Focus On: Cohen Building

(The following article is taken from a class assignment for UP320: Planning for Historic Preservation.)

The Nat Cohen Building, which is located on the corner of West Main and Race streets has made a significant contribution to commerce in downtown Urbana. With the advancement of railroads, trolleys, and automobiles during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, downtown Urbana became an area booming with commercial businesses. The Cohen Building contributed to the continuous growth of the downtown by housing businesses such as the Urbana Banking Company, located on the first floor, and a cigar factory owned by Nathan Cohen on the second floor.

The Cohen Building is also a locally significant example of the Classical Revival style. This two story brick building is trimmed with terra cotta and has classical details. Constructed in 1907, the building was designed by Joseph Royer, a well known local architect.

Commerce

During the late nineteenth century, the lifestyle of Urbana residents gradually transformed with the advancement of railroads, trolleys, and automobiles. The railroads, by carrying freight and passengers between Urbana and other cities, helped to contribute to the economic growth of the city. Further, trolleys contributed to the commercial growth of downtown Urbana as well. Trolleys formed a network from Urbana to Champaign, and connected the UI campus to these downtowns. As a result, residents and students could seek employment opportunities, develop new enterprises, and, of course, shop. As the population of Urbana grew, so did the number of businesses in downtown. Businesses such as the Roth Department Store offered a wide selection of merchandise; the Knowlton and Bennett Drugstore, Reynolds Grocery Store and a variety of banks, barber shops, etc., were located on Main Street.

In 1907 Nathan Cohen erected a two story building on the northeast corner of West Main and Race. Mr. Cohen's cigar factory occupied the second floor until 1912. Interestingly, the current building residing at this location is actually the second building on the site. Mr. Cohen's cigar and tobacco store had occupied the previous building as well during the late 1800s. During the time that Mr. Cohen occupied the second floor of the building, the first floor was occupied, in 1908, by the Urbana Banking Company and the Palace Barber Shop.

Unique to the businesses on Main Street was Cohen's cigar factory. Years ago, cigars were made in large quantities in local cigar factories in many towns. No town could hold up its head and look the world in the face unless it had two railroads, two banks, a cigar factory, a merchant tailor, a dressmaker, and a milliner. Since the Cohen Building is in the heart of downtown, the commercial businesses within the building contributed to the growth and economic vitality of downtown Urbana.

Although Mr. Cohen retired from his business in 1912, the building continued to be used as commercial space. Through the years the Nat Cohen Building has been used for businesses such as law offices, barber shops, doctor offices, and banks. For instance, in 1940, the Embassy Tavern, One Thirty Barber Shop, and the law offices of Williamson and Winkelmann occupied the building. Presently the building is used for the law offices of Phebus and Winkelmann.

The Cohen Family

Nathan H. Cohen was born in Philadelphia on February 4, 1850. He was the son of a lead pencil manufacturer. When he and his family moved to Cincinnati, he became involved with the theater. Known to be a wonderful tenor and influenced by his friends, Mr. Cohen went to Chicago for a place in Hooley's minstrels. In the early 1870s, Mr. Cohen went to California and joined the Italian opera...
company of Madam Fabbrini. During Mr. Cohen's theatrical career he became close friends with numerous stars such as Nat Goodwin, James O'Neill, and Billie Price.

In 1878, Mr. Cohen left the stage and returned to Chicago. At this point in his life Mr. Cohen decided to settle down and find a location where he could start a business. He finally decided that the city of Urbana presented more of an opportunity for starting a business than Champaign. As a result, Mr. Cohen started a cigar and tobacco store and made Urbana his permanent residence.

In 1880, Mr. Cohen was married to Miss Addie Bernstein of Champaign. Mrs. Cohen was a talented vocalist as well. She was the daughter of Sol Bernstein, operator of the Great Western Clothing Store located at Main and Market streets, Champaign, where the Lincoln Building is now. Due to their shared interest in music and the theater, the Cohens would promote and participate in a number of local amateur productions.

The Cohen Family resided in a home located at West Elm and Orchard streets in Urbana, which was the center of music culture. (This house was moved with assistance from PACA in 1989 to the 700 block of East Green Street.) The Cohens had three children: Sidney (1885-1931), Julius (1888-1973), and Sol (1891-1988). Mr. Cohen's three sons also became prominent in the musical and civic affairs of the community.

Classical Revival Style

Buildings that depict the Classical Revival style are, in most cases, generally larger than buildings that are from the nineteenth-century Greek Revival style. These buildings are also simpler in effect than buildings of the Beaux-Arts style. The buildings show none of the tendency to multiply angles and projections that marks the latter style; instead, broad expanses of plain wall surface are common and roof lines, when not level, are quiet and unbroken by sculptural incidents.

Exhibitions played a major role in bringing the Classical Revival style to the forefront. Although the Columbian Exposition of 1893 helped introduce the style with Charles B. Atwood's Fine Arts Building, it was the Pan-American Exhibition at Buffalo in 1901 that brought the Classical Revival style center stage. Buildings such as Pennsylvania Station, by McKim, Mead, and White, set the pace for the Classical Revival during the early twentieth-century.

