



# PRESERVATION AND CONSERVATION ASSOCIATION

Volume 19

July-August, 1999

Number 4

## Focus On: Thomas Franks House

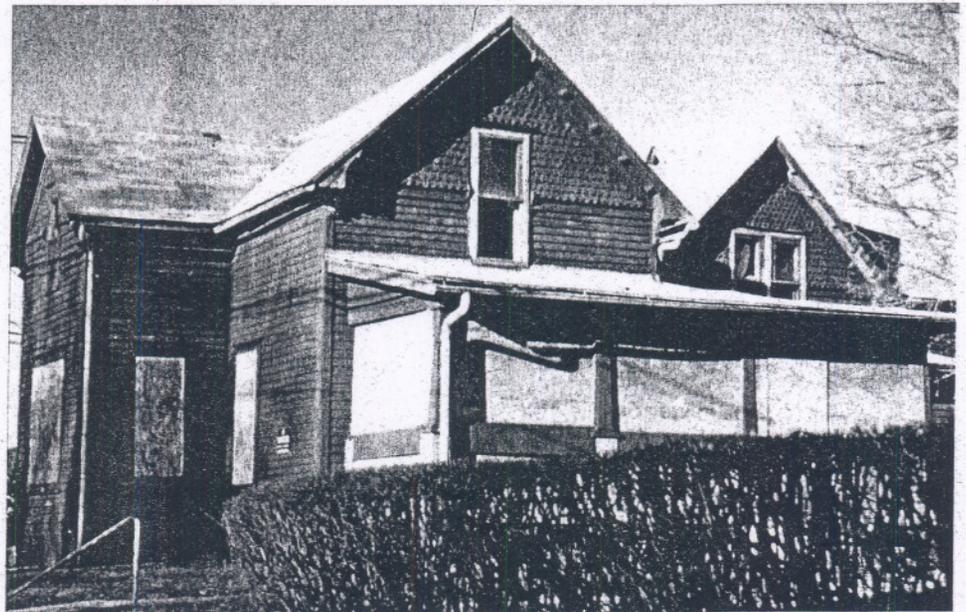
The Franks House, 704 N. Randolph, Champaign, was probably constructed around 1872 with a later addition around 1895. Bowman's Map of 1858 shows the block bounded by Maple, Randolph, Vine, and Neal streets as unplatted with C.F. Columbia's name written across it. This block was a special assessor's subdivision that was developed much later than the rest of Columbia's holdings in the area to the west and north; perhaps he was speculating on the construction of an east-west railroad. In fact, three railroads would eventually build tracks and stations immediately north of Maple Street: the Wabash Railroad; the Cleveland, Cincinnati, Chicago & St. Louis Railroad; and the Havana Line of the Illinois Central Railroad.

By 1871 the block had been platted into lots and Columbia sold lots 4, 5, and 6 to James M. Ralph on March 31 for \$1,500. Ralph, in turn, made a quick profit by first selling lots 5 and 6 to Thomas Franks for \$600 per lot twelve months later and then lot 4 for another \$600 on July 3, 1873.

Thomas B. Franks was born in Westbury, near Bristol, England, on February 8, 1844 and was apprenticed in the landscaping trade. He left England for Canada at age 21 and landed in Quebec in 1865. From there he immigrated to the United States to work on Chicago's new Lincoln Park. According to his obituary in the *Champaign Daily Gazette*,

*When Lincoln park in Chicago was being laid out Mr. Franks went to Chicago and was employed on the park work for several months. While employed there he was recommended to the trustees of the University of Illinois for head gardener and he accepted the position and was listed as a member of the faculty. Mr. Franks came to Urbana at the end of the first term of school and remained there for three years before moving to Champaign to engage in the greenhouse business.*

J.S. Lothrop's *Champaign County Directory of 1870-1*, lists Franks as the Univer-



*The Franks House, 704 N. Randolph Street, Champaign, has been nominated as a Champaign Landmark for its vernacular architecture and association with an important Champaign personage. Photo courtesy of City of Champaign.*

sity Gardener and Florist living south of University Avenue in the University Gardens. His house was on the site of Engineering Hall and was later moved south to the University farm. His obituary details some of his work for the University which included laying out the grounds of Illinois Field and also supervising the planting of the present [1916] forest. Students had to work two hours each day under him and among those workers were Prof. I.O. Baker, Prof. N.C. Ricker, and Dr. T.J. Burrill.

