

## PRESERVATION MATTERS

### PRESERVATION AND CONSERVATION ASSOCIATION

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#### WHAT USED TO BE AT...

712 N. NEIL...

#### THE ST. JAMES HOTEL

When the railroad came to Champaign on July 24, 1854, it soon created a need for hotel space to accommodate travelers. The IC built the Doane House at the head of Main St.. to act as a combination depot and hotel and it quickly became a center for civic activity. In that same year, John and Ellen Sullivan, an Irish couple, who had come to help create the railroad, began to acquire property on North Neil Street for a proposed hotel that eventually became the St. James. By 1858, the Sullivan's property occupied more than 200' of frontage on North Neil, just south of the east west spur line of the Havana and Cleveland RR and just north of the future right of way of the NY Central, extending east as far as Hickory St. The Sullivan's first hotel was a modest two story wood frame structure that faced north and sited well back from the Neil St. frontage. It was operated as "The Traveller's Home" and was advertised as a Farmer's Hotel. Many local farmers disliked staying in town because the down town hotels had no accommodation for their horses and buggies. Mr. Sullivan provided

an in-house livery and feed stable behind the hotel along Hickory Street. The Traveller's Home soon acquired a reputation for comfortable rooms and a fine table and business boomed.

In February, 1865, the Sullivans sold the hotel property to Patrick and Mary Coffey, who immediately began a huge expansion and refurbishment project. The Coffeys built most of the Neil St.



frontage that you see in the picture above, completely dwarfing the original hotel, which became a sort of annex at the back. The new hotel was renamed The St. James and its sumptuous dining room, comfortable lobby and magnificent saloon quickly made it a popular place for travelers and local citizens.

The St. James was an enormous wood framed structure with over 200' of frontage along Neil St. It was 2 full stories tall with a steep roof that provided plenty of extra

attic bedrooms. The hotel was remarkably plain on the outside with simple corner and door and window trim. There were several large plate glass windows at the front and 3 entrances sheltered by a long veranda. The first floor was divided into 3 large spaces. The room on the north end was the dining room/restaurant with a street entrance and access from the comfortable Lobby/Office in

the middle space. The South room was the location of Mr. Sullivan's fine saloon bar with its own entrance from the street and in a city already known for its fine drinking establishments, The St. James soon took first place.

By the 1870's, the Coffeys had renamed the hotel and the Champaign House became an even busier place with the arrival of the NY

Central RR east-west main line, which ran along the south side of the building to its new depot directly across Neil St.

"It (the Champaign House) soon became one of Champaign's premier hotels, convenient to the Big 4 and Wabash RR stations. It served the NY Central travelers much as the Doane House on Main St. did Illinois Central passengers."

The Coffeys remained the proprietors for nearly 25 years, residing in the hotel and raising a large

family. Patrick Coffey died in 1889 and in 1890, his widow sold the hotel to Wm. Heffernan, her son-in-law, married to the Coffeys' eldest daughter, Mary. According to court records, Heffernan bought the Champaign House at auction for \$2980. The Heffernan family already ran a hotel and large cigar business on Walnut St. in the building now occupied by the billiard room at the Esquire Lounge.

Once again the hotel was expand-



ed and refurbished. A large two story wing was added on the back of the main building, parallel to the NY Central right of way, furthering enclosing the back court. The first floor of the new wing was used as a billiard room and cigar shop, adjoining the hotel's popular saloon. The second floor and attic provided more hotel rooms. A new laundry building was built next to the stables at the back of the court yard. The Champaign Daily Gazette of June 11, 1891 waxed eloquent about "The New St. James."

*'Mr. Heffernan has at last completed his St. James hotel on North Neil street and now Champaign has got one of the best hotels in the state for the purpose for which it was built...The bedrooms are furnished for use and are beauties. In making his selections he got the furniture and carpet just alike for all rooms. They are carpeted with cheerful ingrain*

*and the bedroom suites are oak The furniture for the office and reading room when completed will be oak also, which will make an attractive show. He is more than pleased with his trade thus far and says that he did not expect to do more than pay expenses for the first year, but the prospects are that business will far exceed expectations.*

But by 1898, the New St. James had lost its cache and was closed for a short time. On Dec. 14, 1898, the Champaign County News announced the re-opening of the old hotel, now named The Tremont House, owned and operated by S.G. Simms of Covington, IN.

