

PRESERVATION MATTERS

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WHAT USED TO BE AT...

931 W. GREEN ST., URBANA

While browsing through an album of historic Urbana photographs published in 1916, I came across the picture that illustrates this article. "Residence of Mr. Frank Fay, West Green St. Urbana." read the caption. I was certain the house was no longer extant, but the photograph fascinated me for several reasons. It was an imposing house in the Greek Revival style, a rarity in Champaign-Urbana. It rested on a high brick basement, at least 4 feet high, judging by the boy and his bicycle at the foot of the broad front steps. The house had a deep portico with 4 fluted Ionic columns supporting a full cornice and a tall, but delicate pediment with a semi-circular fanlight. Only the fenestration was slightly off, the 3 windows improperly centered between the columns and the front door almost an afterthought. Extremely wide pilasters decorated the corners. The lot was deep and park like, filled with trees and shrubs. There was a large front lawn and side yard and in the far back corner what appeared to be another two story structure and a line of washing. It was a remarkably grand house and beautifully sited. But where had it been on Green Street and who was Mr. Frank Fay? Who had built the house and when?

A quick search of the Urbana City Directory for 1916 revealed that Frank Fay lived at 931 W. Green Street and that he was the President of the First National Bank of Urbana. A glance at the Sanborn Map of Urbana for 1915 clearly showed 931 on the SE corner of West Green and South Goodwin, the current site of the University Married Housing Complex. The house sat in splendid isolation on a large square lot, nearly a whole city block, save for a narrow strip of small houselots on the Illinois Street side and one long narrow lot to the east at 921 W.

Green. Working backwards and forwards through the Urbana directory, I discovered that the Fay family had first lived there in 1903 and continued in residence until 1928. During the Depression, the house fell on hard times. It had one or two tenants and in 1931, it was the site of The Paradise Miniature Golf Club. Frank Fay's widow, as executrix of his estate, petitioned the county court to permit her to demolish the house and sell the property stating in an affidavit dated Sept. 1927 "that it is an old rundown house, barely worth \$10,000 and not rentable." After numerous court delays the house was demolished in 1934. The University purchased the property in 1945.

Unfortunately, before 1900, the Urbana City Directory is arranged by name only and it isn't possible to search it by address. The Urbana Sanborn maps were of no help as none of the earlier maps extend that far west on Green St. Strictly speaking, 931 was outside the village limits. The house had certainly been built before 1903, when the Fay Family moved in. On stylistic reasons alone, it was not unreasonable to assume that the house had been built before the Civil War or soon after it, but who had been its first owner?

I next took a trip to the County Clerk's office to take a look at the original plat. I knew that this was Dr. William Miles Goodwin's addition to the Village of Urbana and that the addition covered the area bounded by the Street Railway on the North(today's Western Avenue),



Goodwin Ave. on the West, Dry St.(Illinois St.) on the South and a line that ran parallel to present day Gregory St. on the East. The plat had been registered in 1872, but several lots were occupied at the time. Dr. William Miles Goodwin was listed in Lothrop's Directory 1870-71, not as a physician, but as a nurseryman and it gave his residence as "on the west edge of the village and North of the Street Railway." So 931 West Green wasn't Dr. Goodwin's home, though he had seemed a likely candidate.

The plat however revealed a number of intriguing bits of information. Directly across the street was a lot owned by Thomas Leal, the director of public schools and next door to the east was the home of Judge J.O. Cunningham. In the years to come, many other prominent members of the University faculty lived in the neighborhood, including Andrew Sloan Draper. On the plat at 931, there was a single faded notation....."Gen'l Black." The only Black listed in Lothrop's was a Charles Black, a lawyer residing in Champaign City, which didn't seem to fit the bill at all.

I then started searching the abstract of title for the property working backward from Frank Fay. The Fays had bought the property from a Mrs. Jane Noble in 1903. She

had acquired the property in 1891 from Milton Goff for 5000 dollars. Mr. Goff had bought the house in 1887 from Jesse Burt.

Jesse and Alma Hall Burt were married in November of 1857 and were early settlers in Urbana. They owned considerable land in the Village and the County, including a sizeable farm that eventually became the site of Mount Hope Cemetery. In 1875, the Burts had given up the farm and moved to 931 W. Green. They had purchased the property for \$3500, a considerable price in 1876, which implied the existence of a house on the property, although no structures are specifically mentioned. The Burts had bought the property directly from General Black, but I still knew nothing about him. However, further reading of the abstracts revealed that General Black had received the property from Clark R. Griggs, who had bought it directly from Dr. Goodwin.

Clark R. Griggs is legendary in Urbana history, one time mayor, founder of the Gas and Electric Company, railroad man and hotelier, landowner and most importantly, the man that brought the University of Illinois to Urbana.

