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Castles in the Air: Three Unbuilt Projects

In the course of researching the history of the built environment of Champaign-Urbana, I often find myself working page by page through faded newsprint or peering at microfilm in hopes of finding the pertinent facts about a particular building. With diligence, I usually succeed in finding the facts or at least a clue where to continue the search, but every now and then I find a treasure that is totally unrelated to the matter at hand. Often it's just a reference to a long gone building, previously unknown to me, or, if I am really lucky, a photograph or drawing that fills one of the holes in the streetscape. The best discoveries though are plans or schemes that, for one reason or another, remained unfulfilled and exist only on paper. In some cases, the buildings are obviously just "pie in the sky," but several of them have been intriguing and you can't help but wonder what if . . .

The New Hamilton

In 1917, C.F. Hamilton, the well-known Champaign businessman and hotelier was busy with his latest project. Hamilton had been a major mover in the development of downtown Champaign and in concert with others had helped build and finance any number of businesses in the area. At the time, his most ambitious project was the establishment of The Grand Hotel. Located at the southwest corner of University Avenue and Neil Street, the Grand occupied a large three-story structure with a bay window that overlooked the busy downtown corner, opposite City Hall.

But now C.F. Hamilton was about to begin a project that would outshine all his others, a project so magnificent that it would make him a household name not only in Champaign-Urbana, but throughout the state of Illinois. The plans had been drawn, the financing was in place, the necessary

permits and bids had been received and approved and Mr. Hamilton had finally secured the ideal property for his new building. It had taken months to secure the location, but Hamilton had persuaded the last holdout to move his long established business so that the site could be cleared and construction begun. The location was the southwest corner of Church and Neil streets, the venerable Metropolitan block, and the new building was to be a magnificent twelve-story bank/hotel. It would have towered over everything in the city and provided an awe-inspiring visual terminus when viewed from the east end of Main Street. Granted, taller buildings existed in Chicago, but nothing like it existed south of the Loop and certainly no other small city in the state would be able to boast of such a magnificent edifice.

The Champaign Gazette published an elaborate description on April 24, 1917:

The new hotel will have 150 rooms, all with bath, and will cost approximately a quarter of a million dollars, building and grounds. It will be completed within ten months. . . . The new building is to be of reinforced concrete, fireproof throughout and thoroughly modern.

The Neil St frontage on the street was to be the home of a new Savings and Loan company that was being organized under Mr. Hamilton's auspices. The hotel office and lobby would be at the rear of the building with a main entrance off West Church St. The lobby dimensions of both the hotel and bank would be nearly equal in size, 33 by 54 feet for the hotel and 33 by 48 feet for the bank. Both would have 24 foot ceilings, which would permit a mezzanine balcony. The front of the third floor would be devoted to parlor and reception rooms suitable for all social occasions and the extreme rear of the floor would provide several parlor/bedroom suites. From the fourth to the twelfth floor, each

floor would be identical. A large hallway would run through the building with large rooms on either side, all with outside exposure. There were to be no windowless interior rooms in the building. A double passenger elevator would run from the basement to the top of the building. On the twelfth floor of the hotel was to be a magnificent roof garden that would be in operation year round as it would be enclosed completely by a moveable glass roof in winter. The hotel was also to be run on the European plan, with no café or restaurant and it would provide a free bus that would meet all trains for the convenience of the guests.

Unfortunately, no drawings or plans for this building have been found and despite a lengthy search of the local papers for the subsequent months, no other mention of the "New Hamilton" can be found. Obviously, the project never got off the ground, despite Mr. Hamilton's detailed arrangements. Until last year's devastating fire, the old Metropolitan block was still with us and we can only assume that some other circumstance put an end to the project. A possible reason may be the entry of the United States into WWI later in 1917 and the diversion of all steel production to war needs. A similar fate met the new Robeson Building just down the street. It's half finished steel frame languished until well after the war's end when construction resumed. By the time steel was available, C.F. Hamilton was involved in other business and his magnificent hotel exists only as a description in the newspaper.

The Melton Building

After WWI, the campus town area was experiencing a building boom of sorts. The University was expanding and along the old fraternity row on East Green Street, many of the old frame houses were being replaced by commercial structures. Fraternities were moving south to be near "Fraternity Park" (Washington Park) and they were building elaborate new houses

