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Two Hidden Gems

To the general public, the term "historic property" brings to mind a stately architectural confection or a grand mansion steeped in history. Glossy magazines devote pages of color photographs to the wonders of Mount Vernon or Monticello and local publications rhapsodize on the beauties of Silk Stocking Row on University Avenue or its counterpart on West Main Street in Urbana. Certainly those major works are worthy of attention, but of equal interest should be the simpler vernacular houses of the middle or working class. Many of these houses contain aspects of interest but because of their location, often on "the wrong side of the tracks," they are prime candidates for neglect or demolition. With this thought in mind, herewith are presented two gems from the north side of Champaign.

Boyle House

For years, people have been fascinated by a house at 408 East Church Street, Champaign; the house with the big yellow brackets. Compared to its neighbors, it is an enormous house, quite out of scale with its contemporaries. The main facade is a full two-story gable front that is three bays wide with a double-door entrance on the east. It has classic Italianate wide overhanging bracketed eaves and tall round arched windows with simple moldings on the first story. There are two lights in each original double-hung sash. Presently, transite shingles cover the house, but its walls appear to be extremely thick, as the first-story windows have paneled jambs. It is possible that the house is actually brick in construction. The second-story windows are nearly as tall as the first story, but have flat arches. In the gable's apex is a rectangular attic light. The main block of the house appears to contain three large rooms on each story and a generous side stair hall. A slightly lower wing at the rear probably contains the kitchen and service

rooms with bedrooms above. Unfortunately, a concrete block garage with a picture window at its back has been grafted to the northeast corner of the rear wing.

The house sits on an oversized lot devoid of trees, but it seems evident that at one time the property had more elaborate landscaping. An equally unfortunate concrete block front porch mars the front facade. Originally, it is likely that the front door was sheltered by a simple porch hood on brackets and was approached by a small stoop with three or four steps. The porch is definitely a later addition.



The Boyle House is located at 408 East Church Street in Champaign. Photo by Mark Chenail.

It was not possible to gain access to the interior, but the few details visible through the first-story windows are intriguing. Although the original double front doors have been replaced, their transom is intact. The transom reveals a fine ceiling medallion at the foot of the staircase. This magnificent walnut staircase, with an enormous carved newel post, curves along the right hand wall to gracefully meet a balconied upper hall. Also visible through a small window in the front door is a large and extremely ornate pier glass and hat rack, which seems to be a permanent fixture on the west wall of the hallway. There is also a small carved niche and bracket under the curve of the stairs. There is at least one fine Italianate-style mantle in the front parlor and another elaborate ceiling medallion. Interior doors are four paneled

with large transoms and wide elaborate molding. Large windows flood the house with light. Despite the concrete block alterations, the house is an excellent example of an Italianate side-hall plan house, which is very rare in Champaign-Urbana.

The original plat indicates that the McKinley family first owned the property, but no house is indicated. The earliest mention of a house is in *Johnson's Directory* for 1878-79. Patrick Boyle is listed as resident and he is employed as the night supervisor of the Illinois Central Railroad train yards. Further research in the earliest directory, *Lothrop's Directory* for 1870, indicates that the Boyle family was living on the northeast corner of Fourth and Church streets, but there is no house listed at 408. However, the house appears on the Bird's Eye Map of 1869. It seems likely that Patrick Boyle may have constructed the house around this time. The first Boyle house, now numbered 404 East Church, was occupied (1878) by relatives John and Frank Boyle. These two gentlemen were butchers in the firm of Dallenbach and Boyle and maintained a shop at 71 North Neil Street in downtown Champaign. This shop was in direct competition with the better-known firm of Dallenbach Brothers of 8 Main Street, Champaign's premier butcher shop.

In 1893, the house at 408 East Church was sold to John Brannon Achilles Collan and his new bride, Mary Clarke of Galveston, Texas. Mr. Collan was born in Champaign (1858) and received a public education. He learned the cigar maker's trade before he entered high school and became superintendent of the Sain and Epstein Cigar Factory. He quickly rose to social prominence joining Western Star Lodge #240 A.F. & A.M. (Masons) and winning election as Alderman for the First Ward. By 1890, Mr. Collan had bought out the cigar firm and was running his own cigar business at 41 Main Street. He was later elected to the County Board and was treasurer of the Twin City Building and Loan Co. Collan

