



# PRESERVATION AND CONSERVATION ASSOCIATION

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## Levi Wood House Obituary

The Levi Wood House has been razed. Loyde Esry's commentary in the January 25<sup>th</sup> edition of the *News-Gazette* attempted to justify the Forest Preserve Board's action—to present the view from his "side of the fence." The Levi Wood House was public property, and belonged to all the citizens of Champaign County. It is proper that Esry's justification be examined, and the "other side of the fence" explored.

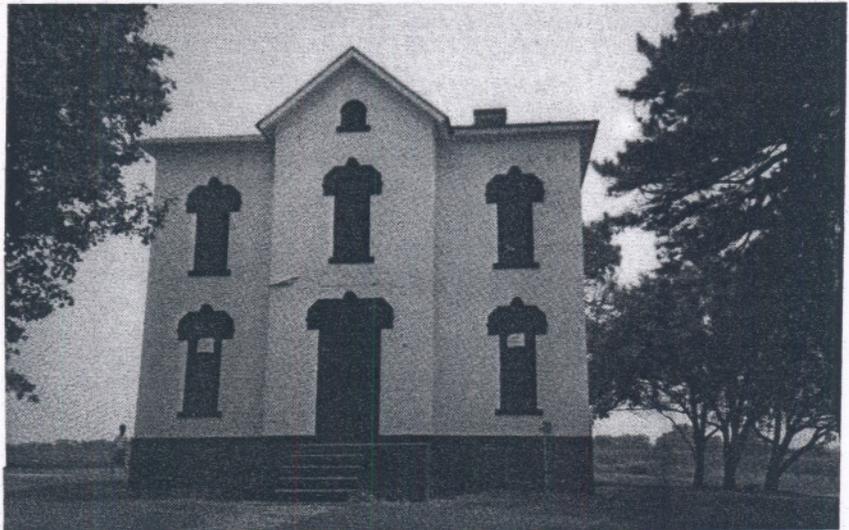
Esry's commentary was titled, "Time had taken toll on health of once-vital Levi Wood house." If left to time alone, the house would still be standing. Time did not destroy the Levi Wood House, the Forest Preserve Board and some heavy equipment did.

The Forest Preserve acquired the Levi Wood House in 1973. From 1975 until the spring of 1988, a Forest Preserve employee and his family lived in the house. Children were being raised there just ten years ago. While no doubt the house was in need of modernization, one must conclude that it was in respectable condition when it became public property.

In 1988 the house was vacated, essentially abandoned by the Forest Preserve. Vandalism became a recurring problem. The Forest Preserve stopped supplying heat to the house in the winters, which is the sole reason that hardwood floors buckled and interior finishes failed. The gutters and downspouts, the first line of defense for any house, were ignored. Funds allocated in 1991 to stabilize the house were never spent. After 120 years of service, the suddenly increased deterioration was not the result of time or natural forces, but of neglect.

The Forest Preserve must accept responsibility for this period of neglect. To justify its destruction based on its condition is to conveniently ignore the obvious responsibility for creating that condition.

Despite a decade of neglect, the Levi Wood House remained in remarkably sound structural condition. The misinformed but often-heard concern over



*The elaborate Italianate Levi Wood House was demolished in January, 1998. PACA photograph.*

"soft bricks" is nonsense. When combined with a compatibly soft mortar, historic bricks are a servicable and time-tested building material. The loss of the Levi Wood House has nothing to do with the rigidity of its bricks, but rather with the rigidity of opinion on the Forest Preserve Board. Independence Hall in Philadelphia, 140 years older still, is made of equally soft brick, and it survives because it is valued and maintained. The Levi Wood House perished because it was neither valued nor maintained by those we entrusted with its care.

It was pointed out that the Levi Wood House was not a serious candidate for the National Register of Historic Places. That opinion comes from the 1988 letter by Ann Swallow of the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency, and represents a very selective slice of her opinion. In that same letter she states, "*it is certainly an impressive residence with restrained Italianate ornament on the exterior and fine plasterwork on the interior...I remain impressed by the finishwork and the overall physical condition of the house...I encourage the Champaign County Forest Preserve District to further investigate retaining the Wood House.*" The opinions of preservation professionals were unanimous in urging the county to

save the house. They were unanimously ignored.

