



# PRESERVATION AND CONSERVATION ASSOCIATION

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

by Allison Carll White  
Part II

*Part I of this article discussed the building trades in the early years of Champaign County, up to 1870. Part II continues the discussion through 1900.*

In the 1880s, building seems to have slowed considerably in Urbana-Champaign, perhaps due in part to the panic of 1873. Likewise, the population figures reflect a similar slowdown in growth. By 1880, the population of Champaign had increased to only 5,116, while the figure for Urbana was 2,942. Four years later, the *Illinois State Gazetteer* estimated that the population had grown to 7,000 for Champaign and 3,600 inhabitants for Urbana. At least 95 carpenters, contractors, and builders were working in Urbana-Champaign in 1885 in addition to three architects and four woodworkers.

In the years that followed, however, a second large building boom attracted numerous craftsmen. On August 18, 1886, the *Champaign County Gazette* noted, "Up to the present time this summer, fifteen new houses have been erected in this city [Urbana], and several more will be built this fall." In both 1889 and 1890, the paper again suggested that carpenters were in demand. According to an 1890 issue, "Next spring Champaign will have the biggest building boom she has enjoyed for a number of years. The building will be of residences ranging from \$800 to \$6,000, and all the carpenters in town will have all they can do until late in the fall." And in 1892 the newspaper commented, "The number of skilled workmen has been doubled in Champaign in the past two years," and contractors were having difficulty finding sufficient help.

By 1895, Champaign had grown to 9,273 and Urbana to 5,369. Jobs for skilled



*Robert D. Burnham House, West University Ave., Champaign; photo from the Champaign County Historical Archives.*

craftsmen increased accordingly. Between 1890 and 1900 at least 500 different carpenters, contractors, and builders worked in Urbana-Champaign in addition to 34 architects and 11 woodworkers. Some of those craftsmen no doubt worked for the university while others were employed by various planing mills and other building-related factories. Some tradesmen remained in the area for a considerable period; others moved on quickly, perhaps due to a second panic in 1893 that again slowed housing starts. Yet the figures reveal that a healthy building trade existed in Urbana-Champaign during the last decade of the nineteenth century.

Included among the group was carpenter, contractor, and builder Frank Jahr of Urbana. In 1896, the *Champaign County Gazette* announced that Jahr had been awarded the contract for construction of Robert D. Burnham's \$10,000 residence on

University Avenue in Champaign. A later edition of the paper attributes the design of the 15-room colonial-style house to A.W. Pillsbury "now of Bloomington," but notes that contractor Jahr was doing the mechanical work. The house was finished in oak, cherry, bird's-eye maple, and chestnut on the first floor and poplar on the second floor. Also working during that time was architect Rudolph Z. Gill of Urbana, son of Zachariah. In addition to building many houses, Gill served not only as the architect in 1895 for Urbana's new fire department headquarters and the *Courier* offices, but also as city engineer. In 1896, Gill joined architect Fred Brown, who took charge of their Danville office. They dissolved their partnership in 1898; Gill continued to work in Urban, and Brown was rumored to have gone to the Klondike.

The 34 architects working in Urbana-Champaign during the 1890s represented an increase of 23 over the previous decade. Included in the group was one woman, Meldora Ice, who formed a partnership with carpenter-architect Hachliah Vredenburg in 1900. Also, architects attracted to the area in connection with the Department of Architecture at the University of Illinois were responsible for designing a number of notable residences and public buildings. Despite the availability of local architects, some commissions were awarded to professional outside the immediate area. The residence of J.B. Walton at the corner of Green and New streets, for example was designed by Curt Bainum of Decatur (later of Champaign); plans for the \$15,000 residence of Andrew Draper, president of the University, were prepared by architect Solon S. Beman of Chicago.

For those who did not have the desire or money to hire an architect, other sources for fashionable house plans were available. During the second half of the nineteenth century, pattern books such as Andrew Jackson Downing's *The Architecture of Country Houses* (1850) offered house plans, and "between 1846 and 1898, *Godey's Lady's Book* published some 450 model-house designs." Robert W. Shoppell of New York popularized the sale of mail-order house plans in 1881 with the publication of *Artistic Modern Houses of Low Cost*. In 1886 the *Gazette* advised, "People who are contemplating the building of a house, no matter how cheap or how elaborate, would do well to send for one of Shoppell's "Modern House"—a work that costs but \$1, yet contains a large number of plans and designs with estimates of cost." During the 1890s, the local newspaper also ran a series of house plans available for purchase. Included were a "Cheap Cottage," a "Pretty Country House," and a colonial residence; the *Gazette* also announced a plan for a house that was "out of style."

