



PRESERVATION MATTERS

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The Christmas Fire

December 22, 1904

It was unusually cold on the night of December 22, 1904, just three shopping days before Christmas. At a little after 9 p.m., the streets were deserted as young John McCullough, fourteen-year-old cash boy at The Robeson Department Store, hurried east along Main Street, heading for a warm supper at his family home on the east side of Champaign at 111 E. Church Street. McCullough walked rapidly past the Cunningham Bros. Store and crossed Walnut Street. Presses of the *Champaign News* were quiet at that time of night, but young McCullough would soon give them reason to spring to life. He continued along Main Street until he reached the double storefront at 33-35. In the past, it was the location of Louis Vitton Manspeaker's fancy grocery store, but on that cold night, it was the new home of the big Meis Brothers Dry Goods Co.

As I passed the Meis Store, I saw it was on fire. I yelled as hard as I could and two men heard me. They ran up and when they saw what was the matter, they went away to get the Fire Department. It was only a little while until the building was all on fire inside.

Champaign News, December 27, 1904

At that time, the fire station was at City Hall down at Walnut and University. The two men shouted FIRE as they ran down past the saloons and businesses that lined Walnut Street. Within a few minutes of the alarm, a sizeable crowd had formed and the fire company and its volunteers were racing to Main Street to fight the fire that was rapidly spreading. Soon they had four streams of water spraying on the Meis Building. The facade had already collapsed into the ruins and the water had little effect on the roaring furnace inside. All the available equipment was put to use, but to no avail and the fire continued

to grow and spread. By 10 p.m., the fire had spread west into Ben Mollet's drug store and east into the Hessel Building and the offices of American Express.



Images of America: Champaign, Raymond Bial, Chicago, IL: Arcadia Publishing, 2008
This photo is a group of sturdy workers pose in front of Hessel's Harness and Carriages, circa 1890s.

A call was made for assistance to Urbana and by 10:10 p.m., Chief Roughton and his equipment were on the scene. They quickly took position in the alley and rail yard north of the burning buildings, fighting a valiant battle to keep the flames from spreading into the piles of material in the Alexander Lumberyard that covered the block north to Washington Street. The Illinois Central Roundhouse took fire several times but was saved by the work of the railroad men and the Urbana Fire Company. All the locomotives were moved to a place of safety.

Meanwhile, many of the merchants and businessmen in the immediate area attempted to save their stock, fixtures and records. It was reported that a crowd of 8000 people watched the fire from the neighboring streets, scores of people coming from Urbana when it was reported

there that the greater part of the business district was aflame. The inter-urban even brought people from Danville as word had reached there before the last train left for the night. The crowd attracted the usual pickpockets and thieves. Goods thrown out of windows or carried out by Good Samaritans were never returned after the fire. One saloonkeeper on Main Street lost half his store of whiskey to the supposedly helpful crowd.

But the combined efforts of both Fire Departments were unequal to the task. By 10:20, all the buildings in the block were a mass of flames, with the exception of the two story block at the northeast corner of Main and Walnut, the first floor and basement occupied by the *Champaign News* and the second story by the offices of Drs. Heckman and Thompson and several private sleeping rooms. A massive firewall between the *News* and the three-story building to the east, occupied by the Akers and Wilson Furniture Company, prevented any loss to the printing offices. Firemen positioned themselves on the roof of the *News* and poured gallons of water into the windows of the Akers and Wilson Building. The interior and all the stock were a total loss, but the brick wall survived the fire. Both the *News* building and Akers and Wilson Building are still in place today.



Current photo of the Akers and Wilson and *Champaign News* buildings.

The fire also burned fiercely to the east from the Meis Bros., devouring the shops in the old continuous building facade. For the third time in its existence, Joseph Kuhn and Company was threatened by fire. Kuhn's was at 45-47 Main and had recently completed a renovation of the store facade. The old Star Store at 47 Main had been expanded west into 45 Main and the facades combined with elaborate plate glass show windows and leaded and beveled glass transoms. These fancy transoms can still be seen, displayed on the back wall of the current Kuhn's store. The firemen did their best work here, pouring gallons of water into the burning buildings to the west, occupied by Melahn, the barber, and the Tierney & Sons Cigar Factory, while paying equal attention to the Kuhn Building and the east end of the block beyond Market Street. It was here that the fire was stopped and the Kuhn Building suffered only smoke and water damage. Most of the stock was successfully moved out of danger.



Images of America: Champaign, Raymond Bial, Chicago, IL: Arcadia Publishing, 2008
This is the first Kuhn's building with the fancy early 20th century storefront. Employees are standing in front.

