



PRESERVATION AND CONSERVATION ASSOCIATION

Box 2555, Station A, Champaign, Illinois 61820

"The Past Has A Future"

Volume 7

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Number 6

FOCUS ON: THE MAHOMET GRADED SCHOOL

In this quiet, rural community, on a most prestigious spot facing Main Street, the Mahomet Graded School stands above all other buildings both in height and stature. It is the only building in the township of Mahomet as well as the Western half of Champaign County which represents the Richardsonian Romanesque style, and therefore, can be claimed architecturally significant to the local area. Educational significance can also be claimed as this school was typical and representative of early twentieth century rural education in Illinois.

The Mahomet Graded School was designed in 1904 by the reputable architectural firm of Spencer and Temple of Champaign-Urbana. This building was never more than a township school, but to recognize its importance to the community, Spencer and Temple designed a distinctively Richardsonian Romanesque building to denote a landmark. Nelson S. Spencer and Harry R. Temple distinguished themselves locally as fine architects in 1899 with the First Baptist Church of Champaign and later with the Masonic Temple of Urbana in 1912.

Romanesque Revival had been associated with institutions of learning and public buildings on the East Coast as early as 1875 by Henry Hobson Richardson. The overall effect of this style was mass, volume and scale. Towers, round arches, bands of windows and cavernous door openings along with the use of masonry were the strong elements of Richardsonian Romanesque. On the campus of the University of Illinois, Altgeld Hall was designed in 1896 as a superb example of Richardsonian Romanesque. The Champaign County Courthouse was another Romanesque Revival landmark in Urbana built at the turn of the century. The Mahomet Graded School, though not as elaborate as these two examples, is distinctively Richardsonian Romanesque and, being the largest structure in the center of town, stands as an impressive building of architectural significance. The school's massive bell-tower, opened with huge round arches, was designed to dominate the rural setting.



Horizontal bands of round arched windows and a cavernous door opening formed by a round arch characterize the school as Romanesque Revival. The use of rusticated blocks of granite and the reticulated brick work on the front pavilion associate the styling with Richardson.

The history of the events which led to the construction of the schoolhouse illustrates the commitment Mahomet has always placed on education, a cornerstone in the foundation of her community identity.

The school board recorded in their log on April 20, 1900, that the citizens of Mahomet voted on a proposal for a new school building. The number of children of school age had increased rapidly between 1860 and 1900 as new families moved to Mahomet. To the board's dismay, the voters were counted 83 to 40 against the proposal. Four years later to the day, the determined board members declared the existing school buildings "condemned and unsafe for school; clerk was instructed to write to State Superintendent, Alfred Bayless, and get his opinion in closing school." Immediately, the school board posted a notice for another election to vote on a \$5800 bond for a new school building. It carried 114 to 11. This was the official beginning of the Mahomet Graded School.

The school board secured Spencer and Temple of Champaign-Urbana as archi-

tects. Mr. L. Spurgeon's bid of \$9360 to construct the building was accepted in May of 1904. "He was the local contractor and had a good reputation in town," according to Mrs. G. Clapper, a current citizen of Mahomet who remembers these events from her childhood. The bond was bought by Mr. N. W. Harris of Chicago at 4% interest, to be paid back over an eleven-year period. The terms of the arrangement were written down very clearly in the school board's log book. Trees and flowers were planted by the community as Mr. Spurgeon and his crew worked through the summer and into the autumn. Finally, after holding classes in various homes and businesses during the first term, the Mahomet Graded School building was completed in January of 1905. The local newspaper ran an article written by Mr. Abbott which not only described the building in detail, but also told of the pride the community felt for their new school:

"The new house is a handsome substantial building, concrete foundation, deep and broad with granite trimmings and slate roof, size 70' x 60', six rooms and same number of large cloak rooms, principal's room and spacious halls, all furnished in latest styles. As a whole it reflects great credit to the school board, Messrs. J. O. Rayburn, C. L. Lindsay and C. B. Holt, also to the architects,

and to the contractor, Lon Spurgeon, and while the old one lasted forty years, we predict eighty years for this one. The cost of the building and furnishing the building throughout with up-to-date apparatus and decorations, with grading and tree planting and other outdoor improvements will be about \$13,000. We are proud of the house and proud of the bevy of rosy-cheeked children that are being educated within its walls and think nothing is too good for them."