Local lumber dealers and planing mills offered a variety of ready-made products. G.H. Burt manufactured specialty wood items at his Walnut Street factory in Champaign, and he advertised that planing, turning, and scroll sawing were to order. Also Walker Brothers, best known as a Champaign furniture store, advertised builders' finishing materials. Before long, suppliers were getting competition from Parker and Roots, who made window frames and moldings. Daniel Roots later took over the business and made his reputation by manufacturing screen doors and windows. In 1891-92, Roots's factory made more than 4,000 screen doors. Other woodworking firms included the Cham-

paign Manufacturing Company, later the Champaign Cabinet Company, and Bevis and Company.

The years from 1850 to 1900 saw incredible growth in the twin cities, stimulated by the railroad and the University. Despite the somewhat remote location, fashion was no less important here than in more urban areas of the country. The work of builders, architects, and planing mill proprietors was state of the art, and examples of local houses can still be found in all popular architectural styles. Improved communication, of course, played a significant role. Style magazines, pattern books, and house plans arrived by mail, and trains brought specialty items of the latest design. Local support industries provided quality features for the structures that provide not only examples of the work, technology, and economics, but also visual evidence of the local mores and values of the period. Many of the houses have been preserved and continue to stand as monuments to the skills of the nineteenth-century tradesmen.

*This article was reprinted with permission from the ILLINOIS HISTORICAL JOURNAL, Spring 1992. The editor apologizes for the incorrect author credit given for Part I.*

## Kids Building Fair: A celebration of building crafts

The first annual Kids Building Fair was a resounding success! Guestimates of attendance during the five hour event ranged from 800-1,000 children and parents. Eleven different construction trades and building professionals participated in the event as did nine other community groups with ties to the building trades or science projects. Kids (and their parents) were able to try various construction trades by doing hands-on projects. Amateur contractors built a brick wall, constructed carpentry projects and painted the finished pieces, and created intricate ceramic tile plaques. They also learned about the intricacies of plumbing and electricity. Budding architects built structures with Kinderblocks, helped design a pneumatic structure, or learned about architecture and computers. Basic science demonstrations were also available to try out.

The Discovery Place, Inc. opened the Orpheum Theatre lobby and auditorium for viewing and presented slide shows about other children's museums. This opportunity gave area kids and their parents

a first-hand idea of how the theatre space could be adapted for the children's museum. Everyone commented on the wonderful and elegant auditorium and many shared their memories of when they attended movies in the building.

The Kids Building Fair was the kick-off project for The Discovery Place, Inc. and was jointly sponsored by the Preservation Association. PACA and DPI would like to thank all the participants and material suppliers who made the Fair possible and such a success. Look for next year's Fair to be even bigger and better!

### Participants

- Olsen & Associates
- Design Build Services
- Captain Rehab
- Markstahler, Inc.
- Electric Bob's
- The Finishing Touch
- Brown-Woods & Associates
- Millikan Masonry
- John Little Painting
- Sullivan Plumbing
- Meister Contracting
- Kasey's Clubhouse
- UI Center for Compound Semiconductor Microelectronics
- Champaign County Farm Brueau
- City of Urbana - Community Development
- Community Recycling Center
- East Central Illinois Partnership for Excellence in Education
- Jay Hoeflinger
- Leal School - Grades 3-4C
- ODIS
- Olga Jarrett

### Donations

- Action Advertising
- Alexander Lumber
- Architectural Spectrum
- Armstrong Cash & Carry
- Art Coop
- Brown's Paint
- Carle Clinic Association
- Champaign Unit 4 Schools
- Christie Clinic
- City of Champaign
- Color Tile
- Hallbeck Homes
- Hillcrest Lumber
- C.V. Loyde Music Center
- PIP Printing
- Precision Graphics
- Robeson School
- R & R Enterprises
- Severns Reid & Associates
- Sherwin-Williams
- Sierra Printer
- Smith-Burgett & Associates
- Tile Specialists
- University Asphalt
- Urbana School District 116



### 1993 Heritage Award Nominations

Don't wait to the last minute to think about next year's Heritage Award nominations. This construction and remodeling season is the time to begin looking for significant preservation and landscaping projects that deserve PACA recognition. Nomination forms will be sent this fall, but the time to plan is now.



