts on who we were, who we are today, and who we will be tomorrow. Thus, when we preserve historic places, we truly bring history to life, for ourselves and for our children and grandchildren.

Preservation & Conservation Association
Box 2555, Station A, Champaign, IL 61825

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