1993 Illinois Preservation Conference

"Living with History" will be the theme of this year's statewide preservation conference being held in Galena June 3-5. Galena, one of the earliest Illinois boom towns, is remembered as a trade center of the Northwest Territory and the home of President Ulysses S. Grant. In the late 1840s and early 1850s, Galena was the wealthiest city in Illinois. Its hillsides are scattered with homes and mansions of prosperous miners and businessmen. The conference is a great time to visit Galena's historic homes, stores, and sites, and to meet Galena residents, business leaders, and public officials.

The conference, with "Living with History" as its theme, will explore the many dimensions of dealing with historic resources on a daily basis. While Galena presents a unique backdrop for this theme, many communities have the opportunity to live with history. Workshops will focus, for example, upon the sensitive and economical renovation and repair of a historic home, the economic benefits of heritage tourism as well as some of the problems it creates, such as high prices and TIMBY (Tourist in my back yard). The Planning for Preservation track will discuss the protection of cultural resources and property rights.

The conference will also offer case studies of how Galena integrates its historic resources into everyday life. Participants will have the opportunity to visit house museums located in neighborhoods, exceptional reuse projects such as Galena Green Condominiums, and several of the shops along Main Street.

The historic DeSoto House Hotel will serve as conference headquarters. The hotel is offering conference room rates, call 1-800-343-6562 and make your reservation under the Illinois Preservation Conference. For further information, contact PACA for a brochure and registration materials.

Historic Preservation Week, 1993

Historic landmarks will be renewed, revitalized neighborhoods will be toured and American community life will be celebrated as preservationists across the country observe the 22nd annual National Historic Preservation Week, May 9-15.

Co-sponsored by the National Trust for Historic Preservation and hundreds of local groups, "Preservation and Livable Communities: Make the Connection!" is the theme of the week-long celebration.

"Preservation Week presents a perfect opportunity for us to make the connection between historic preservation and the aesthetic, environmental, and economic well-being of livable communities," says Richard Moe, president, National Trust for Historic Preservation.

Activities locally include the Second Annual Kids Building Fair, to be held May 15 in front of the Orpheum Theatre, and the third "Architreasures" contest on May 7, sponsored by the News Gazette and PACA. Look for PACA's new blue and green banners to be flying from street poles in downtown Urbana in honor of Preservation Week.
Focus on: The Illinois Theatre

During the last half of the nineteenth century, Urbana’s Tieman’s Opera House had opened and closed. It was soon replaced by Busey’s Hall, which closed about 1903, leaving Urbana without an opera house. During the next few years, support was strong and widespread for a new opera house, although the Rev. Toble, of Trinity Methodist Church, called the proposed opera house a “public curse.”

By the autumn of 1906, the new opera house was becoming closer to reality. Early plans called for a four-story building, costing as much as $100,000, to be erected west of the Flatiron building. (The Flatiron building stood in the triangle formed by Main and Springfield avenues.) An elaborate building was envisioned. The first story would house the opera house; the second and third, the Flatiron store; and the fourth, a dance hall. A roof garden would be located on the roofs of the new building and the adjoining Flatiron building.

Prominent and influential citizens were backing the venture. They were advised by theatrical manager George W. Chatterton of Springfield, who managed opera houses in Springfield, Decatur, Lincoln, Bloomington, and Danville. The group formed a stock company, the Illinois Theatre Building Company.

Stock sold at $100.00 a share and $34,000 worth of stock in the theatre company had been sold by February of 1907. More than sixty people had purchased stock in the company including W.B. McKinley, several members of the Busey family, T.B. Thornburn, W.B. McDaniels, and G.M. Bennett.

The building committee consisted of W. Busey, C.N. Clark, J.W. Stickes, and T.B. Thornburn. They hired J.W. Royer as architect. The committee accompanied Royer on visits to several opera houses throughout the state to get ideas for the design of their new theatre. Final plans were scaled down from the early vision, with the building remaining quite grand, but housing only a theatre. The Illinois Theatre was managed by theatrical manager George W. Chatterton of Springfield, who managed opera houses in Springfield, Decatur, Lincoln, Bloomington, and Danville. The group formed a stock company, the Illinois Theatre Building Company.

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Construction of the Illinois Theatre began in early June, 1907. The contractor for the brickwork was John S. Bennett with brick from the Sheldon Brick Company's yards, and the trimmings of St. Louis pressed brick. Walsh & Hawley were sub-contractors for the concrete work, Charles Holden for the painting, and J.D. Green for the plumbing and steam fitting.

The contract for the electric work went to R.L. Rock at a price of $2,385. The building contained five miles of wire and 1,900 lights. The electric sign at the front entrance spelled "Illinois" in 18-inch letters using 300 lights of various colors.

The contract for interior decorations went to Mitchell & Halback of Chicago. The price of the contract was $1,000. Other sub-contractors were: plastering and plaster-of-Paris work, S.D. Gallagher; seats, Cincinnati Seating Company; and scenery, Sosman & Landis.

The brick exterior was not overly elaborate. The building measured 70 feet wide by 127 feet long. The walls, 23 inches thick, rose 65 feet high at the front, and 80 feet high at the rear where the stage was located.

Seating capacity exceeded 1,400. The gently sloping parquet and dress circles seated 500 people in leather chairs. The first balcony seated 400, the second balcony 300, and the gallery 100. There were ten boxes, five on either side of the stage at three levels. The boxes were elaborately furnished and heavily decorated with roses and cupids. Twelve exits were provided. It was estimated that the full house could have been emptied in two minutes.

Each floor had a toilet and lavatory for both ladies and gentlemen. A ladies dressing and check room was on the first floor and a smoking room for gentlemen was located in the basement.