### Discovery Place Update

Exciting things are happening with The Discovery Place, a hands-on science museum for children which will be located in the historic Orpheum Theatre in downtown Champaign. In May, notification of tax exempt status was received from the Internal Revenue Service, clearing the way for the solicitation and receipt of grants and donations. On June 20, the Kids Building Fair drew attention to the bricks and mortar phase of the project. All the children and their parents had a great time participating in the various building trades that were on hand. On July 7, the Champaign City Council approved the sale of the building and adjacent property to The Discovery Place Board. Although PACA has been maintaining the building for two years, DPI now has "official" possession; this will benefit us greatly in fund raising.

The summer will be spent writing and sending out grant applications for the building renovation and exhibits. DPI is collecting toys and Christmas decorations for a "Christmas in August" garage sale, and plans are underway for a major fund raiser to be held in November. Donations are always welcome and are sorely needed as expenses are going up as activity on the project increases.

### Orpheum Memories Wanted

The Discovery Place, Inc. and PACA are actively soliciting remembrances about the Orpheum Theatre. If you have a favorite memory or an interesting antidote about an experience at the theatre, please contact DPI at 110 West Main, Urbana (384-4838). The memories will be published as a collection and the proceeds used to help in the restoration of the theatre. Please take a moment to write down your favorite memory about the Orpheum. It can be amusing, romantic or theatrical; but whatever the memory, it is an important part of the history of the theatre and should be preserved.

## Membership Application P.A.C.A.

### MEMBERSHIP CATEGORY:

#### INDIVIDUAL

- Adult.....\$10.00  
 Student (1/2 time or more) .....\$ 5.00  
 Senior Citizen.....\$ 5.00  
 Family (includes all members of a household with no more than two members being over age 21).....\$15.00

Additional Contribution \_\_\_\_\_

#### CIVIC

- Over 100 members.....\$100.00  
 50-100 members .....\$ 75.00  
 Up to 50 members .....\$ 50.00

#### CORPORATE

.....\$ 50.00

NAME \_\_\_\_\_

RENEWAL

NEW MEMBERSHIP

ADDRESS \_\_\_\_\_  
Street City State Zip

Make checks payable to: PACA, Box 2555, Station A, Champaign, Illinois 61825

Contributions are tax deductible to the extent allowed by law.



### Scott-Dallahon House Saved

A coalition of neighbors, concerned Mahomet citizens, and PACA members joined forces last May to save the historic Scott-Dallahon house (circa 1870) from being demolished for a strip commercial development. Although lengthy testimony failed to convince the Mahomet Zoning Board of Appeals nor the Plan Commission to deny a needed variance, subsequent neighborhood lobbying and publicity about the issue around the village must have contributed to the developer withdrawing his variance request and his bid on the property. The property has since been purchased by a group who will renovate the house for resale as a residence. The house is one of the oldest in Mahomet and a landmark along Rt. 150; it is also surrounded by seven 100 year-old oak trees that would have also been sacrificed to the development.

#### PACA Newsletter

Steven Roemmel, President  
 Alice Edwards, Vice-President  
 Susan Appel, Secretary  
 Pat Jensen, Treasurer  
 Karen Lang Kummer, Exec. Director

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#### V.I.P.s

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 Oak Street Neighbor-  
 hood, Mahomet

#### Salvage Contributions

University of Illinois  
 Dragon's Hoard  
 Rich Cahill  
 Assembly Hall

#### Kids Building Fair VIPs

Steve Turner  
 Charlie Butzow  
 Joe Gallagher  
 Tom Todd  
 Kathy Roemmel  
 Art Zangerl  
 Marcia Todd  
 Rebecca Adam  
 Virge Jenkins  
 David Childress  
 Steve Roemmel  
 Perry Morris  
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