Esry states that "the rich and famous were solicited for money to save the Levi Wood House." That is a major exaggeration. I know of only one grant that was applied for, and that was about five years ago. No serious fundraising effort was ever initiated, nor could there have been. How does one ask individuals or foundations for money for a project that might or might not be approved? Unless one enjoys being scoffed at, it is a pointless exercise. One cannot solicit funds for a project without the explicit and enthused commitment of those charged with making project decisions. This was an obvious fact that was never understood by the Forest Preserve Board. At least I trust it was not understood.

In essence, the Board's approach to the preservation community was: "You've got the ball. If you score a touchdown, then maybe we will block for you." We all know that it takes the whole team blocking to score a touchdown, and the Board remained firmly on the sidelines. In hindsight, this attitude ensured the demise of the Levi Wood House.

With fundraising impossible, the citizens committee working to save the

Levi Wood House did what they could to try to get the Board in the game. In conjunction with the Forest Preserve staff, a plan was developed to incorporate the house into an environmental education center. (One of many potential adaptive re-use possibilities.) Furthermore, with joint funding from both PACA and the Forest Preserve, the house was stabilized. A security system and security lights were installed. Vandalism stopped. The summer kitchen was removed and the roof patched. Minor repointing was done, and the house painted in its original colors. Deterioration was halted. In doing so an alternative to destruction was presented, the option to maintain the house at a very modest cost (about \$2000/year), leaving options open for the future. With some vision and interest at the Board level, with a willingness to work with the community, there could be hope for the future.

The Forest Preserve Board was not interested. The plan was dismissed and the preservation effort declared a failure. Reason and an appeal for prudent action meant nothing—there was no alternative save a large amount of money appearing, and the ground rules ensured that a large sum of money would not appear. The Board stayed on the sidelines and watched the clock tick out, and then fired the final gun.

Which brings us to the final chapter of the obituary—Chris Knight's single-handed attempt to save the house with an offer to move it. I admired the effort, and personally supported what I am confident was a sincere proposal. But on the technical side I agree with Esry, a large masonry structure is a poor candidate for moving. It was too big and difficult a job, and careful analysis was bound to dictate against the effort. I will not comment on the apparently difficult negotiations between the Board and Knight, as PACA kept a respectable distance. With all due respect to Knight, PACA views this type of effort as truly a last resort. A publicly owned historic resource should not be ripped from its setting and sent down the road and out of public life. The Forest Preserve Board is charged with protecting our public resources. This last ditch solution did not satisfy that charge.

One aspect of the attempted move does bear mentioning. In an effort to secure financing for the project, Chris Knight had the house professionally appraised. It was appraised at \$65,000. This is not an estimate of its historical or architectural value, but purely its market value. The Forest Preserve spent another \$8200 to destroy and discard that value.

Esry states that he is accountable to all

the taxpayers, not just those with special interests (meaning preservationists.) At the same time that the fate of the Levi Wood House was being sealed, the Forest Preserve Board approved \$856,000 over six years for improvements to the golf course at Lake of the Woods. It is not a question of whether the Forest Preserve protects special interests, but rather whose special interests they protect. Esry is convinced that the Board's decision "will stand the test of time." On what basis will the demolition of the Levi Wood House do this? The two traditional reasons for demolition don't hold water: the house was not in the way of any planned construction, nor was it any longer a threat to public safety. The only possible justification he provides is in the name of fiscal responsibility. The Board did not want to spend money on the house. But not just satisfied with not spending money on the house, the Board's action assured that no future Board could possibly spend money on the house. The taxpayers required protection from a future Board that may actually have vision and a willingness to work with the community. Now that's fiscal responsibility with a capital "F." That's Old Testament-style fiscal responsibility.

Here's the bottom line. We had an asset of determined value and a tremendous opportunity potential. Now, with the taxpayers out an additional \$8200, both that value and opportunity are buried in a landfill. How that adds up to responsible fiscal management escapes reason. Destruction is destruction. It always subtracts value, it never adds value. The citizens owned a unique and irrecoverable historic asset. Now they don't. There is nothing to show for it. The end.

I am grateful for the kind words Mr. Esry reserved for me in his commentary. He should be assured that the feeling is mutual.

For the record, (and despite the fact that we don't get to vote for these positions) the Board members voting to destroy the Levi Wood House were Jim Capel, Lloyde Esry, Mark Johnson, and Jerry Lyke. Board member Maureen McCord was a staunch supporter for protecting the house, and ably chaired the citizen's committee for two years. PACA thanks John Potts and his capable staff, and all those who supported the preservation effort, in particular Rose Geier-Grant and Sara Reibe, who contributed substantially to the efforts of the citizen's committee at PACA's request.