Every modern convenience was afforded the new school except electrical lighting, an option not yet available in Mahomet in 1905.

On May 10, 1906, the day that the commencement exercises were to be held, the new school building burned to the ground. The fire was reported to the *Urbana Courier-Herald* by a relative of a Mahomet family who lived in Urbana. *The Champaign Daily News* reported that the fire had started in the basement that morning at about 10:30 and that there had been a few injuries. At that time, the cause of the fire was not determined, but later a confession by one of Mr. Spurgeon's workmen disclosed an improperly built wall between the furnace and the stairway. The quoted remarks of Bill Johnson indicate the tension between the architect and the contractor as to the blame for the fire:

"Pat Murphy and I were working for Spurgeon. We left off part of the paneling and something else which was a part of the stairway. I said, 'Keep your mouth shut,' and then after the school burned we told Spurgeon what had happened. Neither Spurgeon nor the architect knew that anything had been left off until after the school burned and then we told him. The architect caused Spurgeon much trouble. He said we had put the oath too close together and we had to tear off the lath and rebuild and put them not so close."

Fires were devastating, but largely accepted as matters of fate according to Mrs. Clapper. It was not unusual for entire towns to periodically burn to the ground, as happened to Mahomet both in 1872 and 1902. Fortunately, the Mahomet Graded School had been insured, so bids were reviewed immediately by the school board to rebuild the identical building on the existing foundation. The rebuilt school was ready for occupancy by the spring of 1907.

The history of Mahomet has been passed from generation to generation through the recollections of "old timers." In 1962, however, Miss Isabelle S. Purnell, a fourth-generation Mahomet resident herself, recorded this verbal history in her book, *A History of the Schools of Mahomet And A Historical Calendar 1833-1962*. This collection of memories colorfully illustrates the values and character of the people. Ben Carson recalled with pride and a sense of

humor, "My class at Mahomet High School (the high school room at Mahomet Graded School) graduated in May 1906 and in celebration of the event, the school building burned down in the morning of the evening of Commencement." Elsie Black Bancroft writes, "The five girls of the Class of 1908 with their school motto, 'Out of school life, into life's school,' were a serious group as we faced the world." As serious as she thought they were, her stories tell of practical jokes played on teachers and classmates alike, although discipline was rarely needed. In fact, a great deal of respect was shown for teachers.

Since Mahomet High School was only a three-year program from 1905 to 1916, students often continued with their education at Champaign or Urbana High School before entering college. Vern Purnell, one of four from the first graduating class in 1906, continued at Champaign High School, received his appointment to the United States Military Academy at West Point, and graduated in the class of 1911. Many went on to graduate from the University of Illinois and other prestigious schools which would indicate that the Mahomet Graded School was offering an unusually high quality of education for a township school. In 1916, the State Superintendent of Instruction notified Principal C. P. Burman that the Mahomet High School program had been given probationary recognition as a four-year high school. *The Courthouse Record Book of Mahomet Teachers for 1918-1919* recorded fourteen high school programs in Champaign County, but only Fisher, Homer, Rantoul, Longview and Mahomet were recognized as four-year high schools.

Team sports were obviously a source of pride with the high school students. With only twenty-six students in the high school program, Mahomet had an eleven-member football squad its first year (1905-1906). The sports program was flexible to suit the needs of students. The graduating class of 1908 had only five graduates, all being girls, and the first girls' basketball team. By 1914, physical training was added to the required course of study by the office of the State Superintendent. The school board's log book noted in 1923 the purchase of track shoes as well as a vaulting pole.

By examining the Mahomet School Board's log between 1905 and 1935 (the last entry) the role of the teachers and their salaries can be compared to other public schools in the state. In 1905, the Mahomet Graded School had five teachers assuming the roles of: primary teacher (grades 1-2), first intermediate teacher (grades 3-4), second intermediate teacher (grades 5-6), grammar teacher (grades 7-8) and principal (high school). The "graded" school, a central school with the children grouped according to their ages and attainments,

had been encouraged by the State Superintendent as early as 1856. All children between the ages of 6 and 21 were considered to be of school age, and the school year in Mahomet was eight months long. In 1905, schools in Illinois were required to maintain no less than 110 days, and average length was seven months; by standards of the day, Mahomet had a long school year. It was assumed that every child would attend school up through the eighth grade with high school being encouraged. By 1905, the course of study for all public schools was required to consist of: orthography, penmanship, arithmetic, geography, U.S. History, reading, grammar, natural sciences, physiology and hygiene. Most of the teachers at this time were certified to teach up through the eighth grade by passing an examination after high school. The principal was always a man with a college education, usually from a state "normal" school (teachers college), and prior teaching experience. In 1905, the principal at Mahomet received \$75 per month, the teachers ranged between \$40 and \$45; this was above-average wage for a township school in Illinois.

