

# RESERVATION MATTERS

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PRESERVATION AND CONSERVATION ASSOCIATION

## LEAVITT MANUFACTURING COMPANY BUILDING 208 WEST GRIGGS STREET, URBANA, ILLINOIS

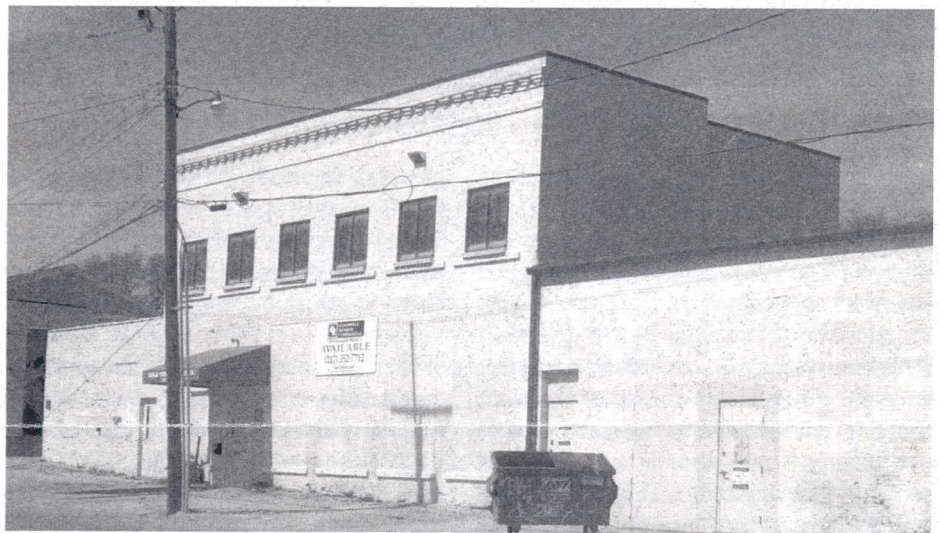
by Brian Adams

You've probably seen them all over Urbana-Champaign: cistern covers, coal chutes, sewer grates, etc. bearing the names of either "T. Wright and Son, Urbana, ILL." or "Leavitt Mfg. Co., Urbana, ILL.," but who were these people and where did they manufacture these durable metal objects still in use today?

The Abram Snedeker/Thomas Wright "Enterprise Foundry"/Leavitt Manufacturing Company Building, 208 West Griggs Street, is located immediately west of the Boneyard Creek beautification project at Race and Griggs streets, and represents a unique historic landmark of local and historic value to the Boneyard Creek improvement project.

Abram Snedeker established the foundry in 1872, a significant time in the socio-economic development of Urbana and Champaign County. In the early 20th century, the foundry was remodeled by Urbana architect Joseph William Royer for businessman H.W. Leavitt of Tuscola, Illinois. Leavitt turned the modest Urbana foundry into a worldwide operation. Today the old foundry complex originally established by Abram Snedeker in 1872 still exists. Situated north of the intersection of Wood and Griggs streets, the building is now an amalgamation of industrial structures consisting of approximately 18,000 square feet, with updated windows and doors reflecting the constant expansion of a thriving business.

The former foundry is located immediately west of the intersection of North Race and Griggs streets at 208 West Griggs Street. The current complex of structures rests



The former Snedeker-Wright "Enterprise Foundry"/ Leavitt Manufacturing Company Building today.

on a slab foundation and consists of three sections that occupy an area approximately 100 feet north-to-south by 200 feet east-to-west. It is bounded by Boneyard Creek to the east, railroad tracks to the north, Griggs Street to the south and an apartment complex to the west. The first section is a 2-story brick structure, the former machine/pattern shop located in the southwest portion of the foundry complex. Close examination of this section reveals details of brick window frames and modest triangular brick corbels along the roofline dating to the period of Joseph William Royer's remodel of 1903. The second section of the foundry consists of the western section of the complex. This section consists of a concrete block wall on the north, brick and concrete walls on the west, and a brick wall on the south. This section is 1-story high with a flat roof that slopes downward towards the north. The third section consists of the east portion of the

of the complex. It consists of a flat-roofed, 1.5-story area with concrete block walls on the north and east, and concrete block and brick walls on the south. The concrete block portion at the east end of this section dates to 1992.