*'He has thoroughly cleaned and renovated the house from top to bottom, new furniture, bedding and carpets...'*

Mr. Simms also re-opened the popular saloon and billiard rooms. By the turn of the new century, the hotel was beginning to show its age and it no longer was seen as a first-class establishment. It changed hands several times and by 1903 it was being operated as the Arlington. Eventually it was purchased by Harry Wilson, a popular and well known bail bondsman in the Twin Cities. The Arlington/St. James became Wilson's favorite form of security and was used as collateral for probably millions of dollars of bail for the release of prisoners in jail until Wilson's death in 1949. In 1916, a chimney fire damaged the office and lobby and on October 2, 1917, a second fire caused by sparks from a bonfire nearly destroyed the building. The fire was extremely hard to fight because of the double roof and

numerous additions to the building, compounded by low water pressure due to malfunctions at the water works.

*'Firemen had only a 40 gallon tank of chemicals with which to battle the place, but somehow they put it out.'* Champaign News-Gazette article in 1951.

City Officials along with the Fire Department and Health District began at this time to take a particular interest in conditions at the St. James. The Fire Dept. considered the enormous wooden structure a dangerous firetrap. By 1923, the St. James was no longer operating as a legitimate hotel and had been divided into single rooms and many small cramped apartments. It's tenants were poor and the hotel acquired an unsavory reputation with the police, cited for illegal gambling and as "a disorderly house." It became the sort of place where "you best not let your Mama catch you going in or out" and neighborhood children were admonished to cross the street and never pass in front of the "Jim House" as it was now called. For the next 25 years, Harry Wilson ran the St. James, deferring all but essential maintenance and refusing entry to all local officials, who wanted to inspect the premises in hopes of getting the St. James condemned and demolished.



In one court appearance on February 15, 1939, reported by

the Urbana Courier, the presiding judge asked Wilson if the property had running water. The owner replied:

*'It sure does, judge. Lord, you should see it when it rains.'*

Harry Wilson and the "Jim House" continued to feud with officialdom until Wilson's death on Oct. 7, 1949. The City immediately began the process of condemnation, but the eviction of the tenants was delayed by post war housing shortages and rent controls until early in 1951. But before demolition could take place, the old St. James was once again front page news. An early morning fire on Feb. 20, 1951 began in a first floor apartment in the South wing and quickly spread to the 2nd floor and roof causing extensive damage to the rambling structure. Only two tenants were left in residence and all escaped without injury. Demolition began on July 17, 1951 by Cook, Collins and Morris of Danville and within a few days, the venerable St. James was only a memory, preserved in a few photographs taken in its final hours.

As the area was now zoned for commercial use, the land was purchased by the Eisner Company and became the site of a modern supermarket with a large paved

parking lot. Eventually, the Eisner Company went elsewhere and the building saw use by various tenants. Currently, it is being remodeled as the new location for Robert Grossman's antique business, The Estate Sale.

When it was first built, The St. James hotel was one of Champaign's premier hostelryes. One of the largest wooden buildings in the city, it was a popular establishment and an ornament to downtown.

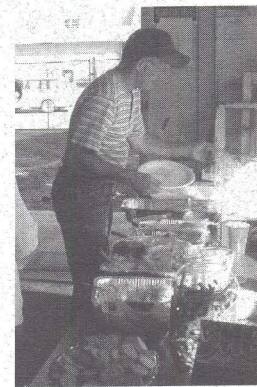
Unfortunately it became a tired, dilapidated ruin, an eyesore to Officialdom. But even in it's last days, there is no denying the sheer size and presence of the rambling old hotel that once dominated North Neil St. It should have been saved.

