



PRESERVATION MATTERS

PRESERVATION AND CONSERVATION ASSOCIATION

VOLUME 28

MARCH-APRIL, 2008

NUMBER 2

Focus On: Joseph W. Royer's and N.H. Cohen's Forgotten Urbana Post Office

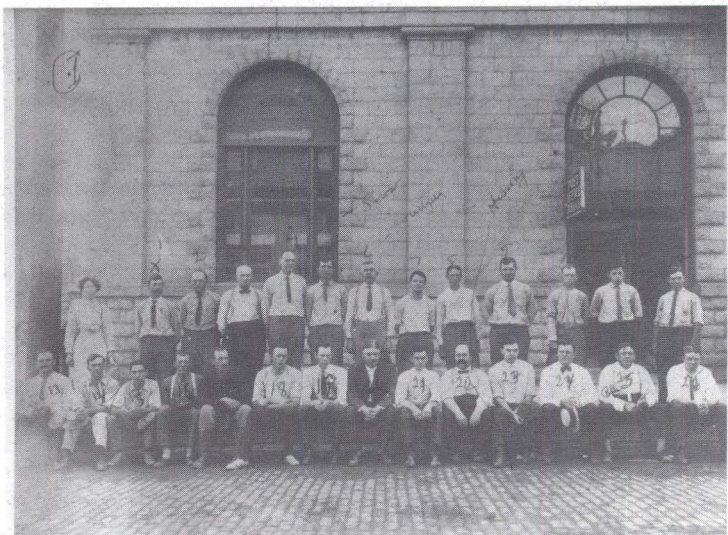
Prior to the construction of the post office building at West Elm and Broadway streets in 1914, the City of Urbana's post office was located at 106 North Race Street. This post office, which was designed by Joseph W. Royer, was built in 1906 and replaced an earlier post office located in the old (pre-1907) Cohen building at the corner of North Race and West Main streets. The 1906 Royer post office is especially significant as it likely represents the earliest concrete block structure designed by the architect. Stories published in the *Urbana Courier-Herald* and other local papers between April 1906 and March 1907 present a fascinating history of Urbana's "forgotten" post office.

The 1906 post office was built by "Colonel" N.H. Cohen on a lot he owned north of a building block that housed his cigar factory as well as an earlier post office. An article in the April 4, 1906 edition of the *Courier-Herald* suggests Cohen was negotiating for the site with post office officials in Chicago at this time, but a decision on a site had not yet been reached. By the end of April 1906, it was announced that Joseph W. Royer had completed plans for the new post office building (*Champaign Daily Gazette*, Wednesday, April 25, 1906):

The plans represent a building covering N.H. Cohen's entire lot at the rear of the present postoffice. The toilets and carrier rooms are to be in the concrete basement. On the first floor is to be the postoffice, postmaster's private office, clerk's workroom, carrier's work room and a large corridor for the public. It is expected the contract will be let within the next 10 days.

Preparation for construction began in late April when sheds on the lot were razed,

The staff of the Urbana Post Office poses in front of their new building constructed in 1906. It was designed by Joseph Royer. Photo courtesy of the Champaign County Historical Archives of the Urbana Free Library.



Urbana Post Office employees about 1914. See names on back of mount.

and excavations for the foundation began during the first week of May, 1906. About this same time, five bids had been received from contractors to construct Royer's building. It is interesting to note that in addition to the removal of sheds from the construction site, the old *Courier* building "...opposite the present home of the *Urbana Courier-Herald*..." was also razed (*Urbana Courier-Herald*, Tuesday, May 15, 1906). The location of the old *Courier* building is clearly depicted on the 1902 *Sanborn Fire Insurance Map*. Towards the end of May 1906, the old *Courier* building was down, and its bricks were being salvaged for use in the foundation of the new post office building.

Iron work began arriving at the post office construction site in mid-June 1906, and masonry work on the foundation was about ready to commence. However, it was reported at this time that apparently an error had been made in the dimensions of the foundation, and an additional four feet had to be excavated to the north of the existing excavation (*Urbana Courier-Herald*, Thursday, June 28, 1906). Disaster

soon struck when the north wall collapsed, "...a portion of the alley just north of the excavations giving way and sliding into the hole" (*Urbana Courier-Herald*, Friday, June 29, 1906). While no workers were injured, work was delayed in order to clean out the collapsed material as well as shut off and repair a broken water pipe.

By the first week of July, 1906, work had resumed on the post office and by the middle of the month, cement blocks were being hauled to the site in readiness for construction of the superstructure. The use of concrete blocks for the building generated some interest and controversy at the time, suggesting this was an uncommon or unfamiliar construction technique in the city. A brief article in the July 17, 1906 *Courier-Herald* reports the following:

Laying Concrete Blocks. The first concrete blocks for the new postoffice building were laid today and the building will now rise rapidly in the direction of the skies. These blocks are laid by the regular brick masons, it being directly in line of work for men of the trowel.