To date, no image of the original foundry built by Abram Snedeker has been located. The earliest known image of the foundry is from the 1887 Sanborn Fire Insurance map, published approximately 15 years after Snedeker established the business, and five years after he sold it to Thomas Wright. Inspection of Sanborn Fire Insurance maps between 1887 and 1945 indicates how the Wright/Leavitt complex evolved over time. The 1887 map indicates the Wright foundry 1 consisted of three clusters of buildings. On the west, the shop consisted of three structures consisting of a pattern shop, shed, and iron storage. East of this was the main structure of the

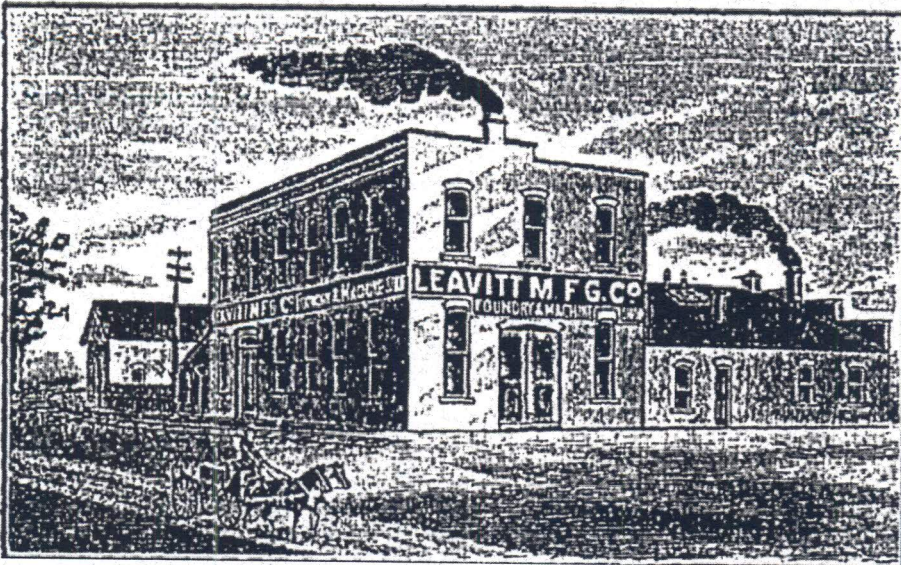


Image of the Leavitt Mfg. Co. building from the Urbana Daily Courier (1904)

shop, consisting of the foundry, machine shop, rattler room, and coal shed. East of this was a small iron storage structure. The 1892 and 1897 maps indicate the plant was essentially the same as the 1887 plan, with the exception of an expansion of the main structure to the east to facilitate an electric light plant. The 1902 map of the plant indicates the facility had been abandoned at this time. This is shortly before Wright sold the foundry to Dr. H.W. Leavitt. As stated above, Wright was still listed as an "iron moulder" in 1900, suggesting he still operated the foundry at this time. The foundry may have temporarily ceased operations during the sale to Leavitt. The 1902 map does not depict the electric light plant at the southeast corner of the main structure, suggesting this area had been removed. The 1909 Sanborn Map depicts the plant following Royer's remodel of 1903. By this time, the three disparate parts of the plant had been joined into a single complex. What had been the pattern shop and electric light plant was now the machine shop, and a large storage area had encompassed the small storage building on the east side of the facility. The foundry proper has an earth floor, as does a small room on the southwest side of the complex. The complex is essentially the same on the 1915 map. By 1945, the complex is designated the "Leavitt Corp'n Mfrs-BLEACHERS & TRACK EQUIPMENT." The former foundry space in the center of the complex was now used for printing, while the former machine shop/pattern shop, also in the center of the complex, now housed

printing facilities on the first floor and woodworking space on the second floor. The eastern edge of the complex was used for lumber storage by this time, and an area at the northwest corner of the complex is depicted as a lumber storage area with earth floor. In 1904 a view of the south and east facades of the foundry was published in the Urbana Daily Courier. This drawing depicts the 2-story brick machine/pattern shop with the 1-story foundry extending to the north. The structure at the far west end of the complex is likely the coke shed indicated on the Sanborn Fire Insurance maps. While the foundry complex has undergone numerous improvements and modifications over the years, the 2-story brick machine/pattern shop dating to the period of Joseph William Royer's remodel of 1903 is still recognizable as such, despite modifications to the windows and doors.

### Property History

The old foundry building is located immediately west of the intersection of North Race and Griggs streets. During the 19th century, this area was primarily occupied by commercial and industrial buildings, especially following the construction of the Danville-Urbana-Bloomington-Pekin Railroad (D.U.B. & P.R.R.), the first railroad to pass through Urbana, chartered in 1867 and completed in 1869. This railroad was the result of efforts by Clark Robinson Griggs, who also secured the Illinois Industrial University/University of Illinois for Urbana in 1867. In addition to

the foundry, this area included over the years the following businesses: the Urbana Cement Block Manufacturing Company; the S.E. Huff & Company Lumber Yard & Planing Mill; the Urbana Harness Company; the Cleveland, Cincinnati Chicago & St. Louis Railroad Round House and Car Shops; various coal sheds and machine shops; and further north, the Sheldon Brick Company.