The Nat Cohen Building is a two story red brick structure. The building is trimmed with ivory terra cotta, which is inspired by the Classical Revival style. The Cohen Building is fireproof in construction featuring a tripartite division of capital, shaft, and base. The building also features classic elements such as dentils, which are located below the frieze, and classical ornaments located on the pilasters of the building. Although the windows in the building are not original, the original openings have not been altered.

The Classical Revival style is represented in other buildings throughout downtown Urbana as well. The Masonic Hall, located at 115 West Main, is a four story building whose facade is covered entirely in terra cotta. The building also includes Classical Revival details such as wreaths beneath the windows and between the stories. The Knowlton and Bennett Building, located on the opposite corner of Main and Race, also is very detailed with terra cotta ornament and trim, but is more reflective of the Tudor Revival style.

Prominent local architect, Joseph Royer designed the Nat Cohen building as well as other important buildings in Champaign and Urbana. Born in Urbana in 1873, Royer was the son of John D. and Mary Royer. He was a graduate of Urbana High School, attended the University of Illinois, majoring in Engineering, then later studied Architecture under the guidance of Nathan Ricker.

Joseph Royer is best known for his designs of some of the local public buildings in Urbana and Champaign. The Champaign County Courthouse, built in 1901, has some excellent classic details. The building is a reddish-brown sandstone with gillocke ornamental borders and other classic elements, which blend in nicely with the building’s Romanesque Revival architectural style. Royer’s Urbana Free Library is truly Classical Revival in design with its elaborately detailed entrance and cornice.

This article was written by Angela Ratliff, an undergraduate student in Urban and Regional Planning.

A Special Donation Received

The Ricker House Rehabilitation Project received a very special and meaningful donation from the third and fourth grade students in Colleen Brodie’s and Nancy Coombs’ Leal School classes. During the early 1990s, students in the Team Taught Multi-Age Classroom at Leal were the authors of books on local historic subjects; proceeds from these publications were used to purchase special items for the classroom. However, with the close of the 1997 school year, both teachers will have retired and they wished to disperse the remaining funds to a worthwhile local project familiar to the student authors. The Ricker House Project was chosen since the students researched Nathan Ricker extensively for their publication, Children, Architecture, and History: A Child's Guide to the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and included his home at 612 W. Green as part of the book. In fact, the book is dedicated to the memory and vision of Nathan Clifford Ricker. PACA is quite honored to have been chosen to receive this very wonderful gift.

The remaining copies of the books have also been donated to PACA and are for sale at the Orpheum Children’s Science Museum. The other titles in the series are: Children, Architecture, and History: A Child’s Walking Tour Guide of Urbana, and Children and Historical Research: A Children’s Book of Biographies of Women and Minority People in Champaign County.

Great American Home Awards

The National Trust for Historic Preservation is calling for entries for the 1998 Great American Home Awards contest. If you have restored or rehabilitated an older house within the past five years, consider entering the 1998 contest. In its ninth year, the Home Awards is the national contest that specifically recognizes outstanding achievements in home rehabilitation across the country.

Categories include Exterior Rehabilitation, Interior Rehabilitation, Sympathetic Addition, and Landscape, plus a special category for Bed & Breakfasts. To be eligible, houses must be at least 50 years old and have been designed and still be serving as single-family homes or bed & breakfasts. The entry deadline is September 30. For information and entry forms, send your name and address to: Great American Home Awards, National Trust for Historic Preservation, 1785 Massachusetts Ave., NW, Washington, DC 20036 or call 202/588-6283.
Summer Lecture Series

The Early American Museum lecture series continues this summer with three interesting programs. On July 30, H. Wayne Price will speak on *The American Influence on Illinois Barns*. Mr. Price is Chairman of the Save Our Barns Committee, Illinois State Historical Society. Michael B. Matejka will discuss, *What’s Comin’ Down The Line: The Railroad in the American Imagination* on August 13. Mr. Matejka is editor of the Union News and adjunct member, UI Labor Education Department. *The Gas Station in America* will be the topic of Dr. John Jaki’s lecture on September 3; Dr. Jaki is a UI professor of Geography and Landscape Architecture and co-author of *The Gas Station in America*.

Regular museum admission is charged for the programs (free to museum members) and doors open at 6:30 pm for the lecture with the museum remaining open until 9:00 pm for viewing. Featured at this time is the exhibit *A Railroad Runs Through It; The Architectural Heritage of Six Communities in Central Illinois*. This exhibit highlights trackside towns established in the 1850s and reaches across four counties to look at the architecture as well as the history, growth, and commerce of Mattoon, Tuscola, Tolono, Champaign, Rantoul and Paxton. *Neighborhoods: Weaving the Plots Together* complements this exhibit and is the fourth in a five-year series of exhibits on community history.

