PRESERVATION AND CONSERVATION ASSOCIATION

Volume 15

Focus On: The Harris Mansion

The former home of Mr. and Mrs. B.F. Harris, II is located at 809 West Church Street, Champaign. Period deed records make the exact date of purchase difficult to ascertain. During the late nineteenth century, some 521 Champaign properties were deeded to the name B.F. Harris with little or no information recorded to describe them individually. Furthermore, the property had been in the family for quite some time as it was originally the site of the 1880s home of the first B.F. Harris. Mr. Harris, Sr. was a banker and landowner who started the Cattle Bank and First National Bank. Mr. Harris, Jr. was president of the General Alloys Company of Boston.

The new Harris House was designed in 1904 by architect Arthur Heun (1864-1946) of Chicago. The death of Harris, Sr. was anticipated and it was his wish that a new residence for his son (Harris II) be built. Between 1903 and 1904, Mr. Heun made several trips to Champaign to inspect the site and confer with both B.F. Harris, Sr. and Jr. Late in 1904, plans for an "English country residence" were finalized and approved. Construction, however, waited until May of 1905, the same month B.F. Harris, Sr. passed away. As planned, the 1880s house was razed.

Construction of the 25 room mansion took almost two years and over $200,000, during which time B.F. Harris II and Melenda Melish Harris accumulated the furnishings for their new home in this country and abroad. The home was completed in early 1907. The Harris' had two sons; William Melish Harris, was born in the house on June 29, 1907, and B.E. Harris, III was born at home on May 17, 1909.

Most of what graces the next 25 years of the Harris Mansion history is a roaring '20s social account of who's who in Champaign-Urbana and throughout the nation. Frequent parties attracted such notables as Theodore Roosevelt, General Leonard Wood, Governor Frank Louden, Al Capone, and Dr. David Kinley, U of I President. The third floor ballroom was rarely empty on weekends and overnight guests enjoyed lawn tennis and a dip in Champaign-Urbana's first swimming pool (1912) the next morning. This family also had the community's first horseless carriage.

B.F. Harris, II died on December 19, 1920 at the age of fifty-two following a long illness from stomach cancer. His wife, Melenda continued to lead her opulent party-filled lifestyle until her death in May of 1930 shortly after a famed $50,000 robbery at the house.

On November 10, 1929, hardly more than a week after the Black Tuesday stock market crash, several hundred guests (articles report 150 to 400) were gathered for a party following the Army-Illinois football game. The guest list was studded with notables of the business world and public life from throughout the Midwest. Most of the guests were congregated on the third floor where the Harris' had a ballroom complete with stage. Four men appeared at the door and informed the footman that they were there for a practical joke. Harris, an inventor and manufacturer, had a reputation for introducing the unusual into his parties. Once inside, the men whipped out their guns and began ordering the guests to hand over valuables...cash, jewelry, and furs. They were greeted in many instances with expressions of amusement in belief that this was another of the host's pranks. Stanley Kaufman, Champaign merchant, was slow when answering a command to raise his hands and a bullet fired by one of the intruders ricocheted off the floor and creased his scalp. Meanwhile, one of the guests slipped away and called the police. A squad of patrolmen arrived at the site and an indoor battle ensued. The incoming officers and the four fleeing gunmen met on the stately grand staircase. Clyde Davis, who some years later was named Chief of Police, was shot in the wrist. One of the bandits was fatally wounded, another surrendered and three escaped. (One of the bandits had been waiting outside with a get-a-way car.) The three who escaped were later apprehended in Los Angeles and Effingham and sentences of one year to life were passed. Of the four, as of 1954, two were reported working on the railroad at Mattoon, and another was in Chicago after driving a cab in Champaign for a number of years. The death of the fourth occurred in 1954.
shootout was a conversation piece for many years and the Harris Mansion robbery was featured in Time magazine and was later the subject of two radio dramas.