It is recorded in the log book in 1908 that a sixth teacher was needed for the high school room with the title of assistant principal, and \$150 worth of equipment for the physics laboratory was purchased. This indicated a growing number of high school students and that they taught physics, advanced course for a rural high school program. The principal was now getting \$100 per month with the teachers' pay ranging between \$50 and \$60; this was exceptionally high since the average wage in 1908 was \$46.

By 1916, the need for a full-time administrator became apparent with the school board offering the current principal the position of superintendent at the salary of \$120 per month. The new principal and the assistant principal received \$80, and the teachers' wages ranged from \$60 to \$67. A music teacher was hired in 1917 for \$24.

The Great War was over by 1919 and the teachers saw a 30% pay increase. The physics laboratory was updated with \$245 worth of new equipment, and the school board considered electrically wiring the Mahomet Graded School. The townspeople voted on and passed a referendum to build a new high school building to serve Mahomet and its outlying areas. By 1921, the Mahomet Community High School was completed with 62 students in attendance, a sizeable increase since the 26 students of 1905. The school year was extended eight and a half months. The Mahomet Graded School was accountable for grades one through eight, graduating 13 students from the eighth grade that year. The log mentions ordering Reading Circle Books for the graded school; this was a text

strongly recommended by the State Superintendent's office to standardize the reading program in all public schools.

The board voted in 1923 that "all teachers employed were to have normal (school) training or credits in advance of the coming year." Teachers' salaries had reached \$85 to \$100 per month with the principal of the graded school being paid \$150. Kindergarten was added in 1924, and the Mahomet Graded School was wired for electricity for \$354. Playground equipment was ordered in 1926, and for \$285, a piano was purchased for the graded school.

Hard times were felt by all in the 1930's; the teachers' wages were cut by \$20 in 1932 and had not been restored by 1935, the last entry in the school board's log. In 1940 the Mahomet Graded School building received an addition of two classrooms. Additional classrooms and a gymnasium were added as a separate building on the site in 1952; collectively the two buildings were called the Sangamon Elementary School. Further additions to the school system through the years have reduced the function of this old school building to house only kindergartners. However, it remains the dominant feature of Mahomet's Main Street. The role of the school building has shifted through the years from one of function to one of community identity, providing a familiar landmark and a sense of place.

his article was taken from the National Register nomination prepared by Charlene Williams. The nomination has been approved by the Illinois Advisory Council and is pending in Washington D.C. However, the school is slated for demolition next year.

OLD HOUSE JOURNAL

PACA is once again soliciting subscriptions to the *Old House Journal*. This is a money saving offer for members as an \$18.00 subscription is only \$14.00 if ordered through PACA. This is also a money making opportunity for PACA, for PACA keeps \$7.00 of every \$14.00. So send in your new or renewal subscription to the *Old House Journal* to PACA as soon as possible. Offer ends March 1, 1988.

ANNUAL MEMBERSHIP MEETING

The PACA annual membership meeting and presentation of the Heritage Awards will take place in mid-February. The date, time, place and program will be sent to members in late January. Watch for further details.

EDITOR'S NOTE

We apologize for the lateness of the last two issues of the newsletter. It was due to the need to complete the Greek Revival Cottage by the December 30 deadline. This left little time for our volunteers to accomplish anything else.

COTTAGE UPDATE

With much frantic last-minute work, PACA was able to complete the first floor of the Greek Revival Cottage by December 30, the move-in date of the tenant, the International Society of Arboriculture. There are still some minor details to finish, but the main portion of the building is essentially complete. PACA hosted a "thank-you" open-house for workers and contributors on December 20 and the effect

on everyone was spectacular. People who had only seen the building in its before state were amazed at the difference and those who had worked on the building were impressed at how well everything had turned out.

PACA must still finish the basement which will be used for office space and a small conference area. A change in the building codes has temporarily held up the work, but hopefully everything will be completed by early spring. The parking area and sidewalks are finished, but landscaping, aided by a CCDC grant, will not be started until spring.