His position with the University is further substantiated in *The Movement for Industrial Education and the Establishment of the University, 1840-1870* which states Professor Willard F. Bliss took over the development of the University's agricultural properties in March, 1869 and under him was, "Franks, appointed by the board with the title of gardener to the university." About the time he joined the staff of the new university, Franks married Anna M. English, of Lancaster,

Wentworth County, Canada. According to her 1901 will, Mrs. Franks inherited money from her father which she invested in Champaign property. It is conceivable that it was her inheritance that allowed the Franks to buy the Randolph Street property and to build a large greenhouse complex within three years of arriving in Champaign.

Franks purchased the property between Maple and Vine streets on the east side of Randolph Street in 1872 and established Champaign County's first greenhouse. By August he was advertising bulbs and flowering plants at his greenhouse and he was soon listing both his business and residence on the 1873 Champaign County Map, "THOMAS FRANKS, Landscape Gardener and Florist a full assortment of bedding plants, flowering shrubs and evergreens kept constantly on hand - residence and green houses, FOUR BLOCKS NORTH of BARRETT'S HALL, on Neil St. Champaign, Illinois." Thus his home and business were clearly

in place on Randolph Street by 1873, and in 1879 his son George was added to the family.

The home and business were continually modernized. City water in a 3/4-inch galvanized line was run to the home in 1886; and quite possibly the house was wired for electricity from the power lines of the main trolley line, which ran down Neil Street just a block to the east. Physical changes were also made to the house. The 1892 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map shows the greenhouse complex with a single long greenhouse near the east edge of the property, on the north end of which was the heating plant (steam heat with coal fuel) with a 35-foot brick chimney and two heaters. Attached to the heating plant was a one-story frame building, in two sections, that abutted Maple Street and extended to the west; to the south of this building and adjacent to the west side of the heating plant was a long building with an attached greenhouse that ran east-west. This section in turn was connected to a glass roofed "L"-shaped segment that had three greenhouses adjoining on the south; altogether, the greenhouses created a "U"-shape. In the "L" was the office that in turn was connected to the residence.

On the front page of the *Champaign Daily Gazette* for May 15, 1891 appears an extensive story that describes Franks' annual flower show. Just a year later, the May 23, 1892, the *Champaign Daily Gazette* states on page one, "Thomas Franks, the florist, has completed, and is now moving into another new greenhouse, exclusively for roses. This new house is 95 feet long...With it, Mr. Franks now has nine houses and one of the largest establishments of its kind in Central Illinois." The article goes on to suggest the reason that Franks would later abandon the north Randolph Street area, "He has added new houses from year to year, being compelled to do so by the remarkable growth of his business, until now he has only enough space left to add one more small house. He is at a loss to know what to do when this space is covered." A month earlier in the April 28, 1892, the *Champaign Daily Gazette* appeared the following Urbana announcement, "Thomas Franks, the Champaign florist, opened his branch greenhouse on the lot west of Clark & Saffels marble works, today." This was on north Goodwin. By 1910 the City Directory would list Franks and Son retail on University Ave in Champaign and the wholesale operation on Goodwin in Urbana; however, both Thomas Franks and his son George are still listed as living at the residence at 704 N. Randolph in the same directory.

By 1897, the entire greenhouse and residential complex had been enlarged. A long greenhouse was added along the south side of the original complex, thus enclosing the "U" and creating an open square; an additional greenhouse was placed inside the square along the side of the easternmost original greenhouse. The residence was expanded with the addition of a wing that projected west from the main north-south section and the north "L"-shaped one-story section with inset porch was remodeled into a one and one-half story section without the inset porch, but with a small porch in the southeast corner next to the office. Moreover, the long one-story section that connected the front porch and the office is now depicted as glass roofed.