The stage was 43 feet deep and 67 feet wide with the prosenium arch measuring 35 by 37 feet. Both a fire-proof asbestos curtain and a canvas curtain were provided. Fourteen large dressing rooms, each equipped with hot and cold water, were located behind the stage. The dressing rooms were separated from the stage by a fire wall. The orchestra pit would accommodate forty musicians. There were two entrances from under the stage.

The Illinois Theatre was managed by George W. Chatterton, Jr, his representative at the Illinois was Edward F. Rea. Stage manager was William Funk, a long-time employee of the Chattertons. Other staff members included: head usher, Ralph Sutton; electrician, Frank Anderson; head flyman, Robert Cummins and orchestra conductor, Professor Gus Rudolphson.

The new Illinois Theatre was formally opened on Tuesday evening, March 3,

The Illinois Theatre was located on Springfield Avenue, formerly Railroad Street, in Urbana. Photo used with permission of The Urbana Free Library.
1908. The opening could easily be described as the social event of the year in Champaign-Urbana. The Champaign Daily Gazette's coverage of the event included an extensive listing of those making up the audience. A few of them, whose family names are most familiar today include: members of the Busey family, Isaac Kuhn, Mr. & Mrs. Jake Kaufman, Mr. & Mrs. G.C. Willis, Mr. & Mrs. F.K. Robeson, and Mr. & Mrs. N.H. Cohen. The audience also included people from Ogden, St. Joseph, and other towns along the interurban railway line. The women wore elegant gowns and most of the men wore full evening dress. The ladies were given red and white carnations as favors.

The opening production was "Marrying Mary," a musical comedy. Marie Cahill, who had delighted audiences earlier in the season at the Walker Opera House, stared in the title role. Her company gave the new theatre rave reviews.

After the performance, quite a number of people remained for a tour of the theatre. Every cab in the twin cities and eleven street cars were outside the theatre to return the audience to their homes.

Over the following several years, the Illinois presented equally fine productions. On February 13, 1913, Charles Frohman presented theatre great Maude Adams in J. M. Barrie's "Peter Pan." In 1914, dancers Irene and Vernon Castle appeared at the Illinois. Mrs. Castle's bobbed hair caused a stir as the local ladies began imitating it and rushed to have their hair cut short. Sarah Bernhardt appeared on October 16, 1917, in her last American tour.

Other noted performers included Juny Lind, Enrico Caruso, Geraldine Farrar, Otis Skinner, Eddie Cantor, Al Jolson, and local musicians Sol and Julius Cohen. Eventually, a decline set in. The quality of the theatrical productions at the Illinois suffered. The high-class vaudeville acts were booked into other theatres and the stars no longer appeared at the Illinois.

Three new theatres in Champaign, the Orpheum (1914), the Belvoir (Rialto) (1915), and the Virginia (1921) no doubt increased the competition. Soon, the entertainment at the Illinois was limited to local amateur productions, prize fights, and wrestling matches.

For the last four years of its life, the Illinois Theatre was owned and operated by the Zenith Amusement Company, a Ku Klux Klan organization. The Klan purchased the building when it had outgrown its former quarters. During this period, the theatre was used principally for Klan activities, but was available for rental by local organizations for theatrical productions.

The Illinois Theatre burned in the early morning hours of Sunday, April 3, 1927. A passing University of Illinois student turned in the alarm about 2:15 am. At the same time two men living in northeast Urbana, also noticed the smoke and reported the fire.

The Champaign, Urbana, and University fire departments all responded quickly, bringing all their equipment. However, the fire quickly enveloped the building, perhaps fueled by reported gas explosions in the basement. The firefighters soon determined it would be impossible to save the building, and concentrated their efforts on bringing it under control and protecting the neighboring structures. Within a couple of hours, the interior of the once grand theatre had been reduced to a gaping hole strewn with rubble and charred timbers. The thick lower walls survived the fire, but some of the thinner, upper portions had collapsed.

The cause of the fire was not readily determined. J.J. Reynolds, exalted cyclops of the KKK for Champaign County, had offices in the building. He believed the fire was arson based on a history of threatening telephone calls and anonymous letters. The authorities believed that the fire might have been started by spontaneous combustion, since there was wet lumber stored in the basement.

The building was insured for $17,000, only about half of the $35,000 the Klan had paid for the building. The Klan also lost many of its files and several miscellaneous items.

Initial rebuilding plans, announced the day after the fire, called for the building to be rebuilt as a community hall and banquet room as soon as the insurance was adjusted. Since the walls had survived the fire, the plan was to remove the top portions to a one-story height, add a roof, and rebuild the floor. The new banquet room would have been able to accommodate 1,000 people. However, the banquet room plans did not materialize.

Eventually, the Tuscany apartments were built in the shell of the burned out theatre. The apartments are still standing today.

This article was prepared by PACA Board Member, Perry Morris, who is researching the history of local theaters.

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Contributions are tax deductible to the extent allowed by law.
Kids Building Fair

A Celebration of the Building Crafts

The Second Annual Kids Building Fair is scheduled for Saturday, May 15 from 11:00 to 4:00 in the parking lot in front of the historic Orpheum Theatre. Cosponsored by PACA and The Discovery Place, last year’s fair drew about 1,000 kids and their parents to try their hands at various building crafts and trades. This year, representatives from a number of building trades will be on hand to share their skills and have fun teaching kids how to lay brick, do plumbing, build and paint a project, set ceramic tile, or prepare a “faux finish.” An assortment of hands-on science exhibits sponsored by The Discovery Place will also be on hand as will other building related exhibits by area community groups.