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Joseph W. Royer's First Christian Church at Urbana

By Brian Adams

The First Christian Church at 402 West Main Street, Urbana, was the second concrete block structure designed by the renowned Urbana architect Joseph W. Royer. The new church was built in 1910–1911 to replace the congregation's aging wood church building on West Main.

Siting and acquisition

The original First Christian Church was located at 401 West Main, across the street from where the new building was eventually erected. The congregation had first planned to raze the old structure and rebuild at the same location. But soon it was decided to consider property located directly across Main to the south (*Urbana Daily Courier*, 17 March 1909). This property was owned by Captain John H. Benford, a Civil War veteran. Benford, born in Summerset, Pennsylvania, on 1 February 1834, served with Company B, 54th Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry Regiment during the war. Shortly after the end of the war, in 1867, Benford moved to Urbana (*Urbana Daily Courier*, 17 March 1909, p 1; 19 September 1923, p 1). In 1869, he built a house at 308 West Elm Street, which was later occupied by his son Stanley and wife.

Benford initially offered his Main Street property to the First Christian Church building committee for \$5,500. At first, the committee reject-



Joseph Royer's "Mission Prairie" gem: the First Christian Church of Urbana. The early 20th century building shows off an aesthetically pleasing "modern" style and uses high-quality materials such as simulated marble and copper details.

ed his offer and instead considered building immediately to the east, on the Halberstadt property at the corner of Main Street and Central Avenue. By May 1909, however, Benford had reduced the price of his property, and in June of 1909, the First Christian Church building committee purchased it for \$5,000 (*Urbana Daily Courier*, 15 May 1909; 4 June 1909). Benford's house was to be relocated immediately to the west of the church construction site and used as a parsonage (*Urbana Daily Courier*, 8 June 1909). Benford vacated his residence, and moved to an apartment in the Courier building with son Harry and wife (*Urbana Daily Courier*, 19 June 1909, p 9; 18 June 1909, p 13).

Project architect selected

In March 1909, Royer was chosen by a special church committee to design the new building, which was to replace the original frame structure erected in 1889 (*Urbana Daily Courier*, Wednesday, 3 March 1909, p 1). In April 1909, it was announced that the new church would be made of concrete block faced with white marble (*Urbana Daily Courier*, Friday, 3 April 1909, p 5). The *Urbana Daily Courier* (11 December 1909, p 13) reported that

Lincoln Harrison is framing a large picture of the new Christian church,

Continued on next page

done in water colors by J.W. Royer. The drawing will be used for illustration in the sale of cement blocks at fifteen cents each for the benefit of the church fund.

blocks using a contraption it called the Somers Pressure Block Machine. This device produced a "Stonekote" Portland cement block that convincingly simulated a marble surface through the addition of marble dust to white cement under high pressure (*Urbana Daily Courier*, 28 April 1910). A Granitoid advertisement dated 1910 (below) boasts about the labor-efficiency of block fabrication using the Somers machine, and includes a photograph of Royer's church under construction (*Urbana Daily Courier*,

February 1910). They even plastered a mini-advertisement near the center of the church picture!

Construction begins

By the end of June 1909, excavation of the basement for the proposed parsonage had commenced, and the former Benford residence was ready to be moved (*Urbana Daily Courier*, 29 June 1909, p 13). By the end of July 1909, the old Benford house was being moved (*Urbana Daily Courier*, 28 July 1909, p 9).

The cornerstone of the new church was laid on 13 November 1909, and the church was dedicated on 5 June 1910. The original plan for the church differs greatly from the finished building. Most notable is a tall tower on the southeast corner of an early rendering of the building. In the final plan, the basement housed a gymnasium, dining room, kitchen, toilet and cloak room. A Sunday School room was located at the northeast corner. The final cost of the church was \$25,000. Years later, in 1924, a \$4,575 pipe organ was installed and dedicated (Olin 1981).

Style and aesthetics

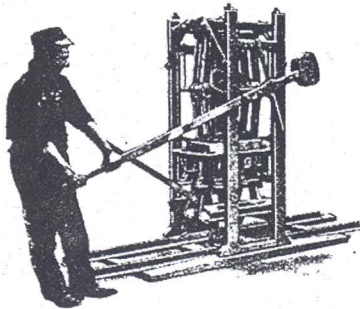
The architectural style of Royer's church defies precise classification. One expert says it is most similar to the Prairie Style of Frank Lloyd Wright (Alice Novak, personal communication), but it is clearly not a pure example of that style. Olin (1981) contends the building displays elements typical of the Mission Style, such as the squat tower and plain walls. She suggested the term "Mission Prairie" to describe the church. Regardless of its formal style, though, the church building was favorably received by the community on the eve of its dedication. The *Courier Herald* (4 June 1910) wrote:

