

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



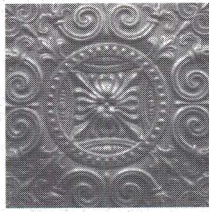
Photo from Champaign County Historical Archives

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.



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But the next issue noted that the Walker Brothers changed their mind.

Upon information last week furnished us by one of the proprietors of the new block on Neil Street, we stated that said row of buildings had been named the Metropolitan Block. The Walker Bros. request us to say that the name was announced without their consent or agreement and they will not permit their part of the row to "sail" under the new name. We are sorry that any misunderstanding exists among the gentlemen most interested, and trust, for the sake of convenience in conversation and writing that no confusion of names will grow out of it.

As late as 1878, the Masons listed their hall as being in the "Metropolitan." It is likely the tag "Metropolitan," being a creation of the newspaper, was used until street numbers came into use in the 1880s. Although the Bailey-Rugg Building and Walker Brothers Building were similar, including having the same entablature, there was some difference in the detailing around the windows. There was also no physical connection between the two buildings.

The third floor halls were popular places. An opera house occupied the south meeting hall of Bailey's half of the building when it opened in November, 1871. However, the use of the building for an opera house was short lived as by January 10, 1872 the Champaign Masonic Lodge was a tenant in the space under a five year lease. The northern half of the third floor, owned by Rugg, was rented (1871) by the Independent Order of Odd Fellows (I.O.O.F.). In 1884, the I.O.O.F. built their own headquarters building at 111 North Neil Street. This building was demolished in 1981 for a parking lot. In 1898,

the Masons moved to a building at 20-22 Main Street, to the west of the present-day Lincoln Building (1916). This building is also gone. In 1914 the Masons built their own lodge building at 202-204 West Hill Street, now the Jefferson Building. During the 1920s, the Champaign High School used these third floor rooms for indoor six-man team football games and basketball games.

On the first story of the building, Faulkner's Drug Store occupied their same corner position as before. To the south of Faulkner's was Rugg's Boot and Shoe Store. Faulkner Drugs moved out of the corner storefront in 1903 and S.C. Tucker moved his drug store into that location. Tucker had a large and handsome painted sign installed on the north elevation of the building for his drug store.

Sometime after 1878, F.K. Robeson's Dry Goods expanded into the south portion of the building. The dry goods firm also occupied storefronts in the Walker Brother's Building. In 1898, the firm took over Rugg's store space. F.K. Robeson's Dry Goods became Robeson's Department Store and as such erected a true department store building on the southeast corner of Church and Randolph streets beginning in 1915. For some time the firm continued its business in both locations--at the Walker Brothers and Bailey-Rugg buildings and at the new department store. However, by 1920 the store had consolidated in its own building.

In 1915 Charles Hamilton purchased the building from his father-in-law. A year later, Hamilton sold the building to the Hamilton Hotel Company, which took out a \$50,000 mortgage on the property in 1919 to remodel the building. Remodeling

included lowering the first-story ceilings and the placement of large steel beams above the storefronts to open them up, the replacement of the storefront facades, and the removal of the first floor dividing wall between 223 and 225 N. Neil.

Later occupants of the building were varied. After Robeson's moved out in 1920, Buehler's Meat Market occupied the storefront to the south of Tucker's Drug Store. By 1925, Sholem Fashion Boot shop opened in the storefront formerly occupied by Buehler's. The south store was Harvey's Ladies Ready-To-Wear Shop in the 1930s, Ralph Miller's Ladies Shop in the late 1940s, The Three Sisters Shop in the early 1950s, and later Lane's women's store. During the tenure of Lane's, the four windows on the second story were covered with a large metal facade. In the 1970s, a series of taverns opened in the building, while in the 1980s, the DSC Thrift Store occupied the building. Hilliard Lyons Investments was there in the 1990s..

In 1997, the great-grandson of Daniel Rugg, Robert Hamilton Tilden, had the building listed on the National Register of Historic Places after he had purchased the Bailey building in 1968 from the Bailey family. He sold both buildings in 2002 to the Fu Partnership, who installed their Soltec computer business on the first story. Jeff Mellander, Bob Balisrud and George Grubb then acquired the building and embarked on its restoration in 2006.

This article was condensed from the National Register for Historic Places nomination for which Michael Markstahler supplied much of the research.

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 _____

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INFORMATION:

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Contributions are tax deductible to the extent allowed by law.

PACA in Cyberspace

PACA has been lumbering away with a "temporary" web site for a long time. However, thanks to the mountain of work led by our website champion, Elisabeth Jenicek, a new and much improved PACA web site is up and running. Check it out at www.pacacc.org. Although the site went live at the beginning of November, there are still corrections to be made and more content, including photos, will be added in an on-going process.

A special thanks goes out to the enormously generous Precision Graphics for creating and hosting our site. Their staff was particularly helpful during every phase. PACA would also like to thank our previous web host, Shouting Ground, for all of their support over the past years. PACA is looking for member feedback on the new site. Please visit pacacc.org and let us know how we can improve the site.

A Special Thank You

PACA's Annual Membership and Volunteer Recognition Party was held in October. The Board of Directors wants to say Thanks to everyone who came out to help us celebrate our hard working volunteers. Their dedication truly makes PACA's mission possible.

We extend our thanks to our friends at Bombay Indian Grill, Chevy's Fresh Mex, and Garcia's Pizza-in-a-Pan for all the wonderful food served up again this year! A special thanks to David Spears at Radio Maria for the overwhelming selection of

outstanding pastries and dessert specially made for the event. Please remember these generous supporters of PACA when you have a craving for a night out!

Thanks also go out to our regular volunteers from the warehouse, Linda and Darrel Foste for their help setting up for the party and for their ongoing supply of special treats throughout the year, for which the warehouse staff never stops craving. In addition, all of the regular volunteers: Mike Miller, Bob and Betty Swisher, Suzanne Ashley-Wannemuehler, Brian Duffield, Jerry Schmidt, Al Friederich, Mark Chenail, and Dan Leasure, spent numerous hours cleaning and organizing the warehouse to make room for everyone. An extra double thanks goes to Becky Duffield for all her work taking care of many of the party details. A triple thank you goes to Dan Leasure, who once again organized

New & Renewing Memberships (received since the last newsletter)

Charter Members (1981-1983)
Mare & James Payne
Helen Levin

Fantastic Supporters
(Over Twenty Year Members)
Melanie & Chris Hill
Pat & Harold Jensen
Ruth Miller
Sandra & George Batzli

Eleven to Twenty Year Members
Jennifer Putman & Bruce Komadina
Monica J. Cox
Randy Kangas & Suzanne Bissonnette

Mr. & Mrs. Gerald Brighton
Rita Gentry
Kevin Fahey & Ann Bergeron
Urbana Community Development Dept.
Pius Weibel & Sue Feldman

Five to Ten Year Members

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Wendy & Chris Harris
Rosemary Kaye
Sue Waller
Bachman Family
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Fred Gleave
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Kay Vermillion-McCool
Michael Strange
Mark Bush
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Michael Lindeman & Alejandra Araya
Christopher Lubienski
Michael La Due
Leonard E. Wilson
Thelma Fite
Susan & Chris Harbourt
Barb Wysocki
Dorothy Baker
Beckee Bachman

New Members

Charles Goodall
Elizabeth Delacruz
Fred & Judy Heilich
Darren Taylor

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.

Preservation Matters: newsletter of the Preservation and Conservation Association

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4