



PRESERVATION AND CONSERVATION ASSOCIATION

Volume 16

March - April, 1996

Number 2

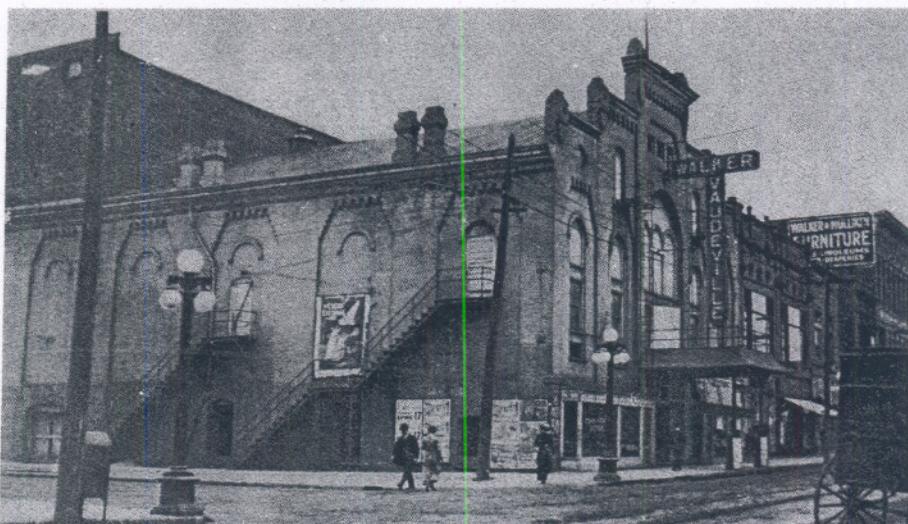
Focus On: Walker Opera House

The Walker Opera House was the first free-standing opera house in Champaign or Urbana. Previous opera houses (Barrett's, Busey's, Eichberg's, and Tiernan's) were all upstairs above other enterprises. The Walker was first known as the Armory. It was the home of Company D, the local militia, and a veteran's organization, Colonel Nodine post, G.A.R.

The Armory was a brick building on the northwest corner of Neil and Park streets in downtown Champaign. The building had been built with multiple uses in mind—a fully equipped stage was built at the end of the drill hall on the main floor and a gallery wrapped around the other three sides of the hall. Seating capacity was over 1,500. Common chairs provided the original seating. Completely movable, they were in sections of six or eight chairs attached by wooden strips screwed underneath the seats. Some small storefronts faced Neil Street. The ground/lower floor was leased by George W. Davidson for his carriage and related supplies business. His showroom was 60 x 120 feet and could hold 150 carriages. He also had a stock exchange where horses could be bought and sold.

The first performance at Armory Hall was Monday, May 18, 1885, consisting of an exhibition drill by Company D and music by the Ninth Regiment Band. That Friday and Saturday, a May Festival of local musical talent was presented under the direction of Mrs. L.C. Garwood. Road shows soon followed beginning with the Kennedy comedy company in July.

After a few years, the old Armory became known as The Walker Opera House. Walker and Mulliken (undertakers and furniture dealers) operated the opera house. In 1889 the Walker Opera House company was incorporated with a total capital of \$10,000. The President was F.W. Walker, Vice President was Charles Fenton Hamilton, Secretary was J.W. Mulliken, and the Treasurer was J. Hamilton. The manager was S.L. Nelson. Senator



The Walker Opera House formerly stood at the northwest corner of North Neil and West Park streets. Photo used with permission of the Champaign County Historical Society.

W.B. McKinley was a stockholder at one time.

The opera house building underwent many changes in its lifetime. The floor was originally level and the small storefronts were raised from basement level to street level. Before the Australian (secret) ballot came into use, these rooms were often used for election purposes. For many years, Miss Ray L. Bowman operated a jewelry store in these rooms.

Dances were frequently held at the Walker in the early days. Any type of activity would not have been unusual, including flower shows, band concerts, political speakers, temperance lectures, hypnotists, mind readers, plays, musical comedies, or a collection of vaudeville acts. After about 1905, a moving picture and perhaps some illustrated songs would have been included. Some of the stars that appeared over the years at the Walker include: the Marx Brothers, Sara Bernhardt, Enrico Carouso, Eddie Foy, Will Rogers, and boxing champ, John L. Sullivan. Many school commencements were also held in the opera house.