The surviving complex of the former foundry was known over the years by various names (the Abram Snedeker/Thomas Wright "Enterprise Foundry"/Leavitt Manufacturing Company 2 Building). Abram Snedeker established the Enterprise Foundry in 1872. In May of 1872, the *Champaign County Gazette* (22 May 1872:1) published the following:

*Mr. A. Snediker (sic), of Pekin, Illinois, has commenced the erection of an iron foundry in Urbana, which promises to be an institution of much importance to the city. The building is to be 45x90 on the ground, one-half of which is to be two stories high and the residue one story high. The excavation is completed and the foundation is being put in, promising an early completion of the building and the commencement of work. Already the engine and much of the operating implements are on the ground.*

By July of 1872, the business was up and running:

*The Urbana Foundry was put in operation and the first heat taken off last month (Champaign County Gazette, July 24, 1872, p. 1).*

The 1878-79 City Directory for Champaign and Urbana identifies Abram Snedeker as proprietor of the Enterprise Foundry at the northeast corner of Grove and Locust streets. Based on this information, the Leavitt Manufacturing Company can trace its roots to the Enterprise Foundry established in 1872 by Abram Snedeker.

To date little is known of Abram Snedeker. As related above, he came to Urbana from Pekin, Illinois in 1872. The *Champaign County Gazette* reported that Abram and his wife visited friends in the "...mountain regions of Pennsylvania..." in October 1879,

and in October 1881 the Snedekers visited relatives in Atlanta, Georgia. In March 1882, the *Champaign County Gazette* wrote that:

*Mr. & Mrs. A. Snedeker will leave the latter part of this week for Centerville, Georgia, where they expect to remain during the summer. Mr. Snedeker has been one of our energetic businessmen, and Urbana can ill afford to lose him. They will be missed by a large circle of friends, by whom they are loved for their many social qualities.*

Thomas Wright purchased the Enterprise Foundry from Abram Snedeker in December 1881 and took possession of the business in January 1882 (*Champaign County Gazette*, 21 December 1881, p. 16). Already by the end of January 1882, Wright had shipped twelve tons of castings to Chicago (*Champaign County Gazette*, 8 February 1882, p. 8).

Thomas Wright was born in Bedale, Yorkshire, England, on August 8, 1828. In 1847 he married his wife Harriet at Bingley, All Saints, Yorkshire, England. In England, Wright worked as a groom and later as a saddler. The records are contradictory, but sometime between 1840 and 1854 Thomas and his wife immigrated to the United States, and by 1860 were settled in Fulton County, Georgia. In 1880, the couple resided in Champaign, Illinois, and by 1900 Thomas, by now widowed, was a resident of Urbana and described as an "iron moulder." Thomas Wright died on June 26, 1914.



Cistern Lid from Wright foundry (In yard of Urbana house built in 1899)

On 23 May 1877 the *Champaign County Gazette* (23 May 1877) reported the following:

*Thomas Wright has started a foundry in connection with the university machine shops and will manufacture all kinds of castings, stove furnishings and repair all kinds of farms (sic) machinery. The highest price paid for scrap iron.*

On 6 August 1879 the *Champaign County Gazette* wrote that

*Thomas Wright has built an addition to his foundry, situated near the university machine shops.*

The 1878/1879 Champaign and Urbana City Directory (Chas. Emerson and Company 1878) lists Thomas Wright as a "moulder" at the Enterprise foundry and also affiliated with the University machine shops. As stated above, Abram Snedeker established the Enterprise Foundry in Urbana in 1872. Based on this information, Wright was employed both at the university machine shops and Abram Snedeker's

Enterprise Foundry.

In December of 1881, Thomas Wright purchased the Enterprise Foundry in Urbana from Abram Snedeker (*Champaign County Gazette* 21 December 1881, page 16). In July 1883, Thomas Wright & Son began production of the "Ogborn grain separator," "... one of the best machines for separating grain" (*Champaign County Herald* 4 July 1883).

In September of 1882, the *Champaign Daily Gazette* wrote that Thomas Wright & Son had sold their foundry in Champaign to the firm of Robinson & Burr who operated machine shops and engine works in that city. The article continued "...Messrs. Wright & Son will give all of their time and attention to the Enterprise Foundry in Urbana, of which they are proprietors, and will add a machinery department to it in a short time" (*Champaign Daily Gazette*, September 1, 1882).