PACA is very much indebted to the individuals and companies who contributed so generously to this preservation project. We ask that our members remember to patronize these businesses and to thank them for their help. A partial list of contributors is below, a complete list will be in subsequent newsletters.

Abana Press	J & R Painting
Caradco Company	Springfield Electric
Rogers Supply	T & C Construction
Browns Paint and Glass	The News Gazette
Cotters Discount Glass	Busey Bank
Hillcrest Lumber	Hennigman Oil
Thompson Lumber	Urethane Insulation
Armstrong Lumber	Design Build Service
Alexander Lumber	Fans, Lamps & Shades
Ray's Heating & Cooling	Kempers
K. Reinke Jr., & Co.	Painters Local 363
Sullivan Plumbing	Ron Meister
Ace Hardware	Construction
Minuteman of Urbana	Helen Bess Cone
Downtown Electric	Interiors
Mac's Electric	Wickersheimer
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Champaign Telephone	



Membership Application P.A.C.A.

MEMBERSHIP CATEGORY:

INDIVIDUAL

- | | |
|--|---------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Adult | \$10.00 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Student (1/2 time or more) | \$ 5.00 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Senior Citizen | \$ 5.00 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Family, (includes all members of a household with no more than two members being over age 21) | \$15.00 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Additional Contribution _____ | |

CIVIC

- | | |
|---|----------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Over 100 members | \$100.00 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 50-100 members | \$ 75.00 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Up to 50 members | \$ 50.00 |

CORPORATE

- | |
|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/>\$ 50.00 |
|--|

NAME _____

RENEWAL

NEW MEMBERSHIP

ADDRESS _____

Street

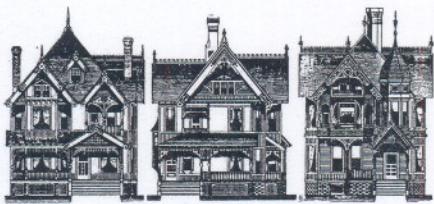
State

Zip

Make check payable to: PACA, Box 2555, Station A, Champaign, Illinois 61820

NEW & RENEWING MEMBERS

Kevin Cullen
Joe Donahue
Randy Estes
Mr. & Mrs. Arthur Hill
Joan Lathrap
Walter & Donna Lembke
Mary A. Miles
James & Mare Payne
Sharon Rapp
Mark & Suzanne Replogle
Frances E. Roehm
Charles Sikora
Mr. & Mrs. Roger Yarbrough
Dr. & Mrs. Joseph Zalar, Jr.
Mrs. Mildred Barnett
Mr. & Mrs. George Batzli
Mr. & Mrs. John Gilpin
Dick Cannon



DESIGN ERAS IN AMERICAN DECROATIVE ARTS 1820-1940

The McLean County Historical Society Presents its 1988 Winter Public Lecture Series

Each lecture in this five-part slide/lecture series will focus on a different design epoch. Speakers will explain the historical background and influences of each period, illustrate its characteristic design elements and common motifs, identify major designers and signed work, and show examples of the period design interpretation in a wide variety of media, including furniture, glass, ceramics, silver and architecture.

- January 26** *Late Federal and Victorian Empire Design* by Marianna Munyer, Curator of Collections, Division of Historic Sites, Illinois Historic Preservation Agency.
- February 2** *The Victorian Revivals: Rococo, Gothic, and Renaissance Styles* by Bloomington interior designer/consultant Laurie Wallace.
- February 9** *The Aesthetic Movement/High Victorian: Eastlake, Art Furniture, and Orientalism* by Chicago historic restoration consultant Robert Furhoff.
- February 16** *The Design Reformers: Art Nouveau and the Arts and Crafts Movement* by Donald Hallmark, Curator, Dana-Thomas House, Springfield.
- February 23** *Art Deco and Art Moderne* by Andrea Wiczak, instructor, Department of Art and Design, University of Illinois, Urbana.

Where: McLean County Historical Society
201 East Grove Street
Bloomington, Illinois 61701
First Floor Conference Room

Time: 7-9 p.m. Tuesday evenings

Registration: \$25 for the entire series (\$20 members)

Fees: \$ 6 per individual session (\$5 members)

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ASSOCIATION

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PACA Newsletter
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Please submit material for publication in the
next newsletter before 15th of month.