Beginning on Monday evening, June 10, 1907, the Walker tried something new. The plan was to remain open all summer

for the first time in its history, showing moving pictures each evening except Sunday. The people in Champaign and Urbana, as well as all over the country were "moving picture mad." At the time, there was little opportunity to see moving pictures in first class theaters with comfortable chairs, electric fans, and ample room with no obstructions between the spectator and the screen. The Walker management decided to give its patrons the opportunity.

The management had purchased the very latest motion picture machine on the market (and the highest priced). A fine group of films were secured for the opening night, none of them having been shown in Champaign before. In addition to the motion picture, there were illustrated songs sung by popular local vocalists. The admission prices were 5 and 10 cents, and on the opening night of the venture, all ladies were admitted free.

The opening night brought spectacular success. The first show was given at 8:00 and it was necessary to give four more showings before all the patrons could be accommodated. More than 2,300 people passed through the doors of the Walker that evening.

Despite good crowds, or because of it, the Walker summer motion picture show ended after two weeks. Matt Kusell, manager of West End Park (Eisner Park), purchased the machine and moved it to the park.

1907 saw a change in management at the Walker. Klaw & Erlanger, of New York City, leased the Walker beginning with the opening of the season on the first of September. Klaw & Erlanger was a very powerful firm in the theatrical world, controlling most of the big theatrical companies and opera houses in the United States—there was not a big attraction on the road in which Klaw & Erlanger did not have an interest. Champaign was now assured of getting the very best of the dramatic and musical productions on the road.

The Klaw & Erlanger lease foreshadowed future theatrical development in Champaign. Marcus Heiman, treasurer of the Garrick Theater in Chicago, was the Klaw & Erlanger agent for the Walker. He became familiar with Champaign as a result of this association. Mr. Heiman would later become a principal in the F. & H. Amusement company which would build and operate the Orpheum Theatre.

In fact, Mr. Heiman would not be the only person associated with the Walker to affect theatrical development in Champaign. Charles Fenton Hamilton would build the Theatre Belvoir (later known as the Rialto) in 1915 and Samuel Kahl, a Walker manager, would be a principal with the Varsity Theatre to open in 1907.

A major renovation took place over the summer of 1912—just two years before the Walker would close. All new stage equipment was installed and the theatre was re-lighted throughout. The house was redecorated with the floor being elevated, the orchestra enlarged, and new seats and other furnishings installed.

The Walker's 1912-13 season opened Monday night, September 9, with high class vaudeville. The bill included: a Marimba Band; Harry Thompson; a skit by Wolf and Zadella; La Belle Clark and her wonderful dancing horse; and Walkerscope—the latest motion pictures views. There were two complete showings every night at 7:30 and 9:00. Admission was 25 cents for the lower floor and 15 cents for a seat in the balcony. Daily matinees were at 3:00 when prices were 10 and 15 cents. There were no performances on Sundays.

The Walker Opera House closed at the end of the season in 1914. The last vaudeville performance at the Walker was given on Saturday evening, April 25. The newspaper ads for the last week's performances advised theater goers to watch for the opening of the "New Or-

pheum" when the new season opened in September.

The opera house building was razed, and the Hamilton Hotel built in its place. It eventually became a hotel for transients and the ground floor housed a Walgreen's Drug store until the building was destroyed by arson in 1977. Currently, a one-story office building housing the Chicago Title Company sits on the site.

This article was written by PACA Board member, Perry Morris, who has been researching all the historic theaters of Champaign-Urbana.

Annual Membership Meeting

The splendid Memorial Room of the Smith Music Building was the setting for the 1996 Membership Meeting held March 10. After a short business meeting in which 1995 preservation activities were reviewed, three members were elected to the Board of Directors to serve through 1998: Perry Morris, Richard Cahill and Anthony Bamert. Currently serving on the Board are Alice Novak (96), Art Zangerl (96), Susan Appel (96), Daniel Wurl (97), Bruce Creamer (97), and Jeffrey Gordon (97). PACA wishes to thank retiring two-term board member Carolyn Baxley for her devotion to preservation causes. Among other projects, Ms. Baxley was resolute in her efforts to save the Orpheum Theatre and establish The Discovery Place children's museum; she continues to serve as president of that Board of Directors.