"Griggs was extremely influential in the decision to locate the Illinois Industrial University, which would later become the University of Illinois, in Champaign-Urbana. He started with \$40,000 appropriated by the Supervisors of Champaign and Urbana Townships and traveled throughout Illinois meeting with elected officials. In a period of five weeks, he had met with 40 Members of the Illinois House, 15 of which pledged their support. Griggs then met with the Governor, Lieutenant Governor, and the Chairmen of the state Democratic and Republican parties. For a period of 3 months after the General Assembly went into session in 1867 Griggs maintained a reception room and suite of parlors and bedrooms at the Leland Hotel in Springfield, where legislators and their constituents were entertained with drinks, light refreshments, or dinners of oyster or quail. Legislators were also supplied with cigars and theater tickets. Griggs further arranged for a special train to take legislators to Champaign-Urbana late in the session. He then ran for Speaker; and after a two day period of repeated voting, he agreed to drop out of the race in exchange for the Chairmanship of the Committee on Agriculture and Mechanic Arts, the committee that would hear all bills regarding the location of the university,

and the right to choose the committee's members. Griggs called the committee to order several times, while privately telling the members not to attend; and when asked why legislation regarding the location of the university was not being heard in the committee, Griggs replied that he had called the committee to order but had been unable to achieve a quorum. Legislation eventually reached the House floor naming Champaign as the site of the new university. Separate motions were made to amend the bill, the first substituting Jacksonville, the second Normal, and the third Lincoln. (Illinois State Normal University, which was nationally admired and would later become Illinois State University, had already been established in Normal 10 years prior--in 1857.) All three motions to amend failed, the measure was approved by the House and Senate; and Governor Richard James Oglesby signed the bill into law three days later." 1

Now here was a name to conjure with, but unfortunately Griggs had never lived at 931 W. Green. In 1870, he had just built a fine new house on the NE corner of Elm and McCullough. But attached to the abstract was a deed of gift, dated Apr. 27, 1870.

"Clark R. Griggs and his wife Lavonia grant to their daughter, Adelina, for love and consideration of one dollar, Lots 11 and 12 of William Goodwin's Addition to Urbana... save the use of the two year old apple trees growing on the south end until Nov. 15, 1870."

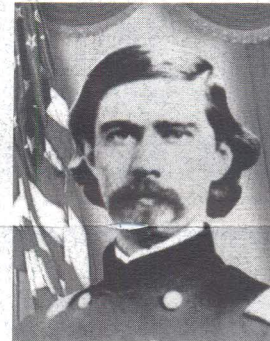
On April 28, 1870, Adelina Griggs married General John Charles Black.

"General John Charles Black was born January 27, 1839, at Lexington, Holmes County, Mississippi. His father was a minister of the Presbyterian Church. His family on both sides was of the best and he was born with the physical, mental and moral endowments which gave rich promise of the success which crowned his life. When Fort Sumter was fired upon April 13, 1861, brothers, John C. and William P. Black, were college boys attending Wabash College at Crawfordsville, Indiana. The next morning, on the 14th day of April, 1861, both enlisted as private soldiers in the 11th Indiana Volunteers. John C. Black was made Sergeant-Major of this regiment and with it he took part in the battle at Romney, West Virginia, on the 11th day of June, 1861, one of the very first engagements of the war and received

high commendation for his bravery and efficiency.

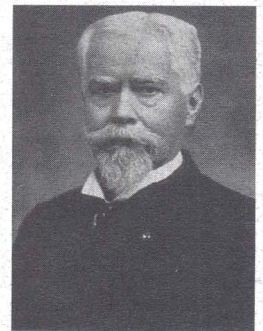
On the expiration of their three months' period of enlistment these brothers returned to their home in Danville Illinois, and together recruited Company "K" of the 37th Illinois Volunteer Infantry. John C. Black was elected Captain, and William P. Black First Lieutenant of this Company, but on the organization of the regiment John C. was elected Major and William P. was commissioned Captain of Company "K." Major Black was thereafter promoted successively for distinguished bravery on the battle field, Lieutenant-Colonel and Colonel, and, at the close of his military service, he was brevetted Brigadier-General of the United States Volunteers.

During the years of his army experience he served in all the states of the South except the two Carolinas and Georgia. His



regiment was at one time in the Army of the Potomac, but his principal service was in the Army of the Tennessee; however, for short periods he also served in the Army of the Southwest, and, at the

close of the war, in the Army of the Frontier, and the Army of Observation on the Mexican Border under the command of General Philip H. Sheridan. He took conspicuous part in many skirmishes, sieges, marches and battles, including Pea Ridge, Prairie Grove, Vicksburg, Mobile, and in Blakely's Batteries, the last battle of the War. He was severely wounded at the battle of Pea Ridge, March 7, 1862, and again at the Battle of Prairie Grove, December 7, 1862, as a result of which he became permanently disabled in both arms." 2



A second search of the local directories and newspapers revealed that John Charles Black was a lawyer practicing in Champaign City in partnership with William D.

