



# PRESERVATION MATTERS

## PRESERVATION AND CONSERVATION ASSOCIATION

VOLUME 28

SEPTEMBER-OCTOBER, 2008

NUMBER 5

### A Crown Jewel, Lost

In the grand tradition of Champaign-Urbana, a spectacular fire has once again robbed the city of what has been described as "the architectural jewel of downtown Champaign." The Bailey-Rugg building is gone, burned to the ground on the morning of November 7th, 2008.

Affectionately known as the Metropolitan Building, it stood on the southwest corner of Neil and Church streets since it was built in 1871. Home to numerous drugstores, countless small businesses, shops, and lodge halls, it was the site of the original Robeson's Department Store.

A massive red brick structure of three stories, it boasted elegant round-headed Italianate windows, limestone trim, soaring twenty-foot ceilings, and a magnificent bracketed entablature. It anchored its corner for generations, even after it lost its sister buildings on the other corners: the Swannell Block at 1 Main and the Kariher Block to the northwest.

The Metropolitan stood proud when Champaign's streets were still a sea of mud. It saw the coming of the trolley car and the gradual replacement of the horse and carriage by the automobile. It witnessed the demolition of the Walker Opera House at the other end of the block and the fantastic original offices of *The News-Gazette* across the street. It survived a scheme by owner C.F. Hamilton in 1917 to replace it with a twelve-story hotel building, capped by a luxurious glass winter garden with a retractable roof that would have towered over downtown Champaign. The plans were drawn, everything in place, the contracts let for its demolition, but long-time tenant Tucker Drugstore held out just long

enough. America entered WWI, steel production was diverted to the war effort,



*Photo from the PACA files*

and Hamilton's plan was put on the shelf, never to be revived.

In a well-known photo of WWII VE day, the Metropolitan stands proudly over the throngs of celebrating citizens, a city bus stranded in the jubilant crowd at the front door. The Metropolitan slowly began to show its age in the post war years, and by the 1970s the upper floors were empty and full of dust, a faded sign for a long



*Photo from Champaign County Historical Archives*

gone further the only indication they were ever occupied. The building saw downtown Champaign fade out, witnessed the ill-fated pedestrian mall on Neil Street, and the advent of the internet age. It even survived the Great Fire of 1987 that devas-

tated the north side of Main Street.

The building was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1997 by a descendent of Daniel Rugg, Robert Hamilton Tilden. Finally the Metropolitan found a savior, when it was purchased in 2006 by Jeff Melander, Bob Balisrud and George Grubb. They immediately began an extensive restoration-renovation project that would have thoroughly transformed the building. Its facade was cleaned and repointed, the massive entablature was repaired, with the missing elements replaced and repainted. All of the tall elegant round-headed windows were sent off to be painstakingly restored and those that were beyond help were faithfully reproduced and reinstalled. The two upper floors were gutted and twelve beautiful loft apartments were being built, each of them taking advantage of the soaring ceilings and magical light. An elevator was discretely installed and a new lobby created in a space that few had seen in thirty years: a thirty-foot cube of space that once linked Frank Robeson's Church Street store with his store in the Metropolitan.

The whole city watched the progress, eagerly awaiting its completion and comparing the Metropolitan's elegance to the newer modern buildings around it. The new buildings on the block towered over the Metropolitan in size, but failed to overshadow it in style. Jeff Mellander thought they were perhaps a month, at most two, away from completion of the loft apartments. The shop spaces on the first story were being completely rebuilt after the recent move of THE ESTATE SALE to its new location on North Neil Street. Everything was looking up for the Metropolitan and most of us felt confident that it would remain as the Crown Jewel of downtown.