In July, the Museum will be the site of a traveling exhibit on the Mormon Pioneer Trail, 1847-1997 called *Faith in Every Footstep* and in August, 25 residents of East Friesland, Germany, will set up a display of photographs and quilts from their home country. The Early American Museum is located at the Lake of the Woods Forest Preserve—one mile north of I-74 on Illinois Route 79.

Heritage Grants Awarded

This May, the Preservation and Conservation Association awarded its fourth round of annual Heritage Grants as part of Historic Preservation Week. Nearly $2,000 was awarded to two area churches and one historic train station to assist in building preservation projects.

The Channing-Murray Foundation at 1209 West Oregon, Urbana will use its grant for the second phase of restoration of the stained-glass windows in the chapel. The windows date from the church’s construction in 1908 and are in dire need of repair. A grant from PACA in 1996 started this restoration project and this year’s larger grant of $1000 will enable the foundation to continue this much-needed work. The Channing-Murray Foundation is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

The Baptist Student Foundation will use its grant of $500 to help with tuck-pointing the historic Stratford House at 312 East Daniel, Champaign. Built in 1905 as the sorority house for Alpha Xi Delta, the house has been used as a cooperative residence for Baptist undergraduate students at the University of Illinois since 1949. Of “Swiss” design, the Stratford House is rather unique in its architectural style and well deserving of preservation.

The Celebration Company at the Station Theatre has made its home in the historic Penn Central Depot since its formation in 1972. Now celebrating its 25th Anniversary, the Celebration Company is a well-known and respected community theater group. The Preservation Association is pleased to give this group a grant of $300 for the greatly needed repair of a front window and minor tuck-pointing. The depot is nearing its centennial having been constructed in 1899 for the Cleveland, Cincinnati, Chicago and St. Louis Railroad; the last passenger service through the station was in the 1960s.

PACA’s Heritage Grant Program is made possible through revenues from the Architectural Salvage Warehouse, located at 106-108 Water Street, Champaign. Historic building materials are rescued from demolition by an active volunteer salvage crew throughout the year. The volunteers also staff the warehouse, providing PACA with the largest portion of our operating budget. Architectural materials are donated by individuals, businesses, and other organizations throughout the community. Overall, the salvage operation prevents these unique historic building materials from becoming landfill, and provides numerous home owners and businesses with the opportunity to reuse these valuable materials.

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Membership Application P.A.C.A.

MEMBERSHIP CATEGORY:

- [ ] New
- [ ] Renewal

ADDITIONAL CONTRIBUTION

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

NAME

ADDRESS

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

- All of our Kids Building Fair volunteers who made the day a success. A special thank you to our contractors and craftspeople who gave up their Saturday (one without rain!) to teach kids the intricacies of their craft.

- Professor emeritus Lachlan F. Blair for his very generous donation of over 1,000 slides from his personal collection. The slides depict various buildings and scenes from Champaign, Urbana, Monticello, Bement, Rantoul, and Bellflower from the 1970s through the 1990s. This is a great addition to PACA’s slide collection.

- The Champaign County Board who voted to preserve the historic 1901 Courthouse and nearby Sheriff’s House and renovate them for much needed office space. A new addition east of the Courthouse will provide space for eleven courtrooms that will meet mandated state requirements.

ArchitReasure Winners

PACA is pleased to announce the winners of this year’s ArchitTreasures Contest, co-sponsored with The News-Gazette. First place winner is Mark Replogle, Urbana; second place winners are Joe and Phyllis Williams, Urbana; and the third place winner is Peggy Shannon, St. Joseph. A previous contest were deemed “easy” by some, but this year’s very hard contest failed to stump these architectural sleuths! Congratulations to our eagle-eyed winners who received books from The News-Gazette and a year’s membership in the Preservation Association.

Champaign Commission Appointed

At the May 17 Council Meeting, the Champaign Historic Preservation Commission was formally appointed by Mayor McCollum. Serving on the this new commission are Lois Wacholtz, Gary Olsen, Jeffrey Mellander, Ernie Martin, James Fallon, Timothy Bartlett and Susan Appel; Kristine Anstead was appointed as an alternate. The Commission will soon undergo training sessions to learn their new duties and responsibilities, but hopefully by this fall the Commission will be ready to accept applications for historic landmarks, historic districts and conservation districts.

New & Renewing Members

Carl & Gabriella Woese
Andrew B. White Family
Susan K. Appel
Walter C. Allen
Irma R. Lore
Sharen Slade
Siamak Mostoufi
Andrew & Carol Timms
Gerald & Sandra Pifanowski
Bruce Creamer
Jennifer Hines & Robert Krumm
Gladys Snyder
Kathy & Steve Roemmel
Cheryl Kennedy
Lynda & Earl Creutzburg
Glenna Bartell
Patricia Miller
Nina Rubel
Kellie & Kevin Cook
Tim Larson
John Clarke
Valerie Woodruff
Louis B. Wetmore
Jim Fallon
Dr. & Mrs. Robert Sutton
Mrs. Ruth Dobbins
Mike Richards
Mrs. J.L. Fairchild

Remember to check your mailing label for your membership renewal date. The date shown indicates when you last renewed; membership runs for one year from that date.