The 1885 city directory places the Enterprise Foundry at the southwest corner of the intersection of Race Street and the I.B. & W. railroad tracks. The 1883/1884 directory places the foundry in the same place, at the northeast corner of Grove and Locust streets.

In addition to the foundry, Wright & Son established the first electric light plant in Urbana in 1887 (*Urbana Daily Courier*, 29 August 1934): "...For several years thereafter they served the city and the wealthier citizens with illumination."

The Wright foundry in Urbana was bought

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H. W. LEAVITT.

Portrait of H.W. Leavitt from the *Urbana Daily Courier*

by Dr. H.W. Leavitt of Tuscola, whose factory there specialized in the production of sickle lawn mowers that were sold around the world (*Urbana Daily Courier*, May 3, 1903, p. 1). Upon acquiring the Wright business, Leavitt immediately took steps to improve the facility. In 1903, Leavitt hired Urbana architect Joseph W. Royer to remodel the facility (*Urbana Daily Courier*, 20 May 1903). Royer's modifications to the old foundry included an addition to the front measuring 30-x-32 feet, a new roof, and other unspecified improvements.

The Leavitt Manufacturing Company was officially established in Urbana on July 1, 1903. The company was run by H.W. Leavitt (president), W.P. Jordan (secretary), and J.W. Moonan (foreman). Initially the business employed four staff, but within two years increased business required a work force of twenty-five mechanics. Soon the company was approached by the "Big Four" railroad and contracted to produce engine and roadway castings, producing 50 tons of goods per month. This substantial increase in business required the company to expand its workspace by one quarter. The plant also produced structural iron and steel. In February of 1906, the *Urbana Daily Courier* wrote:

*...In Urbana there is a manufacturing plant making a line of goods which is scarcely comprehended by the majority of citizens.*

The Leavitt Manufacturing Company was conducting international business from Urbana from the start. In June of 1906, the company received an order for lawn mowers from Perth, Scotland (*Urbana Daily Courier*, 19 June 1906, p. 1). Between 1908 and 1911, the company shipped goods to Cuba, Haiti, Argentina, Uruguay, British Columbia, Nova Scotia, South Africa, New Zealand, Australia, and the Philippine Islands. In July of 1906 demand exceeded supply when the company received an order from New York for 15,000 lawn mowers (*Urbana Daily Courier* 17 July 1906, p. 1). By the 1920s, the company had ten branch offices throughout the United States and abroad, including: San Francisco; Trinidad, Colorado; Minneapolis; Omaha; Eau Claire, Wisconsin; Terra Haute, Indianapolis; Syracuse, New York; Richmond, Virginia; and Puerto Rico. By 1924, the Urbana plant employed 60 people.

In addition to mowers, Leavitt produced cattle leaders, self-cleaning rakes, corn pickers, gasoline engines, fertilizer distributors, sash weights, ventilating grates, fire escapes, and window cleaners and also repaired machinery. One of the most popular products produced only by the Leavitt Manufacturing Company was the "bull dehorner." Between September 1905 and February 1906, the company produced 1,730 of these implements for distribution throughout the United States and abroad. In November of 1906, A.S. Mason of Alexandria and E. Christopher took control of the business.

Beginning around 1911, the Leavitt Company expanded into the sporting supply business. The company began producing baseball bats, golf hardwood flag poles, javelins, and discus according to the specifications of Harry Gill, University of Illinois track coach, and eventually had an entire building at the plant dedicated to the production of these products. Harry Gill required the use of second growth ash wood from the shores of Lake Erie for the athletic products produced at the Leavitt plant. An especially successful product was the collapsible "Knock Down" portable bleacher for temporary use. Designed to meet the demand for increased indoor seating at basketball games, the portable

bleacher was designed by Alonzo Stagg, Director of Athletics at the University of Chicago. University of Illinois coach and Director of Athletics George Huff realized the advantage of such a bleacher system and arranged for them to be produced locally in Urbana, having the Leavitt Company assist in production starting around 1910-11. Soon the demand for portable bleachers was so high that the Leavitt Company produced, after careful research and improvements, the new and improved "Knock Down" bleacher, which quickly became a standard in the business. By 1924, the company was producing 200,000 Knock Down bleacher systems per year, and by 1926 the bleacher "division" was the largest part of the company. In July 1926, the *Daily Illini* reported that:

*Bleachers providing a seating capacity for nearly 52,000 people has (sic) been ordered by the park commissioners of Chicago for Soldiers Field. This order is comparable only to the enormous seating capacity of the bleachers installed at Atlantic City along the Boardwalk which amounted to over 50,000....*

Eventually the company was renamed the "Leavitt Bleacher Company." In 1956 the company was purchased and the name changed to "Skil Bilt Products Company."

