



PRESERVATION AND CONSERVATION ASSOCIATION

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Focus On: University of Illinois Presidents' Homes

Part II

As was mentioned in Part I, Edmund James moved to another University-owned house in 1917. This house, at 1203 West Nevada, was acquired from departing Dean W.F.M. Goss in 1917. President James described the building in his book, *Sixteen Years at the University of Illinois*, as a two story stucco building in the Modern English style. It contains the usual living and service rooms of a ten room house, and is featured by a large porch opening into an old fashioned trellis walled garden.

Period photos of the property show a few shrubs and trees on the slight rise in the front yard that leads up to the house.

This building served as the home of President David Kinley also. After Kinley's ten years as President, he was allowed by the Board Trustees to rent the house as his residence. After Kinley, the building housed the School of Music annex while the new Music Building was being completed. It is now used by the Department of Landscape Architecture.

When Harry Woodburn Chase came to Urbana in 1930 to become the seventh President of the University, he moved into a new building at 711 West Florida Avenue that had been designed by the internationally renown architect, Charles Platt. The design is in the Georgian style which had first been used on campus by the firm of McKim, Mead, and White in the design of the Women's Building, now the English Building.

Charles Platt had no formal training as an architect, but he was able to develop a reputation for his designs of public commissions, including academic buildings. Platt's works also include formal garden and landscape designs. In the forward to Keith Morgan's book on Platt, Charles Jencks suggests that, "perhaps Platt's



President David Kinley's Home at 1203 West Nevada Street, Urbana.

popularity with clients stemmed from his mixture of regular, sober formality on the public side, with growing, changing, informal elements on the more private garden side." Jencks added, "...Platt didn't copy as a revivalist might, nor did he transform his sources as a Post-Modernist would; rather, he adapted them to American conditions." Perhaps the most quotable explanation of Platt's appeal came from Frank Lloyd Wright when he said that Platt was... "a very dangerous man—he did the wrong thing so well."

Charles Platt's affiliation with the University of Illinois began on December 13, 1921, when the Board of Trustees chose his firm over three other national firms to "act as architect for the Agriculture building and to study the general campus plan."

Platt would ultimately be responsible for the design of ten campus buildings: the Library, the Agriculture Building (Mumford Hall), the Architecture and Kindred Subjects Building McKinley Hospital, the Commerce Building (David Kinley Hall), Huff Gymnasium, Evans Residence Hall, the Armory, Freer Gym-

nasium, and the President's House, as well as consulting on campus planning matters and general planting plans with Ferruccio Vitale.

Platt continued to utilize the English Georgian style in his later designs for the campus in order to remain consistent with the formality of his plan for the campus.

Morgan gives this description of the style that Platt dictated for campus buildings and landscaping.

All new construction was to be of red brick with limestone trim, three-and-a-half stories high (or the equivalent cornice level), with gray slate, hipped roofs and tall chimneys...

[with] segmental lintels for the second-story windows of the classroom buildings, limestone niches, and wrought-iron fences and gateways between buildings. Platt designed campus buildings to emphasize long, uninterrupted facades which were complemented by terraced plantings and allees of uniform trees.

The President's House is very consistent in design and materials to the academic buildings Platt designed, only smaller in scale. For his fee of \$3,000, Platt gave the University a design for a three-story structure with added space in the basement.

At the time of its completion, the house became the center of a controversy as a member of the state legislature became concerned that the \$135,000 used to pay for the structure was illegally obtained by the Board of Trustees by means of a tuition rate increase. John R. Devine of Dixon, went on to attack the Board for not looking after the interests of the students at the University, many of whom were working their way through college. The Board of Trustees immediately issued a statement that explained that the funds had come from unexpended revenues from the previous years. While nothing came of these accusations, it appears that the University officials were still feeling pressure to explain themselves up to a year and a half later as memos explaining the background of the house were still being produced.

One of these memos in particular contained many points of interest to the historical study of this property. Mr. Barrett, who was President of the Board of Trustees at the time, explains that preliminary plans for the house were presented on November 15, 1929 with the final plans accepted on March 11, 1930.

Barrett also justifies the site selected by saying

The location of the house, which was determined by the Board, was on the basis of the fact that the Department of Horticulture at the University has long been planning to develop a twenty-acre tract south of the campus as a laboratory for landscape gardening, floriculture, etc., and it was felt that the house should be placed where it could have the advantage of being located in conjunction with such a landscaping development... A total of \$11,738.21 was also expended in developing that part of the horticultural tract just around the house as the beginnings of the development above referred to, which was the deciding factor in the location of the house.

Even today, the house and its upkeep is carefully kept at arms length from students' tuition costs. During the beginnings of the most extensive renovation to date at the President's House, in 1989, Donald Grabowski, a member of the President's House Preservation Commit-



President Ikenberry's Home at 711 West Florida Avenue, Urbana.

tee and University Trustee, was quoted as saying that "no student funds will be used for the renovations."

The following description of the house on Florida Avenue appeared in *The News Gazette* after the 1989 renovation.

The front entrance opens to a large foyer and hall, featuring an elegant curved staircase with a crystal chandelier high overhead.

To the left is the drawing room, which measures about 24 feet by 48 feet and features windows that nearly reach from floor to ceiling.

The room has recently been redecorated in shades of green and off-white with accents of red. A green and cream colored rug covers most of the hardwood floor, a grand piano sits at one end, wing-backed chairs and sofas congregate around the fireplace and chandeliers hang at both ends.

Two sets of French doors off the drawing room open to a morning room on the east end of the house.

This room has a slate green floor and features floor to ceiling windows to let in lots of morning light and provide a view of the backyard as well as the linden tree allee on the east side of the house.

