Preservation and Conservation Association

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Preservation Week: May 14-20

“Real People, Real Places, Real History” is the theme of this 22nd annual celebration cosponsored by the National Trust for Historic Preservation and PACA. Preservation Week 1995 will be observed by the Preservation Association in a number of ways including the annual “ARCHITREASURES” contest cosponsored by the News Gazette. PACA will also be announcing the recipient of this year’s Heritage Grant, a newly established annual program that returns some of PACA’s architectural salvage revenue to the community by means of a $2,000 grant to a local not-for-profit organization. The award must be used for a project involving preservation, conservation and/or education related to history, architecture, or archaeology in Champaign County.

In addition, the award winning Kids Building Fair, begun in 1992 in conjunction with The Discovery Place, will be held this year on Saturday, May 20 from 11:00 to 4:00 in front of the Orpheum Theatre. The Fair is a fun family affair where kids of all ages learn about the building trades. Volunteer contractors including carpenters, painters, electricians, plumbers, tile specialists, masons, and others contribute a day to teach about their special trade. Hands-on science demonstrations are also part of the Fair and the children’s museum will be open. Volunteers to help with this event are still needed; call PACA to volunteer.

Focus On: Varsity Theatre

Moving pictures were a novelty act in the old opera houses. When played as the last act on the bill, managers used them as a way to clear people out of the house for the second show of the evening. However, people came to love the moving pictures and many entrepreneurs recognized their potential and began converting storefronts into small houses exclusively for the showing of moving pictures. These houses came to be known as nickelodeons. A combination of the French word for concert hall-odeon, and the price of admission—a nickel, although the price in Champaign-Urbana was more typically a dime.

On Monday, October 22, 1906, a page one story in the Champaign Daily Gazette announced that Champaign would have a permanent picture show. The Stimmel & Morris Amusement Company had leased a room at 30 Main Street and was remodeling it for a movie theater. The company had been in business for some time with locations in several towns and was now coming to Champaign. Smith Stimmel, jr., said he believed Champaign was a good place and that he expected his company would be successful here.

Promised clean exhibitions and wholesome entertainment. The shows would be presented daily, in the afternoon and evening, with the films changing twice a week.

The Varsity Theatre opened Saturday, October 27, 1906. Business was good for the opening night program of 2,000 feet of film. Within a year of the opening of the first nickelodeon in the United States, Champaign had its own permanent moving picture house. The Varsity Theatre was the first theater to open in Champaign-Urbana devoted exclusively to moving pictures.

Within the next year, Samuel Kahl, the manager of Champaign’s Walker Opera House, had established the Varsity Amusement Company and had taken over the Varsity Theatre. The company operated two theaters for a few years. In addition to the Varsity in Champaign, in 1909 it opened a second theater, also known as the Varsity, at 109 West Main Street in Urbana. It moved to 106 West Main in 1910. By then, the Champaign Varsity had moved down the street to 53 Main Street.

By 1943, the old Varsity Theatre, already having had four owners, was about to begin its series of name changes. The
changed the name back to the Illini Theater. Richard J. Lynch was manager at the time. Along with the name change, a new policy was initiated. The Illini was now an “adult theater” showing X-rated movies.

The theater building was sold in August, 1983. The sales contract prohibited an adult business in the building forcing the theater to close. However, the arcade in the west half of the building was allowed to remain until its lease expired two years later.

The theater sat empty until Jon and Debbie Callahan moved the Harvest Church into the building in 1987. Around June 7, they moved into the arcade space at 51 Main Street. Then, around August 1, they expanded into the theater using it as an audotorium for church services and the arcade space for classrooms. By early 1995, the Harvest Church had outgrown the building and moved out; another church, New Restoration Urban Ministries, moved in.

The building is a two-story red brick structure in basic early twentieth century commercial style. Its ground floor has always been evenly divided into two spaces by the entrance to the upstairs. The street level facade has been remodeled over the years. Originally, the theater side was one large archway, but was divided into two with a box office placed in the center. Some round windows on both the front and rear elevations have been bricked up. The upstairs, unused for several years, was originally a boarding house. All the decoration on the upper story is formed by the arrangement of seven windows and the way the brick is laid. Pilasters, stringcourses and the corbeled cornice are formed by brick.

The interior has not changed a great deal since the 1943 remodeling. Office and storage space have been added at the back of the auditorium, reducing the seating capacity, and the lighting fixtures have changed. The walls are headboard wainscoting topped with flat plaster, the murals having long since been painted over. Very attractive metal ceilings, in excellent condition, remain in both sides.

It is a fairly common practice to house churches in old theaters, and it is generally a sympathetic reuse, depending on how much “remodelling” the church does. Both institutions having similar space and layout requirements, a church can very often make excellent use of abandoned theaters, extending the useful life of some of our fine old buildings.

This article was written by PACA Board Member, Perry Morris, who is researching all of Champaign-Urbana’s historic theater buildings.

Annual Membership Meeting

The National Register-listed Channing-Murray Foundation was the location for the 1995 Membership Meeting held February 26. After a short business meeting in which 1994 preservation activities were reviewed, three members were elected to the Board of Directors to serve through 1997: Daniel Wurl, Bruce Creamer and Jeffrey Gordon. Currently serving are Alice Edwards (96), Art Zangeri (96), Susan Appel (96), Carolyn Baxley (95), Perry Morris (95), and Richard Cahill (95). PACA wishes to thank retiring board member Marianna Murphy and two-term board member Steve Roemmel, who also served as PACA President for two terms. A very moving presentation on the personal side of Stephen Forbes, owner of the historic Forbes House, as revealed through his correspondence was given by Sandra Batzli.