By 1892 the Franks had purchased additional land on East University just west of the Boneyard Creek (204 E. University) for another greenhouse and florist operation; the Randolph Street complex was abandoned by 1901. This is confirmed by the 1902 Sanborn Map that shows only the house remaining. All the greenhouses, the office section and the southeast corner of the residence were removed. Anna Franks died in November, 1901, and in her will she left all her property to her siblings in Canada with a small bequest to her son George. A later codicil had revoked her bequest of the use of the E. University property to her husband Thomas. Although the records are incomplete, it appears that the will was contested on the grounds of her mental instability, and her son George seems to have inherited most of the property. The lots that contained most of the greenhouses were not sold until May 1920 and November 1923.

Records show that Thomas and George continued to live in the Randolph Street house and ran the E. University greenhouse; in 1909 they opened a "big supply plant on North Goodwin Avenue, Urbana." Thomas married a widow, Jennie Murphy, a childhood acquaintance he encountered on a trip to England in 1902; she died in 1908. George married Janet Styles in St. Louis in 1913 and they moved to 111 West Vine. Apparently, Thomas moved in with the young couple as the *City Directory* of that year shows all three living together in the Vine Street house.

Thomas Franks was one of the earliest Champaign Park Commissioners. He was a commissioner at the time the concrete walks and fountain were placed in West Side Park and spent considerable time supervising the work. Thomas Franks' credentials clearly recommended him for the Park Commission. His actual length

of service has been lost with the rest of the City records from this time; however, it can be documented that he was serving on the Commission at least as early as 1892 and that he was the Chairman of the Board of Park Commissioners in 1898. In 1892 an article appeared that suggests that if Franks was not the Chairman of the Commission in this year he was still very influential. It in part reads, "People of the East Side are getting more interested as to the welfare of their park, recently given by J.R. Scott...Some days ago Thomas Franks was taken out to the new park, and he made a small diagram showing how the work of setting out the trees should be begun." From this it might be inferred that Franks should rightfully be credited with the original layout and design of Scott Park.

Planning for the sidewalks in West Side Park was occurring in the early part of 1898. Work started on the sidewalks in the fall of 1898 with awarding of the contract to P.E. Taintor of Springfield. The work continued into 1899 and perhaps longer. As reported in April 1899 "The excavation has just been finished for the curve from the intersection of State and West Park streets to...Prairie street and University avenue...this is the only one of these curves that will now be put in...". The work on the fountain was not underway until 1899, "The excavation has progressed so far for the fountain in the park, that the laying of the stone in the foundation can begin next (soon)." In 1900 the concrete curbing was still being installed. Additionally two later articles from 1900 discuss the fountain, the first stating that in July, 75 to 100 gold fish were installed in the fountain. The second states that in November of that year, "the fishes, thirty in number, were taken out carefully and transferred to water in Thomas Frank's greenhouse to spend the cold months."

From this evidence it is clear that Thomas Franks' was influential on the Champaign Park Commission as early as 1892 and was still actively involved in 1900. Since the official city records are lost and the Champaign Park District's records do not start until 1914, the full extent of Thomas Franks' commitment to Champaign and its open places will never be known. At least part of this time, he was the chair of the commission. During Thomas Franks' tenure, planning and work began on Scott Park as well as the design and development that has made West Side Park a focal point for the community for nearly 100 years. These two parks, especially West Side, are testimony to the enduring service of Thomas Franks to the City of Champaign.

Besides his service on the Park Commission, Thomas Franks was also a member of the Elks and a life-long member of the Episcopal Church, although he served for 15 years as the choir director of the First Presbyterian Church in Champaign. He became a naturalized United States citizen in 1890. Once established in the United States, he sponsored both of his sisters, Mrs. Sarah Ann Franks Frost and Elizabeth Franks Strode, to this county and both settled within a few blocks of 704 N. Randolph. Mrs. Strode came with her husband, George Strode, a local businessman for many years. Thomas Franks died on October 18, 1916 at the home of his sister, Sarah Frost; his funeral was held at his son's home on Vine Street.