The 1996 Heritage Awards were also presented. The following is a list of this year's award winners:

Residential Heritage Award:

Kilbury, Routh, Hargus Residence
Carol & Greg Hargus
505 East Warren Street
St. Joseph, IL

Bert & Mary Barickman
606 West Washington Street
Champaign, IL

Carolyn & Norman Baxley
108 North Webber Street
Urbana, IL

Fuller House
Doug & Sheryl Maxwell
200 East Newkirk
Tuscola, IL

Commercial Heritage Award:

Tony Novak & Mike Jones
Novak & Jones Law Offices
130 West Main Street
Urbana, IL

Denni & Bruce Shurts
Shurts House Inn
(Senator Dunlap House)
U.S. 45, South
Savoy, IL

Dave Spears, Sharon Owens &
Jeff Melander
Radio Maria
119 North Walnut Street
Champaign, IL

Landmark Heritage Award:

Altgeld Hall
University of Illinois
1409 West Green Street
Urbana, IL

Tina Weedon Smith Memorial Hall
University of Illinois
805 South Mathews Avenue
Urbana, IL

Experimental Dairy Farm Historic
District
University of Illinois
St. Mary's Road
Urbana, IL

Environmental Heritage Award:

Urbana Street Light Program
Department of Public Works
City of Urbana
Urbana, IL

Rescue Heritage Award:

Center for Women in Transition
Forbes House
506 East Church Street
Champaign, IL

Oomph! Awards:

Milo & Sheoler Kitchens
613 West Stoughton Street
Urbana, IL

Habitat for Humanity
210 West Maple Street
707 North Elm Street
Champaign, IL

New Officers Elected

Following the Annual Membership Meeting, the Board of Directors elected new officers at the March Board meeting:

President: Art Zangerl
Vice-President: Bruce Creamer
Secretary: Tony Bamert
Treasurer: Rich Cahill

Board meetings are held in the board room of the Discovery Place at the historic Orpheum Theatre on the second Wednesday of each month. PACA members are invited to attend; call PACA for the date and time of the next meeting.



Preservation Week 1996

Champaign County citizens will join thousands of individuals around the country as part of a nationwide observance of the 23rd annual National Historic Preservation Week, May 12-18, 1996.

Preserve Community is the theme of the week-long celebration cosponsored by the National Trust for Historic Preservation and the Preservation & Conservation Association.

"*Preserve Community* calls on us to expand our preservation vision, to realize that our responsibility extends far beyond saving individual buildings. Beautifully restored landmarks, while important in their own right as reminders of significant events or personalities in our history, become even more meaningful when they are integrated into the daily life of the community," says Richard Moe, president of the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

As part of this week-long celebration, citizens nationwide will be highlighting how historic preservation has made their communities a better place to live and work. Preservation Week 1996 will be observed locally with an appearance on the WILL 580 *Afternoon Magazine* talk show on May 8, the Fifth Annual Kids Building Fair on May 18, and the announcement of the 1996 Heritage Grants.

Levi Wood House Update

PACA's efforts to save the Levi Wood House have been successful, at least for the time being.

For a number of years the historic Italianate house, located at the Middle Fork Forest Preserve, has been a topic of continuing debate among the Champaign County Forest Preserve, PACA, and other concerned citizens of the county. Continuing problems of deferred maintenance, security, and vandalism, have plagued the house in recent years. In 1995, frustrations over these lingering problems proved overwhelming, and the Champaign County Forest Preserve Board became determined to resolve the future of the house. It was clear that one possibility under consideration was demolition, a fate that had some support within the Forest Preserve Board.

In response to this threat, PACA members, Jeff Gordon and Greg Hargus, prepared a report which defined a number of viable options for the preservation of the house. Additionally, PACA pledged \$8,000, to be matched by the Forest Preserve, toward the immediate stabilization and security of the house.

On October 12, the Forest Preserve Board held a public meeting to discuss the fate of the Levi Wood House. PACA's report, and the options it presented, was a featured part of that public discussion. More important, however, was the extent of the public support that was on display that night. A "standing room only" audience at the Crystal Lake Park Lake House spoke unanimously, and at great length, in favor of preserving the house.

A week later, on October 19, the Forest Preserve Board voted 3 to 2 in favor of a motion granting a stay of execution for the house. The motion provided a time period, until July 1997, for interested parties to develop suitable plans and funding for the long-term preservation of the Levi Wood House.