After Mrs. Harris’ passing, the home was left to her two sons, W.M. Harris and B.F. Harris, III. B.F. Harris was President of Alloy Engineering and Casting and when in Champaign in the 1940s and 1950s was reported to have lived unobtrusively in an apartment adjoining his business. He poured his energy into research on the use of castings in defense production. The Harris Mansion, a relic of a bygone era of large staffs and low income-tax rates stood unoccupied for more than a decade. The caretaker neglected to turn on the furnace to the main house several years in a row and substantial damage was done to the interior furnishings. In 1947, Professor David Cole and his wife set forth a plan to beautify the grounds, make repairs and improvements to the building and open a hospital that would ultimately accommodate fifty patients. Their proposition was accepted by the Harris sons since, “the exterior appearance would not be changed, the residential character of the neighborhood not be violated and we felt such a use would have been acceptable to our parents.”

Mrs. Cole and her two sisters, all three of whom were registered nurses, directed the operation of the hospital, which according to the records was fully equipped to care for persons convalescing from illness and for chronic invalids requiring continued care. The primary purpose of the hospital was to provide convalescent care for patients transferred from other local hospitals, thereby freeing space in the other hospitals for acute cases. The Coles were emphatic that this was not to be conceived of as a nursing home for care of the aged only.

Subsequently, Dr. David Cole, Assistant Professor of Mechanical Engineering, and his wife entered into a contract for purchase of the home. And so the Harris Mansion underwent the knife for five months and emerged rehabilitated and renamed. Cole Hospital opened on Monday, December 3, 1947 to a crowd of 2,700 sightseers. Remodeling had been the responsibility of E.N. DeAtley, contractor and Fred E. Berger of Berger & Kelley Architects. At this time, the hospital had ready only nineteen patient rooms on the first floor and a waiting room in the famous grand hall. By mid-1948, the second floor was ready for occupancy with sixteen more rooms and there were operating room facilities. Finally, in 1950, the entire facility was completed with the transformation of the third floor ballroom.
The Coles, however, never received official re-zoning of the mansion for their new use; indeed, the neighborhood was zoned residential well into the 1970s. Rather, the City Council issued a statement in 1947 delineating the benefits of the new hospital and unanimously justifying their resolve to allow it to co-exist with a residential neighborhood.

Increasing costs and hospital consolidations forecast the end not only for the Harris Mansion, but for Cole Hospital. By 1978, Kuhne Co. contractors had completed the three story modern addition which completely obliterated the mansion's original main (west) and south facades. This addition expanded the operation into a medical/surgical hospital licensed for sixty-three patients. But by 1987, due to financial difficulties, Cole Hospital turned to Carle Foundation to staff and control the hospital. The mansion was occupied by Parkside Treatment Center and the hospital section, while still in use, boasted only 15% occupancy, was $4,372,000 in debt, and had only $84.29 in assets. Cole Hospital held out until 1988 when it was forced to declare bankruptcy and its assets were absorbed by Carle.

Carle Pavilion opened in July, 1988, following more than $1,000,000 in construction and renovation. Still licensed as a medical/surgical hospital with twenty-seven psychiatric beds and fifteen chemical dependency beds, the adult psychiatric unit opened first, followed shortly by adolescent services. In 1989, the medical/surgical license transferred to psychiatry and the hospital continued to function offering a full scope of psychiatric and chemical dependency treatment services to adults and adolescents. During the early 1990s, the behavioral health business changed rapidly with decreased inpatient services and an increase in expectations that more services would be provided on an outpatient basis. Carle Pavilion continued to live companionably with its residential neighborhood up until November, 1994, when Carle exercised its option to give the business back to Universal Health Care, Inc. from whom they had purchased it in 1988.

Continuing the tradition set of high quality care and respect for the past, Carle Pavilion recently became The Pavilion, after a hospital license transfer. Property improvements have taken place and, with a significant amount of renovation and new construction completed, the Harris Mansion is once again ready to receive the community.

This article was taken from a presentation made by The Pavilion's CEO, Nina Eisner.