Today the foundry complex originally established by Abram Snedeker in 1872 still exists. Situated north of the intersection of Wood and Griggs streets, the building is now an amalgamation of structures with updated windows and doors reflecting the constant expansion of the thriving business. Close examination of the building exterior reveals details of brick window frames and cornice decorations of the former machine/pattern shop dating to the period of Urbana architect Joseph William Royer's remodel in 1903.

### Architectural Significance & Context

The Snedeker/Wright/Leavitt complex at 208 West Griggs Street is now an amalgamation of industrial structures reflecting the historic growth of a viable and successful business in Urbana situated immediately west of the currently beautified stretch of Boneyard Creek south of

Silver Creek Restaurant. Most prominent of these structures is the surviving former "Machine/Pattern Shop," a 2-story brick structure that was remodeled by Urbana architect Joseph William Royer in 1903. Though window and door openings have been modified to accommodate the needs of a 20th/21st century business, early 20th century architectural details remain, such as the modest triangular brick corbels along the roofline, as well as the basic configuration of the walls and roofline.

The Snedeker/Wright/Leavitt complex at 208 West Griggs Street is the last remaining late 19th/early 20th century industrial complex in Urbana along former Danville-Urbana-Bloomington-Pekin Railroad (D.U.B. &P.R.R.), the first railroad to pass through Urbana upon completion in 1869. In addition to the foundry, the area included: the Urbana Cement Block Manufacturing Company; the S.E. Huff & Company Lumber Yard & Planing Mill; the Urbana Harness Company; the Cleveland, Cincinnati Chicago & St. Louis Railroad Round House and Car Shops; various coal sheds and machine shops; and further north, the Sheldon Brick Company, all of which no longer exist.

**References:**

*Newspapers*  
*Champaign County Gazette*  
*Champaign County Herald*  
*Daily Illini*  
*Urbana Daily Courier*

Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps.

Chas. Emerson and Company 1878

1878/1879 Champaign and Urbana City Directory.



**PACA Heritage Grant Program  
Request for Proposals**

The PACA Heritage Grant Program was established in 1994 to contribute to other not-for-profit organizations in Champaign County which are in need of financial assistance for preservation and conservation related projects. Eligible applicants are non-profit organizations, public institutions, recognized neighborhood associations, and public agencies based in Champaign County. Projects must involve preservation, education related to history, architecture, or archeology, and may fall into any of five categories: bricks and mortar, land acquisition, architectural feasibility study, or preservation education and interpretation.

A large part of PACA's annual budget is derived from the sale of historic building materials from our architectural salvage warehouse, and generally we set aside 10-15% of the warehouse profits from the prior year to the Heritage Grant Program in order to help support other non-profit projects in the community.

Heritage Grants are reimbursement grants and funds are only forthcoming

upon completion of the project and with submission of a final report and supporting invoices for the work completed.

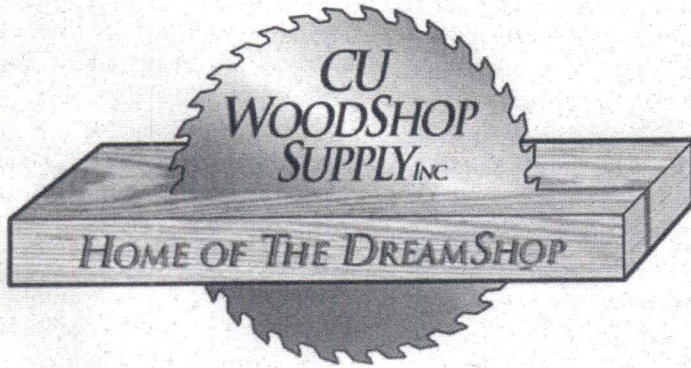
Grants are good for one year from the date of notification. If not completed within that time frame, the grant is rescinded although the grant continues to be eligible for refunding at another grant cycle.

The application deadline for the Heritage Grants Program is September 30th, 2014.

Please call 359-7222 for more information or stop by the warehouse during open hours to pick up an application.




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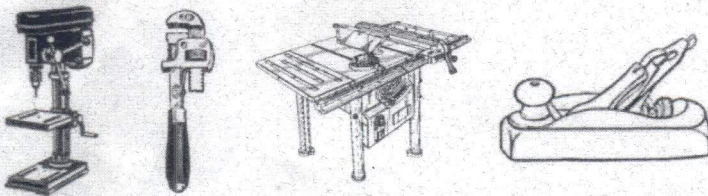
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