Somers, beginning in April 1867. In Lothrop's Directory, he is listed as residing "South of the RR on the West edge of the Village." A subsequent search of the Champaign County Gazette for a wedding announcement yielded the first specific mention of the house at 931 W. Green...

"At an early date, General Black will commence the erection of a dwelling house located midway between the two cities and just South of Mr. T.R. Leal's. The General's well known love for the beautiful induces us to believe he will put up something handsome."

Champaign County Gazette, Wed. April 27, 1870.

Charles and Adelina Black only enjoyed their home for a few years. During the Grant Administration, General Black was appointed a Director of Pensions and the family moved to Washington, D.C., where they remained for many years. Black became Commissioner of Pensions and served in that office from 1885-89. He was candidate for the democratic nomination for Vice President in 1888 and Attorney General for the Northern District of Illinois in the 1890s. He died suddenly in Chicago in 1915 and his widow followed him soon after.

So the mystery was solved. The grand Greek Revival house that had graced the corner of Green and Goodwin had been built by a Civil War General for the daughter of the man who brought us the University of Illinois. It had been home to a prominent local landowner and a wealthy banker and had ended its days as a Clubhouse for putt-putt golf. It should have been saved.

Mark S. Chenail - July 6, 2008

PS. If any of our readers know more about the General Black house please contact us at pacaexdir@comcast.net We would be particularly interested in any other photos that might exist or memories of the house before it was torn down. A description of the interior would be particularly desirable.

1 - Hot Type: 150 Years of the Best Stories in the News-Gazette (Page 13)
2 - <http://suvcw.org/garcinc/jcblack.htm>

2008 Heritage Awards

Landmark Heritage Award:

Ford County Courthouse
Ford County Building Commission
200 West State Street
Paxton, IL 60957-1179
FWAI Architects, Inc.
English Brothers, general contractor

Residential Heritage Awards:

Dunnan-Hampton House
Ron & Charlotte Hampton
511 West Pells Street
Paxton, IL 60957

West-Capel House
Cathe Capel
1123 County Road 300 East
Sidney, IL
New Prairie Construction, contractors

Commercial Heritage Awards:

Carmon's Restaurant
Kerry Navarro
Mike Nelson
415 North Neil Street
Champaign, IL 61820

Jeff Mellander, building owner
Ratio Architects, Inc., architects
Jon Stevens, designer
Tim Stevens, contractor

Philo State Bank Building
Code4PC
Dan Ault
Jon Khachaturian
101 East Washington Street
Philo, IL 61864
Gary Hentges Construction

Seven Saints
Tiffany Moot, Carlos Nieto, Marco Neito
32 Chester Street
Champaign, IL 61820
Wells & Wells, contractor

Landscape Heritage Award:

McMillen/Ehler Prairie
West Champaign, off Duncan Road
McMillen/Ehler/Bruninga Family
c/o Jeffrey Bruninga
444 Tomahawk Street
Park Forest, IL 60466
Peter Schramm, prairie designer

Neighborhood Heritage Award:

James A. Faron
Faron Properties
Sesquicentennial Neighborhood
711 S. Randolph Street
Champaign, IL 61820

Historically Respectful Addition Award:

Kathryn H. Anthony
309 West Pennsylvania Avenue
Urbana, IL 61801
URBANWorks Ltd., architects
Tom Loew Design/Build, contractor
Doug Wax, supervisor

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Lindsay Hannagan-Berlatsky, kitchen designer

Traditional Construction Award:

Straw Bale House
Jill Mulder
Julie Birdwell
605 East Main Street
Urbana, IL 61801
New Prairie Construction

Place in History Award:

Rev. Steve Anderson
First United Methodist Church of Loda
200 South Locust Street
Loda, IL 60948

Stewardship Heritage Awards:

Illinois Traction Building
Paul Kane
41 East University Avenue
Champaign, IL 61820

606 West Ohio Street
Susan & Mark Frobish
Urbana, IL 61801

Adaptive Use Heritage Award:

Bohlen Ice House
Jan Erkert & Bernt Lewy
606 North Walnut Street
Champaign, IL 61820

Special Heritage Awards:

Urbana Daily Courier digitization project
History, Philosophy & Newspaper Library
University of Illinois
Mary Stuart, head
Nathan Yarasavage, research information specialist
Royer Arts District/Urbana 175th Anniversary Calendar
Illona Matkovszki
Dennis Roberts
Brian Adams
Urbana, IL

Wilmer Otto
Rehabilitation work
Arcola, IL & Sighisorara, Romania

Monticello Railway Museum
Donna McClure, president
Monticello, IL

Carol Knepp
PACA Board Member

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Marie Fiedler
Dan Niven

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P.O. Box 2575, Station A, Champaign, IL 61825

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Karen Lang Kummer, Exec. Director



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