1995 Old House Tour

The Old House Society of Bloomington-Normal is hosting a house tour on Sunday, September 17 from noon to 5:00 pm. Eight sites will be highlighted including four homes, circa 1864 to 1884, and four businesses. Tickets are $10.00 and may be purchased the day of the tour at Mid Illinois Title Services, 102 North Main St., Bloomington. For more information contact Allene Gregory at 309/829-7703.

Private Ceremonies & Charitable Deeds

On Saturday, September 30, the Early American Museum will be offering a symposium in conjunction with the current exhibit, Things Said & Done, which explores some of the groups and associations, sacred and secular, of Champaign County.

In May, the EAM offered the Means of Grace, which explored the religious history of some of the cultural groups that settled Champaign County and central Illinois. September's symposium, Private Ceremonies & Charitable Deeds, will look at some of the fraternal, social and volunteer organizations that are a part of Champaign County.

The program will include presentations on Freemasonry, the Salvation Army, the Red Cross and the Illinois Association FFA by representatives of those organizations. Pat Morey, from the Office of Women's Programs at the UI, will give a presentation on the changing role that women have had in volunteer groups.

Cost for the symposium is $15 for museum members and $20 for others. The fee includes coffee and rolls and a box lunch at noon. Pre-registration is required by September 27 and may be made by calling the museum at 217/586-2612. Hours for the symposium are 9:30 to 3:00.

The Early American Museum is administered by the Champaign County Forest Preserve, and is located north of Mahomet and Interstate 74 on Illinois Route 47 at the west edge of Lake of the Woods Park.

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**Membership Application P.A.C.A.**

**MEMBERSHIP CATEGORY:**

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<tr>
<td>□ Family</td>
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Contributions are tax deductible to the extent allowed by law.
News From the Board

The PACA Board of Directors and volunteers have been busy during the first half of 1995. The following is a summary of some current preservation projects.

Hazen Bridge: Bridge ownership transferred to PACA in December. Plans are underway to limit access to the bridge and to develop a long-range landscaping and use plan for the property. Hank Kaczmarek is chair of the committee.

Forbes House: PACA's involvement in this project has been reduced due to the hiring of a general contractor for the renovation project. Conversion of the house to a sixteen bed emergency housing facility by the Center for Women in Transition should be completed by October. PACA recently awarded the project a $1,000 Heritage Grant to be used for interior woodwork.

Levi Wood House: A financially responsible plan for the stabilization, basic rehabilitation and use of this historic Italianate house is currently being developed. It is hoped that the Forest Preserve Board will accept PACA's proposal and help to preserve this important resource owned by Champaign County residents. Jeff Gordon and Greg Hargus are preparing the proposal for presentation to the CCFP Board in October.

Jaques House: The Library Board is still in the process of scaling back plans for the addition to meet City Council directives. No further action with regard to the Jaques House has been taken. Art Zangerl and other concerned citizens continue to observe the Library Board.

Lindley House: In a flurry of activity, PACA quickly responded to a potential preservation crisis when the Conservatory of Music put their 1892 Queen Anne house on the market with the adjoining property. Marketed as a potential development/apartment site, this significant building was clearly endangered. In less than two weeks, PACA found a sympathetic preservation-minded buyer.

Ricker House: A similar project involves finding a like-minded buyer for this c. 1890 house designed and owned by Nathan C. Ricker, architect for the University. Situated on a corner lot in Urbana's Mixed Office/Residential zoning area, this building could be demolished for new development. PACA recently contracted for an appraisal on the property which is available to interested preservation-minded buyers.

Salvage Warehouse: As usual, Rich Cahill, Bob Swisher and their energetic cohorts have been busy organizing, selling and continuing salvage operations during the hot summer. The warehouse has been attracting customers from throughout the state and PACA's reputation as the place to go for hard to find items is growing. Proceeds from sales support local preservation activities.

Salvage V.I.P.s
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Dick Elkin
Gary Perkins
Rich Cahill
Pius Weibl
Matt Riggs
Cheri Chenoweth
Mike Halvorsen
Jim Downs
Richard Davis
Anna Hanagan
Curt Abert
Julie Goldberg
David Spears
Mike Miller

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Michael Mapes
Jim Bray
Milorad Ketchers
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