-Mark S. Chenail, 2008

#### Upcoming events:

Have you been to the PACA salvage warehouse lately? Would you like to? Well here's your chance! It is once again time to celebrate with the dedicated regular volunteers during our **Annual Volunteer Recognition Party**. Once a year we throw a little party at the warehouse to say thank you to a very special group of people who spend an enormous amount of time volunteering for every-

thing from salvaging items out of old buildings being torn down to staffing the warehouse two days a week. Bob Swisher and the gang are even still sorting and stacking bricks. (Only a couple hundred thousand to go so don't forget to help out with this very successful ongoing project if you have some time- call 359-7222 for details!) These volunteers are the life blood of PACA's salvage and fund-raising operations. Without them,



PACA would certainly not exist the way it does. So if you have been helping PACA in any way this year, come let us say thanks! And if you just

haven't had time this year to help out, come help us now to say thanks! There will be plenty of food and drinks to go around. So as the other famous Bob would say- Come on Down- and celebrate another year with PACA. Festivities begin around 4pm and go late on Sunday October 19th in our Salvage Warehouse at 44 E. Washington St. just north of downtown Champaign.

## P.A.C.A. MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION

### MEMBERSHIP CATEGORY

- Adult \$15
- Student \$10
- Senior Citizen \$10
- Family \$20
- Corporate \$75

Additional Contribution \_\_\_\_\_

MAKE CHECKS PAYABLE TO PACA

### TYPE

- New \_\_\_\_\_
- Renewal \_\_\_\_\_

### PACA

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217 359 7222

### INFORMATION:

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Contributions are tax deductible to the extent allowed by law.

The National Preservation Institute is hosting **Professional Seminars in Historic Preservation and Cultural Resource Management**. Seminars are offered throughout the United States and as customized, on-site training. Subjects include laws and regulations, Cultural and Natural Resource Management, Property management and Design Issues, Curation, Conservation and Stewardship. For questions and more information contact the NPI at 703-765-0100 or on-line at [WWW.npi.org](http://WWW.npi.org).

If you missed the statewide preservation conference in Chicago Sep. 18-20, you still have time to catch the **National Preservation Conference 2008** in Tulsa Oklahoma. Local preservationists might be interested in topics such as effective strategies for neighborhood action in the face of tear downs and inappropriate in-fill construction or how adaptive use of historic structures contributes to urban revitalization. October 21-25. For more information call 800-944-6847 or visit [WWW.nthpconference.org](http://WWW.nthpconference.org).

**Have you been thinking green?** You may have noticed our nation is finally starting to act a bit more environmentally conscious. However many obvious factors are often overlooked. For instance it is estimated that constructing a new 50,000 SqFt commercial building releases about the same amount of carbon as driving a car 2.8 Million miles. It takes about 65 years for this same new office building, if made green, to recover the energy lost in demolishing a similar existing building. In upcoming newsletters we will devote an entire issue to this topic. In the mean time, if you would like more information about this important topic as you watch many new high-rise buildings go up around town check out [WWW.PreservationNation.org/green](http://WWW.PreservationNation.org/green).

**New & Renewing Memberships**  
(received since the last newsletter)

**Charter Members (1981-1983)**  
Allen & Elaine Avner  
Lousette Zundema

**Fantastic Supporters (Over Twenty Year Members)**  
Elizabeth Rogers  
Michael & Bonnie Irwin  
Glenna M. Bartell

**Eleven to Twenty Year Members**  
Colleen Brodie  
Joe & Phyllis Williams  
Andrew B. White Family  
Solbert/Seyler Family  
Ronald & Charlotte Hampton  
Anthony Bamert Family  
Mark Netter  
Lianne Anderson  
Sarah & Robert Nemeth

**Five to Ten Year Members**  
Kevin Brumback & Davee Davis  
Doug Anderson  
Robert Selby  
Bill & Joan Price  
Linda L. Lorenz  
Randy Cox  
Susanne Massell  
Kathleen Zanotti  
Ann Lowry  
Christine Fucciolo  
Wes Jarrell & Leslie Cooperband  
Nanette Koerner  
John & Carol Leasure  
Elisabeth Jenicek  
Kate Hunter & Jens Sandberger

**One to Four Year Members**  
Vince & Wanda Hock  
Dannie Otto  
Karen Greenwalt & David Hamilton  
Maureen Reagan  
Russ Arnold  
Stephen Campbell & Heather Munson  
Meg Miner & Janis Sober  
Stacy Harwood  
Barbara Badger

**New Members**  
Kathryn Fitzgerald

**Preservation Matters: newsletter of the Preservation and Conservation Association**  
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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.

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