A Stroll through Historic West Urbana

PACA's fall house tour was held October 15 and, despite the overcast weather, was a success with over 500 tickets distributed and over $3,000 raised. Co-sponsored by the West Urbana Neighborhood Association (WUNA), the tour featured twelve houses and a church. WUNA and PACA would like to thank the chief organizers and "worker bees" of the tour: Ilona Matkovszki, Betsey Cronan, Karen Ross, and Kent Snodgrass. A special thanks goes to the owners, who graciously opened their houses, and the church, plus all our volunteers, who staffed the houses and made the tour safe. The histories of the buildings on the tour will be discussed in this and following newsletters.

Following his father's death in December, 1852, Samuel bought out part of his father's extensive land holdings along the north side of Main Street from his siblings, and gradually subdivided the area, formerly used as pasture, into city lots. Mr. Busey filed a plat for the north 500-block of Main Street, in which the Yearsley house is located, on October 17, 1891, as Col. S.T. Busey's Third Addition to the Town of Urbana. The addition consisted of two blocks: Block 2 was subdivided into four large lots along Main Street, while Block 1, to the north, consisted of seven small lots. Lot 1 of Block 2 on the NW corner of Main and McCullough streets was an extra large lot formerly occupied by Matthew W. Busey's pioneer home - a converted log cabin. Col. S.T. Busey replaced his father's home with a large new mansion, built for himself and his family, and sold off the adjacent three large lots.

Emmett Yearsley purchased Lot 3 of Block 2 on April 30, 1892, and his sister's husband, Frank M. Marriott, purchased the adjacent Lot 2 on the same day. The two men were prosperous farmers in Somer Township, and were planning to build new houses in which to retire from farming. It is said that Mr. Marriott paid $100 to Mr. Yearsley for the privilege of being able to build his home right next to Col. Samuel T. Busey's mansion, as he believed that it was a more prestigious location. Lot 4 of the same block, located on the NE corner of Main and Orchard streets, was sold on October 17, 1891, the day Col. Busey filed his plat for the area. The purchaser was Louis Wahl, prosperous saloon owner on Urbana's Main Street. Each of the new owners paid $1,000 for the prestige of owning a "Busey lot," and they all began construction on their new lots at the same time - in the spring of 1892. The May 4, 1892 issue of The Champaign County Gazette announced: "Frank Marriott and Emmett Yearsley purchased two lots of Col. S.T. Busey Saturday, and will build residences this spring." Two weeks later it was reported: "L.A. Wahl has began the erection of his new residence on Main Street."

The Yearsleys hired architect Martin W. Kaucher to design their new house. Kaucher was related to the Buseys - his daughter, Mary Katherine, was married to Col. S.T. Busey's nephew, James B. Busey. Originally, the Yearsley house had a square...
H. Yearsley died on March 12, 1954, just six months after her 90th birthday. After her husband’s death, Mrs. Yearsley sold their home and prior to her death she lived at 401 W. Michigan Avenue with her daughter, Mrs. Mary McGilligan.

Following the Yearsleys, their home was briefly occupied by the Cook and Brown families. Mrs. Yearsley sold the property to Walter R. and Louisa Cook on May 23, 1944. Mr. Cook was a 44-year-old mechanic at the Botany Annex of the University of Illinois. He remained in the house with his wife and two children for only one year. On June 21, 1945 the Cooks sold the property to Mark D. and Esther E. Brown. A native of Farmer City, Mr. Brown moved to Urbana in 1923, where he operated a real estate and insurance business for 41 years. As adults, his two sons, Mark S. and Lloyd joined him in the business. Mr. Brown was also active in civic life: in 1931-33 he served as chief of police, and he was later a member of the Urbana Plan Commission and Appeals Board. The Browns lived in the house for two years, selling it to Norris L. Brookens on April 1, 1947.

Dr. Norris L. Brookens was a 44-year old physician and surgeon when he moved to Urbana with his wife, Ruth Louise (Schurman) Brookens, in 1946. He was hired that year at Carle Clinic to fill a position in the Department of Internal Medicine. Dr. Brookens received his M.D. at the University of Chicago in 1939, and did post-graduate work in Heidelberg, Germany. He completed his internship at Yale University, and his residency at Cincinnati General Hospital. In addition to his job as physician, he was also appointed part-time lecturer on psychosomatic medicine in the Psychology Department of the University of Illinois. Mr. Brookens was an active participant in Urbana’s civic life, especially in the field of education. He served several years as chairman and director on various educational boards. Mr. Brookens died of a heart attack in 1969 at age 57. At the time of his death he was serving his fifth term on the Urbana District 116 Board of Education. In 1967, he was appointed chairman of the Board of Regents, governing body of Illinois State University and Northern Illinois University, he was director of the Illinois Association of School Boards for six years, was active in the formation of the Parkland College District, and was one of the leaders in the movement to completely desegregate all schools in Urbana. In 1970, the district named its new school on East 1891 plat of Col. S.T. Busey’s Third Addition to Urbana. The Yearsley House was built on Lot 3, 508 West Main Street.

Washington Street “Dr. Brookens Junior High School,” in honor of him. The school closed, and the building is now used as the Champaign County Brookens Administrative Center.

Mrs. Brookens was also a graduate of the University of Chicago (1936), and received an M.A. degree in English from the University of Illinois. An active participant in Urbana’s civic affairs, she was a member of the Urbana City Council between 1971-79, and Urbana City Clerk between 1979-93. In 1973 she was the second woman to run for mayor in Urbana (the first being Marie Wyld in 1969), but lost to Hyram Paley. The Brookens raised five girls and a boy in their Main Street home. They also did major construction on the house: they built a large kitchen addition in the back, and in 1954 they removed the front tower from the house, prompted by extensive damage from a leaky roof.