The new church is one of the most inspiring structures in this city ... The exterior is of marble faced concrete blocks, giving the building the appearance of being constructed of genuine marble. In order to appreciate the beauty and elegance of the

The blocks, a conspicuous aesthetic feature of the modern new building, were to be fabricated by the Granitoid Stone Company of Urbana, A.D. Starkey and F.A. Somers, proprietors. The company had developed a method of producing attractive, durable, and water-resistant hollow concrete

Somers Pressure Block Machine

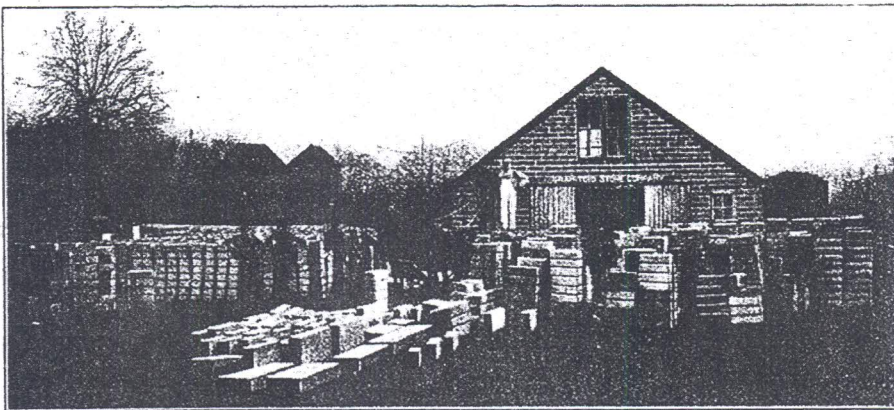
SOMERS BROTHERS
Manufacturers
URBANA, ILLINOIS



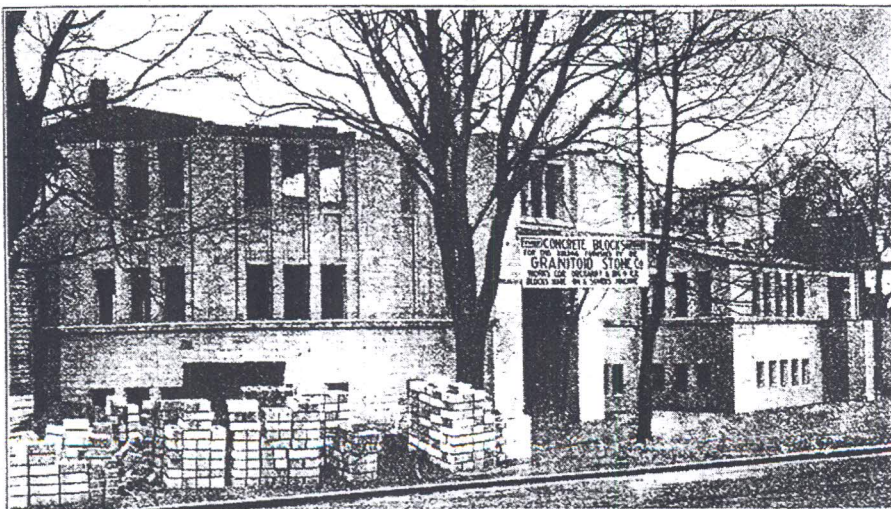
2 Blocks per Minute
2 Men

The machine does
the work not
the man

By the remarkable combination of levers one man can apply thirty tons pressure with ease, creating a dense, compact block



Works of the... **GRANITOID STONE COMPANY** A. D. STARKEY and F. A. SOMERS
Concrete Work of Any Kind Proprietors
Cor. Orchard St. and Big Four R. R.



church ... one must inspect the interior. The building has an architectural style of its own. The auditorium is oblong in shape and is approached from the south entrance. The parlor is on the west and separated from the auditorium by sliding doors which disappear under the floor. The choir and organ loft is directly back of the pulpit and below, in order to afford a background for the baptistery during baptismal rites, is a scene of the river Jordan. This painting is upon the trap-door covering to the baptistery, so that only when the latter is open the scene is shown.



Urbana's wood-frame First Christian Church, replaced in 1910 by Royer's Stonekote edifice.