Since that critical vote a number of positive steps have been taken towards the long-term preservation of the house:

- PACA established a restricted fund with the Harvesters, the Forest Preserve's not-for-profit support organization, as a funding mechanism in support of the project.
- Under the leadership of the Forest Preserve administration and staff, stabilization of the property has progressed. New window coverings, security lighting, and an alarm system are already in place. The removal of the unsalvageable summer kitchen has been completed by workers from the Paris Work Camp. Also, the house was heated through the winter for the first time in a number of years.
- A committee to develop and oversee the planning and funding for the long-term preservation of the house has been formed and the first meeting was held in March.

PACA will keep its membership informed about the progress of the committee and the status of the Levi Wood House. Anyone interested in helping to save this important historic house should contact PACA board member Jeff Gordon at 398-3902.

Membership Application P.A.C.A.

MEMBERSHIP CATEGORY:

- Adult\$15.00
- Student (1/2 time or more)\$10.00
- Senior Citizen\$10.00
- Family\$20.00
- Corporate\$75.00

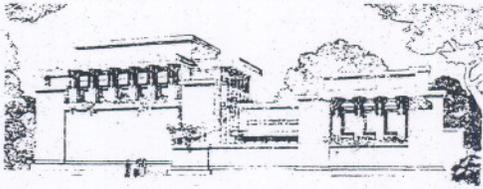
- NEW
- RENEWAL

ADDITIONAL CONTRIBUTION _____

NAME _____

ADDRESS _____

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



Unity Temple.
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Illinois Preservation Conference

The 16th Annual Illinois Preservation Conference will be held June 6-9 in Oak Park, Illinois. This year's theme, *Creating a Positive Image*, will be reinforced through various workshops such as "Preparing a Public Relations Strategy," "Working With Local Media," "Public Relations 911: Crisis Management," "Building Condition Assessment Basics," "Preservation Project Management," "Preserving Historic Schools," "Planning for Healthy Neighborhoods," and "Preservation Advocacy: Election Year Issues."

Katharine Dickenson of the Florida Trust for Historic Preservation will be the keynote speaker during Friday morning's plenary session which will be held in the Frank Lloyd Wright designed Unity Temple. Guided tours of the Prairie School of Architecture Historic District, Downtown Oak Park, Victorian Homes, and Oak Park/River Forest will be offered during the conference. The Richard H. Driehaus Illinois Preservation Awards will be presented during dinner on Friday evening at the Mar Lac House.

Conference registration is \$50.00 with meals and some tours additional. For more information about the conference, contact PACA at 328-7222.

PACA Newsletter

- Art Zangerl, President
- Bruce Creamer, Vice-President
- Tony Bamert, Secretary
- Rich Cahill, Treasurer
- Karen Lang Kummer, Exec. Director



328-PACA: Telephone & Answering Service

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New Salvage Warehouse space desperately needed

Due to the sale of our current warehouse building, PACA needs to relocate as soon as possible. PACA is seeking 2,000-2,500 square feet of warehouse space. Dry, clean space with electricity is preferred in an easily accessible area. Nominal rent can be paid. Contact PACA at 328-7222 if you can suggest a building.

Salvage Donations

- Tony Bamert
- Tom Garza
- Darrel Foste
- Marcia McRae
- University of Illinois

Salvage V.I.P.s

- Bob Swisher
- Gary Perkins
- Rich Cahill
- Loren Kirkwood
- Cheri Chenoweth

PACA V.I.P.s

- Lynda Ramirez
- Kent Snodgrass
- Alice Novak
- Carolyn Baxley

New & Renewing Members

- Joan & John Severns
- John Puckett & Stephen Manthan
- Isotech Laboratories (Dennis Coleman)
- Mr. John Replinger
- David Garner
- Elizabeth Rogers
- Richard & Frances Davis
- Chris Anderson
- Bonnie & Mike Specchio
- Kellie & Kevin Cook
- Sheoler & Milo Ketchens
- Irma R. Lore
- Michael Murphy
- Urbana Community Development Department
- Arthur & Ruth Replogle
- Joe & Jane Marriott
- Laird A. Thompson
- Harry & Marilyn Querry
- Samuel Gove
- Linda & Karl Jensen
- Mrs. Harold Kurzweg

Save the Date!

5th Annual Kids Building Fair

Saturday, May 18

11:00 - 4:00

Orpheum Theatre Parking Lot

Volunteers needed!

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