His son George worked with his father in the greenhouse business, joining the family business around 1908. He took over the business after his father's death, but gave it up in 1931. By then George Franks had been a city alderman for six years (1911-1917) and was involved in the new commission government. George held the job of commissioner of public safety for ten years and in 1927 he was elected mayor. He ran on a platform that was against a two million dollar beautification improvement of the Boneyard; it was under his administration, however, that the railroad viaducts were constructed. After four years as mayor (1927-1931), he started an insurance business and was head of the Franks-Tyler insurance agency at 110 1/2 N. Neil Street. George Franks died in 1959.

*The Franks House has been nominated as a Champaign Landmark and goes before the City Council on Sept. 21 for designation.*

### Greek Chapter House Tour

September 19 is the date of the Fall House Walk which this year features eight Greek Chapter houses. PACA, along with the Society for the Preservation of Greek Housing, is sponsoring the tour which will be held Sunday afternoon from 1-5 pm. The first floor public spaces of Theta Chi Fraternity (formerly the Zeta Tau Alpha Sorority House), FarmHouse, Alpha Gamma Delta, Kappa Kappa Gamma, Delta Tau Delta, Beta Sigma Psi, Gamma Phi Beta, and Alpha Delta Pi will be open for viewing. All the houses are located in Urbana on Lincoln, Ohio, or Nevada streets. Tickets are \$10.00 and will be available the day of the tour at the UI Horticulture Field Laboratory, 1707 South Orchard, Urbana. The Hort Field Lab is the home of the UI's collection on Greek Affairs and a special exhibit in honor of the walk will be on display. Volunteers to help with the tour are still needed; contact PACA (359-7222) if you are willing to help from either 1-3 or 3-5. A free tour ticket is your reward.

### ArchiTreasure Winners

PACA is pleased to announce the 1999 winners of this year's ArchiTreasures Contest, cosponsored by the *News-Gazette* and held last May during Historic Preservation Week. The winners are: Sally & Wally Duchow, St. Joseph; Kevin Pellum, Champaign; Pat Williams, Urbana; and Janet Coleman, Urbana. Congratulations to these eagle-eyed sleuths!

### New Conference Offered

The Illinois Historic Preservation Agency (IHPA) will offer a Conference on Illinois History on October 22 and 23. The sessions will be held in the hearing rooms at the State Capitol. Session topics include early Illinoisans, Catholicism in Chicago, the anti-Lincoln tradition, nineteenth-century land use and building construction, and Illinois educational issues. There will be panel discussions on the past thirty years of State House reporting, and the recent accomplishments of county historical organizations and Civil War Round Tables. For additional information, contact IHPA at 217-782-2118.

### Piatt County Barn Tour

The second U-Drive Barn Tour & Historic Sites, sponsored by the Piatt County Museum, will be held October 9-10 from 10-4 pm. Easy to read maps can be purchased for a fee of \$5.00 at the Main Museum at 315 W. Main Street, Monticello, where volunteers will assist with directions and information. Before leaving the Museum, visitors can view antique agricultural equipment and displays. The tour proceeds along a 25 mile historic route through three of the more scenic townships of the county. In addition to majestic barns, participants will cross old bridges, explore pioneer cemeteries, view several churches and an old schoolhouse, walk nature trails, enjoy a stagecoach ride, observe farm animals, and experience many interesting activities and sites. For information, call 762-4731.

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

Contributions are tax deductible to the extent allowed by law.

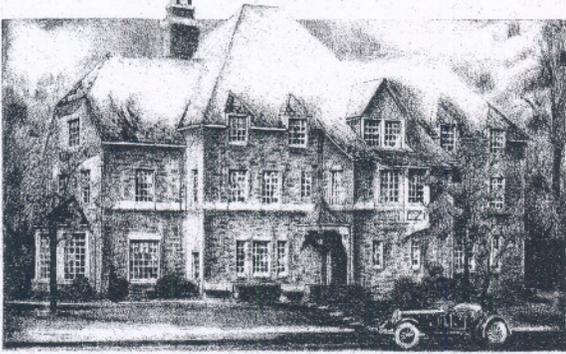
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*Remember to check your mailing label for your membership renewal date. The date shown indicates when you last renewed; membership runs for one year from that date.*

### PACA Newsletter

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