As indicated in this *Courier Herald* quote, the illusion of marble construction was quite convincing. However, it was later reported that the exterior blocks were in fact Granitoid's Stonekote marble imitation material (*Urbana Daily Courier*, 18 September 1909, p 1). Royer's choice of exterior building material for this project clearly demonstrates his appreciation for cutting-edge technology that could provide stately looking building materials at an affordable cost for his clients.

Home to many congregations

Over the years, Royer's church building has hosted a succession of

congregations (Olin 1981). By 1932, the Christian and Congregational denominations joined to become the First Congregational Church of Urbana. Between 1957 and 1968 the church was known as the First United Church of Christ, the result of the merger of the Congregational Christian Denomination and the Evangelical and Reformed Church. In 1968, a merger with two other churches created the Community United Church of Christ. In October 1971, the Board of Trustees of the First United Church of Christ sold the building to the Community United Church. With this sale, all records of church history were moved to a new building at 6th and Daniels Street on the University of Illinois campus. Unfortunately, archival records there only go back to the 1920s. On 11 November 1977, Canaan Baptist

Church, the current owners received the building from the Good Shepherd Apostolic House of Prayer. Canaan Baptist Church currently occupies the church building and has flourished in the community.

Latter-day maintenance and repair

In 1966, the architectural firm Lanz & Edwards was consulted on possible expansion of the church (Olin 1981). Despite concluding that the building was structurally sound and suitable for expansion, the firm argued for construction of a new building. Fortunately, the pitch fell on deaf ears. As of the early 1980s, the church was in generally good condition, but needed some maintenance and repair. The most serious problems were spalling and cracking of the concrete blocks and the need for tuckpointing. Substitution of limestone blocks for deteriorated Stonekote blocks was suggested because the original materials were no longer available. Also, ornamental pilaster caps were crumbling (Olin 1981). Today, the church exterior remains essentially unchanged from the original, except for some original copper gutters that have been replaced with steel or aluminum, and the building has been painted beige and brown.

Additional reference: Olin, Ruth. 1981. *The First Christian Church Building*. Urbana, IL: Champaign County Historical Archives.

MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION



Box 2575, STATION A CHAMPAIGN, IL 61825

MEMBERSHIP STATUS

- New
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MEMBERSHIP CATEGORY

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- Family \$20
- Corporate \$75

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Note: Please make your check payable to PACA. Your contribution is tax-deductible to the extent allowed by law.

"Munificent" Harris Mansion, history-rich Champaign landmark, slated for demolition by owner

By Gordon Cohen

The coming, inevitable demolition of the historic Harris mansion, 809 W. Church St., Champaign, provides the community a sad object lesson on how to unintentionally doom a prominent example of historic architecture.

The mansion was built in 1904 for B.F. Harris II, son of Benjamin F. "Frank" Harris, a successful mid-1800s cattle drover who in 1842 settled on a farm in Champaign County. The Harrises were a first-generation Champaign family who founded the Cattle Bank, the First National Bank, and other early enterprises. The house was once hailed by the *Urbana Courier* as "the city's most munificent residence."

In local legend, the mansion was once renowned for an armed holdup by five masked bandits that occurred about a week after the 1929 stock market crash. The robbers reportedly crashed a Prohibition-era party of the

area's social elite and made off with \$50,000 in a blaze of gunfire.

In 1947 the long-vacant mansion was purchased by David and Faye Cole and converted into a 61-bed Convalescent Hospital, as it was briefly named. The Coles' thoughtful adaptive reuse preserved the mansion structure, but ultimately doomed it. First, certain necessary technical modifications of the interior were inherently "historically insensitive." Second, the landlocked location of Cole Hospital—confined to lots bounded by Church, Prospect, and Park streets to the north, west and south, and private property to the east—left little room for expansion into new medical services the market demanded in the 1970s. Starting in 1972, a succession of new corporate owners found themselves trying to reconcile conflicts between expansion plans, lack of land, and new building codes that made the Harris mansion obsolete as a medical-surgical hospital.

These problems were ultimately addressed by the construction of modern, but architecturally irrelevant, hospital facilities on the cramped grounds of the former Harris estate.

The current property owner, The Pavilion rehabilitation center, now intends to complete redevelopment of its facility by demolishing the mansion and its coach house, and building a modern addition to accommodate more beds. Because it is not designated as a historic landmark, nothing can be done at the local level to prevent demolition of the Harris mansion.



Editor's note: sources for this article were a 29 October 2010 memorandum from the city planning director to the Champaign Historic Preservation Commission; a web page authored by Ed Link at <http://www.illinoisattle-drives.com/bfharris.php>; and the author's capstone project for a master's degree, University of Illinois, 1987.

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