At the other end of the hall is the dining room... The dining room is done in shades of pale yellow and gold, and has a fireplace and a room-size rug covering the hardwood floor... Off the dining room is a smaller dining alcove...

Upstairs are three large guest bedrooms, each with its own bath, and the master bedroom and bath... Also on the second floor is President Ikenberry's office...

The third floor of the house was left unfinished, but two small bedrooms and a bath were finished in 1948... The remaining third-floor rooms are for storage.

The approach to the house follows "the brick walkways bordered with flowers and spring-blooming trees..." and the linden tree allee mentioned above is part of the formal design, in the Italian style, of the grounds. The design of the grounds is a mixture of formal and informal elements such as Platt might have proposed, although it is not known if he had a hand in the design of the planting schemes. Planting diagrams in the University archives from the mid-to-late 1930s were done mostly by Stanley White. These drawings show plans for formal planting beds and trees on the grounds. An interesting discovery on these plans called for a tennis court that was to be included in the scheme for the landscaping, yet no evidence of the tennis court ever being built can be found.

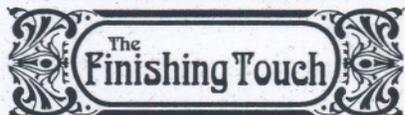
As a final note on this present President's House, it should be noted that a Historic Property Evaluations Summary had been done for this property by members of the University's Historic Sites Committee. The site was given a collective score of 3.93 points on a 5 point scale, with the recommendation that "Future development to the west and east should be made sympathetic—setting the house off as a clear campus landmark."

Some portion remains of three of the four University president's homes/sites.

With some consideration and foresight, what remains can be preserved and reused. The greenhouse on Green Street is in need of stabilization, repair, and plans for reuse; the University is now engaged in such reuse planning. The Nevada Street site needs sympathetic treatment to stabilize it and to keep the options for restoration open. And finally, the Florida Avenue residence, which is in no immediate danger of being replaced, might well be eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places.

No matter what the future holds for these three remaining buildings, the past of the University's housing for its presidents is filled with interesting events, national and internationally prominent people, and some of the most endearing architecture on campus.

This article was written by PACA member David Finet, a recent UI history graduate with assistance and guidance from Professor Christopher Vernon of the UI Landscape Architecture Department.



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National Trust Conference Coming to St. Louis

The forty-seventh National Preservation Conference will be held September 29-October 3 in St. Louis, at the Union Station Hyatt Regency Hotel. The Conference will explore its theme, "The Challenge of Livable Communities," through plenary sessions, educational sessions, tours, mobile workshops, and special events. A roundtable on urban issues will be followed by discussion groups. A group of PACA members is planning to attend and is looking for other interested parties to join the caravan. Contact PACA or the National Trust (1-800-YES-NTHP) for more information.

Window Workshop a Success

The recent double-hung window workshop for do-it-yourself homeowners was a success. Participants learned how double-hung windows are put together, how weights and pulleys work, how to remove the windows for repair, and the names for all the different parts of a window. Demonstrations were also given on simple window repairs: how to use epoxies, how to install and glaze glass, how to replace sash cords, and how to install various types of weatherstripping. A special thanks to PACA Board members Tim LaTourette, Steve Roemmel, and Rich Cahill for conducting the class. A spring homeowners workshop is in the planning stages and topic ideas are being sought.

Forbes House Update

Recently, the Champaign City Council reaffirmed their support for moving the historic Stephen A. Forbes House and rehabilitating it in conjunction with the Women's Emergency Shelter. The Forbes House would allow the Shelter to double its capacity and house an additional sixteen people. Under the proposed plan, the house would be moved next to the present Women's Shelter at 506 East Church Street. However, the house would be turned sideways in order to fit on the existing vacant lot; the current Mathews Street elevation would face Church Street and the Springfield Avenue elevation would face the Shelter. A sheltered children's play area would be developed between the two houses.

The Board of Directors has committed PACA to help with this important project. PACA has pledged to help with demolition of interior plaster and modern intrusions, window repair and weatherstripping, installation of insulation, and painting the interior and exterior. Volunteers will be needed to work on these projects, and PACA will be sending out a call for volunteers at the appropriate time.

In order for this project to proceed, the Women's Emergency Shelter must raise \$30,000 by January 1, 1994 and the City of Champaign must be the successful bidder for the Forbes House from the University of Illinois. To contribute to the Women's Emergency Shelter's Forbes House campaign, contact WES at 506 E. Church St., Champaign. PACA will keep its membership informed as this project unfolds.

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

Contributions are tax deductible to the extent allowed by law.

PACA to Aid Flood Victims

The recent Mississippi River flooding has greatly affected historic buildings and towns, including a number of places which are listed on the National Register of Historic Places. At the August Board meeting, the Directors sought a way for PACA to help flooded historic sights and have decided to "adopt" a National Register site and help in its cleanup. PACA has been in contact with the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency and has offered to lead a contingent of local historically-minded volunteers to an affected site for a weekend cleanup effort. PACA was the first organization to offer volunteer help for historic site cleanup, but we are hopeful that other preservation groups and historic commissions will follow our lead and also adopt an affected historic site. Planning for this effort has just begun, but a weekend in mid-October is the target time.

In order to facilitate planning, PACA would like to know how many members would be interested in participating in a cleanup effort. Plans could be made for a one or two day trip with accommodations being provided near the site. Transportation and meals will also have to be organized. Cleanup activities would probably include: shoveling out mud, removal of damaged materials, cleaning of furniture and small items, landscape repair, eat.

If you would be interested in helping with a cleanup effort on a historic site, please call PACA's answering machine (328-7222) and leave a message with your name and phone number. Additional specific information about the trip will be sent to PACA members when the event is planned. This is a good opportunity to help our fellow preservationists and we hope to have a great volunteer turnout.

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