By 11:15, the fire had spent its force and it was clear that it was contained. Most of the central part of the block had been completely destroyed, the old mid-nineteenth century brick facade with its long corbelled brick cornice collapsed into Main Street and the rear walls into the alley and rail yard. The exterior walls of the Akers Building were intact, but the interior was a total loss. The *News* had managed to survive with minimal smoke and water damage. Fortunately no lives were lost and only minor injuries were inflicted on the combined fire departments, despite the extreme dangers they had faced.

Oddly enough, the Christmas fire of 1904 was not a huge loss, architecturally, to downtown Champaign. The *News* and Akers buildings dated from the 1870s and survives to the present, little altered except for the store fronts and the loss of an elaborate parapet and crest on the Akers Building. In 1904, the rest of the block, 33-43 Main Street, consisted of four separate buildings with a continuous repetitive facade. The whole two-story range had round arched Italianate windows with simple hood molds supported by floral corbels and decorative keystones. There was a plain deep cornice supported by brick corbelled brackets. Above the cornice was a parapet wall topped by a simple corbel arch. It was a remarkably plain and undistinguished building.



Images of America: Champaign, Raymond Bial, Chicago, IL: Arcadia Publishing, 2008

Company M of the Fourth Regiment, Illinois National Guard march past Kuhn's Department Store in 1898 (Spanish-American War). The long continuous facade of the Hessel Block is at the far left end, then Melahn, the barber. The Tierney & Sons Cigar Factory is the building with the white awning. Kuhn's is the building with the round sash in the attic story, fourth from the right.

The only notable interior was the double shop at 35-37, occupied by the Meis Bros. department store. Previously this space had been the spectacular premises of Louis Vitton Manspeaker, downtown Champaign's most prestigious grocers. Manspeaker's carried only the best in groceries, specializing in "fancy fruits and vegetables of all sorts." The store had occupied two floors and was lavishly decorated, including a large stained glass skylight.

The Meis brothers had come from Danville, where they were already an established business. Meis Bros. had refurbished the premises at 35-37, opening in March of 1903 and they were an

immediate success. They ran daily full-page newspaper advertisements, liberally illustrated, at great expense. The store attracted considerable attention and the older downtown merchants had to pull up their socks to compete with the younger, more modern Meis Bros. Store. The Meis store had done very well in its two year existence and the 1904 Christmas season had been extremely profitable.

The fire pretty much put them out of business in Champaign and they "regrouped" at the family store in Danville. In 1914, Milton Meis opened a store in downtown Urbana. In 1932, his sons, Herbert and Herschel, came to Champaign and went to work at Joseph Gould's Department Store in the old Eicheberg Building at 20-22 Main Street. This generation of Meis Bros. worked for Joseph Gould until they were managers in the 1940s. In 1949, Gould retired and sold out to the Meis brothers, who continued the business under their own name until 1951 when they finally closed for good.

After the fire in 1904, the burned out area was cleared and rebuilding began immediately. The old Meis Building was owned by Mrs. W. T. Sutton, with her daughter and Isaac Kuhn as equal partners. Within a year, the Kuhn Co. had bought out the Suttons' interest and plans were underway for a new, thoroughly modern four-story department store, steel framed and fireproof. The new Joseph Kuhn Co. set a new standard for downtown Champaign. Time, money and a great deal of care was put into the design and construction of the new flagship store and it was 1907 before it opened for business. Further down the block, the Hessel Land Co. rebuilt at 37-39 Main Street, a fine three-story building with Chicago-style windows. This building was recently renovated for Jupiter's. At 41 Main, the Eggleston Music Store and the Noonan Hotel took space behind a tall elegant classical facade with colossal Ionic pilasters and simple window moldings. The old Kuhn's Building at 43-45 was once again refaced in the classical style of its neighbors. The first floor was home to Metzler and Schaefer, another fancy grocery business, and the upper stories were an annex of the Noonan Hotel next door. Unfortunately, this building and the next two to the east were lost to urban renewal in the late 1960s.

The Great Christmas Fire of 1904 was one of a series of conflagrations that altered the fabric of downtown Champaign. It



Images of America: Champaign, Raymond Bial, Chicago, IL: Arcadia Publishing, 2008
 Photo taken by Charles Webster in 1952. A view of the block with the 1907 Kuhn's Store at far left, Hessel Block (now Jupiters), Eggleston & Noonan (now pawn broker). The Metzler Building (large arched windows) was the former site of Kuhns and is now a parking lot.

nearly took two of downtown's oldest structures, the *News* building at Main and Walnut streets and the Akers Building to the east. But when the flames had died and the ashes had cooled, the fire created an opportunity for one of downtown's prize buildings, the Joseph Kuhn and Son store of 1907 and the equally elegant Hessel and Eggleston blocks. It could have been worse.