*This article was written by PACA President Jeff Gordon, who served on the Wood House Citizen's Committee and helped prepare a detailed structural assessment of the building.*

## Frequently Asked Questions About the Salvage Warehouse

### Has the PACA warehouse moved?

The view driving along University Avenue would give you that impression. In June we finished the move out of the north half of the building and cleared out the University Avenue display windows. We are still located in the same building, just a little less visible. Follow the arrows around the block to the Water Street side. We are there most Saturdays from 9:30 to 11:00 am. Our current space is filled beyond capacity. In fact, material is now being stored at five different locations in member's garages and basements.

### How is the search for a new warehouse going?

We keep trying. In 1997 we made offers on two buildings near our current location. Both failed. We continue the search and hope to find something in the downtown area. If you have any ideas or leads please contact PACA. Ideally we would like to have a building with 2500-3500 square feet, heat and electricity, in an area that is accessible.

### What were the highlights of 1997?

The Landmarks Preservation Council of Illinois presented the salvage crew with a Richard H. Driehaus Award in September. The judges were impressed with the "win-win" situation we have created for the community by recycling architectural fragments and building components that otherwise would be lost to landfills. Bob Swisher and Rich Cahill attended the awards banquet in Galesburg, that was held in conjunction with the LPCI annual meeting. It was an honor to be one of the eight groups in the entire state to be recognized.

The salvage operation at the Japan House in January of this year brought together sixteen volunteers at one time. When the day began, the first floor had three formal Japanese rooms for tea ceremonies and a "hidden" staircase. After peeling off the raised floors and added walls, the original oak trim and details were exposed. People of all levels of skill and experience worked together and in a few hours hundreds of feet of oak trim were saved, along with pocket doors, parts of a built-in buffet, and the staircase. The cooperation of Steve Hesseschwerdt, Gary Biehl, and Roger Martin of the University of Illinois made this possible.

**Was salvage possible from the Boneyard Detention project?**

In late December and early January the construction of the detention basin for the Boneyard Creek began in the area near Locust and Healey streets in Champaign. The City of Champaign, Green Street Reality, Healey Street Associates and one private homeowner all were extremely cooperative in giving us enough lead time to conduct salvage operations in the area. Seven houses were salvaged and at least six nice exterior doors, five stair cases, sixteen interior doors, eight porch columns, several buckets of decorative door and window hardware, and lots of nice pine trim were salvaged.

**What are the most frequently requested items?**

Fireplace mantels are often requested. We have had about three in the last six years. Two came from a farmhouse near Royal, and one from a house on Neil Street. The one from Neil Street is cast iron and, after being sandblasted, it is for sale in Mahomet at the Victorian House store. Because of overcrowded and often "wet" conditions in our current warehouse, items that are unique and have higher value are often taken there.

Next comes French doors. We can't seem to keep these in the warehouse for long. More will be coming in late March so keep stopping by. Windows are often requested, especially leaded or stained glass. We have a couple at the warehouse, and a nice one in Mahomet. We also have a nice selection of bathroom "etched"

glass. We do not have the space to save normal sash windows, transom windows, or storm windows.

Oak flooring is often wanted. We have a small stock of thin oak flooring that was donated by a member this summer, but we don't take out flooring ourselves. However, we have arranged for members to remove flooring for themselves. This works best when we have sufficient lead time prior to demolition, which in many cases does not happen.

Cast iron floor registers, interior doors, newel posts, spindles, handrails, and fancy door knobs continue to be our best selling items and turnover quickly. The message is: Keep coming back. Materials come and go quickly at the warehouse. We also keep a request list for items.

**What were some of the best moments in 1997?**

At least three times this summer truck loads of nice oak trim came in from a generous Charleston donor. He had saved the material for years, and it was time to clean out the barn. On his last trip he brought pictures showing what he had done at his home using rescued materials. Ask to see the pictures when you come.

Recently a visitor from the Iowa City Preservation Society came to the warehouse. He was amazed by the variety and the crowd of people we had that day. Their operation is open only two Saturdays a month, but is located in a building that the city provided the group. One of the goals of 1998 is to get PACA on the Web so we can network with similar not-for-profit salvage operations.