Following the Brookens, the house was occupied by Ruth Yearsley Satterfield, daughter of John C. and Jessie Mae Yearsley, and granddaughter of the original owners. She purchased the home on April 30, 1999, and lived in it until her death in 2004. After her death the house was purchased by the present owners, James E. Diffendorfer of the Illinois Natural History Survey and his wife, Amy King.

Physically, the house is in good condition, as are its neighbors, the Marriott and Wahl houses. All three houses are single-family residences, which will hopefully insure their survival for some time to come. Col. S.T. Busey’s mansion, which was once the most prominent property on the block, was demolished despite popular protests in 1964, to be replaced by the sprawling Landmark Apartments.
Busey Family
Mathew W. Busey was born in Shelby
County, Kentucky, the son of Samuel and
Cathrine (Seigler) Busey. As a child, his
parents moved to Washington Co., Indiana,
where he was raised, and trained as a brick
mason. In 1832 he came to Illinois, follow-
ing his uncles, Isaac, Mathew E., John, and
Charles Busey, who were all living in the
area by 1831 and had purchased large
tracts of land. Mathew Busey became one
of the most influential residents of Urbana
and Champaign County. He and his wife,
Sarah (Fibel) Busey had eight children, two
of whom, Samuel T. and Simeon H. Busey,
were the founders of Busey Bank in 1868.
After his death, his extensive hind holdings
were divided among his heirs. In 1867, the
heirs transferred title to much of the land
along the north side of Main to Samuel T.
Busey. In November, 1867, Samuel Busey
filed a plat for the 600-800 block, known as
Col. M.W. Busey's Heirs’ Addition to
Urbana, and in 1891 for the 500 block,
known as Col. S.T. Busey's 3rd Addition to
Urbana, and began the sale of the old
Busey estate as individual residential lots.

305 West High Street, Urbana
This stucco Craftsman/Arts & Crafts influ-
cenced house was built in 1911 by Chester
W. and Angie (Casey) Richards, on the site
of a late 1860s home built by carpenter
Lewis C. Higgins, and later occupied by
plasterer John and Eliza Leroy. The
Richards lived in the house until 1916. Mr.
Richards received his law degree from the
UI in 1906, and in the same year became
vice-president of the First National Bank of
Urbana, which was founded by his father,
Patrick Richards. He was Master-In-
Chancery of Champaign County from
1911-17, and Mayor of Urbana in 1917-19.
Between 1916-20 the property was owned
by Joseph S. Williamson, who used it as a
rental. Long-time Urbana jeweler and
watchmaker, Charles S. and May (Johnson)
Creek lived in the house with Charles' wid-
owed mother, Mrs. Mary Creek, between
1920-22. Insurance agent Erhart and Bertha
Latowsky purchased the house in 1922,
after moving to Urbana for the educational
opportunities it offered their children.
Their son Erwin Latowsky graduated from
the UI and Rutgers Graduate School in
banking and worked in the banking busi-
ness for 45 years, retiring as executive VP
of Champaign County Bank & Trust. He
and his wife, Margaret (nee Smith) lived in
the house with Erwin's parents. In 1954,
after his parents death, Erwin sold the
house to Prof. Phillip A. and Charlotte R.
Wadsworth, who lived here until 1964. The
Wadsworths sold the property of Clive
Follmer, Urbana attorney, who was instru-
mental in the development of Sunnycrest
Mall. In 1972, attorney Robert W. and
Diana Waaler became the owners. They
sold the property to the present owners,
Prof. John E. Cronan and his wife,
Elizabeth, ceramic artist.

This article is expanded from the tour brochure
research principally done by Ilona Matkovszki
with help from Brian Adams and Perry Morris.

New National Register Listings
PACA is pleased to announce that two
more local buildings have recently been
listed on the National Register of Historic
Places. They join two others that were list-
ed last year, plus a historic district. To date,
fifty-three Champaign County places have
been listed on the National Register. Two,
the UI Morrow Plots and the UI Astro-
nomical Observatory, have also received
the highest honor as National Historic
Landmarks. Four buildings have been
demolished since their listing.

The following are recent additions to the
National Register:

Alpha Phi Fraternity (Sorority) House
508 East Armory Ave., Champaign
November 15, 2005

The Georgian Apartment Building
1005 S. Sixth Street, Champaign
November 15, 2005

Chanute Field Historic District
Rantoul National Aviation Center, Rantoul
July 14, 2006

Illinois Traction Building
41 East University Ave., Champaign
September 20, 2006

Urbana-Lincoln Hotel/Lincoln Square Mall
300 South Broadway Ave., Urbana
September 8, 2006

In addition, the Champaign City Building
was recently listed as a local landmark. To
see the nominations for all Illinois National
Register listings, check out HAARGUS at
http://www.state.il.us/hpa/PS/haargis.htm

P.A.C.A. Membership Application

MEMBERSHIP CATEGORY
○ Adult $15
○ Student $10
○ Senior Citizen $10
○ Family $20
○ Corporate $75
○ Additional Contribution

TYPE
○ New
○ Renewal

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Contributions are tax deductible to the extent allowed by law.
Urban's 1964 Lincoln Square Mall was the second enclosed shopping mall in Illinois. It was designed by nationally renowned architect and planner, Victor Gruen to help revitalize downtown Urbana. The mall was wildly successful in its first decade before suburban malls gained prominence. Surprisingly intact after nearly fifty years of use, Lincoln Square Mall and the integrated 1923 Urbana-Lincoln Hotel were recently listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

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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.