The 1995 Heritage Awards were also presented. The following is a list of this year’s award winners:

Residential Heritage Award
D.J. & Jann Meyer
801 South Vine Street
Urbana, IL

Larry Birch & Steve Skillesstad
602 West Hill Street
Champaign, IL

Scott-Dollahon House
Jo & Hank Kaczmarski
Karen & Rex Kummer
407 East Oak Street
Mahomet, IL

Commercial Heritage Award
Bank Illinois - Campus Branch
633 East Green Street
Champaign, IL

Prillaman Law Offices
Roger & Terry Prillaman
Karen & Steve Miller
117 North Broadway
Urbana, IL

Sew-Sew Sisters Shoppe
Teri Daly & Cindy Hoss
114 East Holden
Tolono, IL

Adaptive Use Heritage Award
The Discovery Place
Orpheum Theatre - Phase I
946 North Neil Street
Champaign, IL
15th Annual Illinois Preservation Conference

Grassroots Preservation is the theme of this year's program to be held in Rock Island, June 1-4. Tours, workshops and even receptions are designed to highlight the importance of “doing” preservation at the local level.

Workshops and tours will emphasize activities that promote preservation at the local level. Topics are broad-ranging from monument restoration to property rights challenges—but each provides practical information for strengthening preservation in communities. Many of the following workshops will feature successful programs carried out in the host community, Rock Island.

- In Expanding the Scope of Preservation speakers will identify resources (rivers, historic highways, etc.) which could and should be tied in to a community’s preservation and heritage tourism program.
- Preservation Pays explores in more depth the economic issues raised by Keynote Speaker Don Rypkeman. Critical and timely economic information useful to all preservationists will be presented.
- Participants can roll up their sleeves and talk advocacy strategy during Grassroots Preservation. Winning strategies and building a strong local organization will be highlighted.
- Creative solutions to the downtown parking problem will be presented in the Main Street, Rock Island Renaissance and the “Parking Problem” workshop.
- Preservationists care about property rights and property values, yet are being challenged by “property rights advocates.” Hear about these challenges—and responses—at the local, state, and national levels at the Property Rights workshop.
- In Rock Island Success Story: Historic Neighborhoods, Rock Island can boast of its thriving, mixed income historic neighborhoods. Public-private partnerships have contributed to this success.
- Technical Tracks features state-of-the-art information for “hands-on” preservationists. Adaptive use, continued use, in-fill construction and materials conservation are some of the topics.

Three tours are part of the conference. Chippiannock Cemetery, founded in 1855 and designed by Almerin Hotchkiss, is listed in the National Register of Historic Places for architecture, landscape architecture and art. Midwest Architectural Woodwork is one of the Midwest's oldest woodworking companies and will be open for a behind-the-scenes tour. Arsenal Island, a National Historic Landmark, remains an operating munitions factory, but during the Civil War it housed a notorious Confederate prison camp known as the “Andersonville of the North.” Quarters One (commander's house), Officers Row, and the Colonel George Davenport House are included on the tour.

For more information about the conference and registration, contact PACA.
Warehouse Clean-up & Sale
June 10
9:00 - 12:00
65 E. University
Champaign

Come join the fun at the annual salvage warehouse organizational party! The morning will be spent organizing, pricing & cleaning. New & "Experienced" Volunteers are welcome.

Urbana Free Library Expansion

The Board of Trustees of the Urbana Free Library is eager to hear ideas about improving future library service. A public meeting was held May 11 to solicit ideas and written comments are welcome from those unable to attend the meeting. Specific areas that the Library Board would like patron input on include Collections, Readers/Users Space, Public Meeting Space and Access to the Building. They are also asking what patrons like best about the current Library, what they find adequate and inadequate in the current Library, and what new things would be nice in a larger Library. As these comments will have an impact on future library expansion plans (and therefore, will impact on the Jacques House), PACA encourages its members to respond to this survey. Comments should be mailed to the Board of Trustees, Urbana Free Library, 201 South Race Street, Urbana, IL 61801 or drop them off at the Library.

In a related matter, PACA and Library representatives met in March with the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency architect, Michael Jackson. A full staff report is pending, but Jackson's initial reaction to the structure was positive. The building's exterior integrity is readily apparent and more of the interior woodwork appears to be original than was previously thought. It was suggested that the rear wings may actually predate the Italianate portion of the house and, based on brickwork and other Illinois examples, may date to the 1840s. If correct, that would make the brick wings the earliest structures in Urbana. More research to confirm this theory is needed.

New Officers Elected

At its March meeting, the Board of Directors elected new officers. Elected were Art Zangerl, president; Richard Cahill, vice-president; Daniel Wurl, secretary; and Perry Morris, Treasurer. Board meetings are held the second Wednesday of each month and are open to PACA members.

Salvage V.I.P.s
Gary Perkins Mike Miller Pius Weibel Paul John Gail Taylor Bob Swisher Rich Cahill
Jim Downs Hank Kaczmarski Matthew Riggs Chris Young Joanne Chester John Peterson

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