This article was researched and written by Mark Chenail, architectural historian.

Kummer Receives Prestigious Driehaus Award

PACA Executive Director Karen Lang Kummer was selected for a prestigious Richard H. Driehaus Foundation Preservation Award for Leadership. Karen was recognized at

an award ceremony at the Chicago Club on October 17th. Landmarks Illinois was overwhelmed with submissions from around the state and recognized only nine awardees.

Here is an excerpt from the Landmarks Illinois website:

The Preservation and Conservation Association of Champaign County (PACA) was incorporated in 1981, spearheaded by the respected urban planner, Lachlan Blair. Ms. Kummer, who had recently completed a degree in architectural history with a certificate in historic preservation from the University of Virginia, was selected to serve as the association's first (and only) executive director. Under her leadership over the past two decades, PACA has orchestrated funding for community and University of Illinois architectural surveys. An annual awards and Heritage Grant programs have been established, along with numerous educational programs from architectural tours to hands-on restoration workshops. A 5,000-square-foot warehouse of salvaged

architectural elements is staffed by PACA volunteers who have assisted countless property owners with their restoration projects.

As Ms. Kummer plans for her upcoming retirement, this award recognizes her tireless support of the cause and her numerous achievements in educating the public and elected officials about the importance of historic preservation.

Heritage Award Nominations Needed

The Heritage Award Committee is seeking nominations for the 2009 Heritage Awards. Award categories include residential, commercial, institutional, landscape, and landmark projects. Special Heritage Awards are also given to individuals/groups who have worked to preserve a special aspect of our heritage or who have advanced the cause of historic preservation in our community. The nomination process is easy; a form is enclosed with this newsletter or can be picked up at the salvage warehouse. Self nominations are encouraged.



PACA Executive Director, Karen Kummer, accepts the Richard H. Driehaus Foundation Preservation Award for Leadership. Co-nominators are: Susan Appel, Alice Novak, and Carolyn Baxley.

Mumford House Endangered

A public meeting on the future of the Historic Mumford House is scheduled for Thursday, January 22, 2009 at 7:00 pm at the ACES Library, 1101 South Goodwin Avenue.

The University of Illinois has announced its intention to move the Mumford House from its original location to a site at the corner of Race and Windsor streets. An agricultural interpretive center is planned;

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however, funding for this center has not been documented and the outlook for restoration and operating funds for a "museum" in this economic climate are dim.

PACA holds that the Mumford House should remain on its original site as a testament to the agricultural history of this portion of the campus, now largely forgotten in the midst of modern campus buildings, and as a memorial to John Milton Gregory, the University's first Regent and designer/promoter of the building of the Farm House and surrounding Experimental Farm. Mumford House is the OLDEST extant building on campus, having been built in 1870 as a model "Farm House."



The Farm House has strong ties to two administrators who played key roles in the establishment of the University: John Gregory and Thomas Burrill. Regent Gregory was a strong advocate for the Experimental Farm, located on the South Quad. During the first decade of its existence, 1870-1880, the Farm, including its house, paid for itself, while providing agricultural and horticultural students with a place for research and experimentation. The Experimental Farm, (the only remnant of which are the Morrow Plots) was one of Gregory's early projects.

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During this time, the Farm House would have stood out prominently as one of the few buildings on an otherwise empty campus. The house was considered important enough to be included in the University's exhibit at the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia in 1876!

Thomas Burrill, the Farm House's first occupant, was Professor of botany, Dean of the Department of Natural Sciences, Vice-President of the University. Burrill was Acting Regent from 1891 to 1894. He was a member of Powell's first expedition to the Rocky mountains in 1867. He made careful studies of the diseases of plants and discovered that bacteria were a cause of many of the diseases. After Burrill's tenure, the house served as the residence for three Deans of the College of Agriculture from 1880 until 1938: George Morrow, Eugene Davenport, and Herbert Mumford. Thereafter, it housed various campus offices until becoming vacant in the mid-1990s.

The house is on the National Register of Historic Places for its historic role in the early development of the University, its association with Gregory and Burrill, and for its pattern-book architecture. It is also a Landmark Illinois Ten Most Endangered Place listing, due to the neglect that it has suffered at the hands of the University over the last two decades. Restoration of the house in its original central campus location would be less expensive than relocating it to the outer reaches of the campus and then under going a doubtful rehabilitation. Finding a viable use for the building in its current location will help the cause of stabilizing and restoring this important building in its proper, current setting. Please forward your suggestions to PACA prior to the upcoming meeting.



New & Renewing Memberships
(received since the last newsletter)

Charter Members (1981-1983)

Mark & Kirstin Repogle
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Fantastic Supporters

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Alice Berkson
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