**Why am I not called to help with salvage?**

There are two reasons people may not be getting a call. Before any salvage begins, Bob, Al or Rich usually evaluate what of "value" can be saved, and the safety of the building or area. We don't want to bring in lots of volunteers if there is no work to be done or the conditions are unsafe. Our best operations are in buildings where we have several weeks lead time to organize efforts. My message is don't give up, it is nothing personal. With any luck sometime in 1998 we will need every one for a large moving party.

**How did the warehouse do in 1997?**

Gross sales were \$17,884; net sales, after sales tax, were \$16,791. Major expenses included: rent \$4,500, insurance \$1,245, repair and upkeep of truck \$524, and \$402 for miscellaneous expenses.

**Where does the money go?**

Salvage sales continue to permit PACA to carry out its programs. The PACA Heritage Grant Program was begun in 1995 and has awarded nearly \$6,000 in small grants. In 1997 we supported the Channing Murray Foundation, Baptist Student Foundation, St. Patrick's Church, and The Celebration Company at the Station Theater. In 1997 we also provided significant support to the Ricker House (\$12,000) that covered real estate taxes, repairs to the porch and chimney.

*This annual salvage update was prepared by Salvage Co-Chair Rich Cahill.*

**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 \_\_\_\_\_

e mail address: \_\_\_\_\_

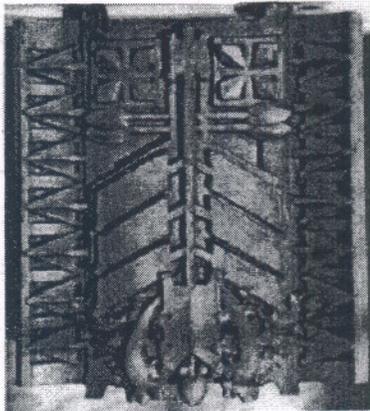
**Make checks payable to: PACA, Box 2555, Station A, Champaign, Illinois 61825**



Corner of Locust & Healey, Champaign. All three houses were salvaged before demolition. Note porch supports used after columns were saved. Photo by R. Cahill.

### Architectural Ornament for Sale

The UI Chapter of the Society of Architectural Historians is selling plaster casts of architectural ornament by Louis Sullivan and George Elmslie. Four different casts are available this spring. Contact SAH President, Marci Uihlein at 352-0946 for further information or to place an order.



### PACA Newsletter

Jeffrey Gordon, President  
 Bruce Creamer, Vice-President  
 Tony Bamert, Secretary  
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### Salvage V.I.P.s

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 Al Friederick  
 John Schneider  
 Mark Wetzel  
 Dan Leasure  
 Peter Bushell  
 Brian Wansink  
 Matt Riggs  
 Darrel Foste  
 Phil DeMarris

### Salvage Donations

City of Champaign  
 University of Illinois  
 Healey Street Associates  
 Green Street Realty  
 Gillespie-Roland Apartments

### Preservation Calendar

#### March 8

PACA Annual Membership Meeting, 2-4 pm, Station Theater, Urbana

#### March 24-25

Preservation Days, Springfield. Legislative lobbying sponsored by LPCI (312/922-1742)

#### April

Heritage Grant Applications distributed to area non-profits, contact PACA for an application

#### May 16

Seventh Annual Kids Building Fair, 11-4 pm, Orpheum Theater, Champaign

### Membership

#### Charter Members (1981-1983)

Mr. & Mrs. Lynn Altenbernd  
 Dr. & Mrs. Edward Kolodziej  
 Sharon J. Rapp  
 Mrs. Ruth Youngerman  
 Hermie Kruidenier  
 Mr. & Mrs. Edwin C. Rae  
 Mark Replogle & Kirstin Dohrer  
 Mrs. M.G. Snyder

#### Ten to Fifteen Year Members

Caroline Hibbard  
 David Finet  
 Dr. William Youngerman  
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 Shirley Stillinger

Dan McCollum  
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#### Five to Ten Year Members

Peter & Colleen Bushell  
 Steve Leonberger & Cheryl Koranda  
 Sally Foote & Thomas Wold  
 Pius Weibel & Sue Feldman

#### One to Five Year Members

Sheila Goldberg  
 Walter & Marguerite Maguire  
 Francis & Heather Young  
 Peckham Family  
 Mr. & Mrs. E. R. Gordon  
 Norma & John Gremer  
 Greater C-U Economic Partnership  
 Marilyn Morris  
 Dan Sullivan

#### New Members

Ruth Wyman  
 Marianne Winslett & Eric J. Bina  
 Kristine Anstead & Alan Chalifoux  
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