

PRESERVATION MATTERS

Summer 2018
Volume 38 Number 1

PRESERVATION AND CONSERVATION ASSOCIATION

“This is classic American architecture, and I love it!”



Historic Postcard view of Solon Family at 503 South State Street, Champaign, circa 1911

“The earliest of memories must be recalled in order to fit the Harwood-Solon House into the context of Champaign history.”

(Opening sentence of the Champaign Landmark Application written by Kim Riesterer for the Harwood-Solon House.)

There is no longer anyone who was alive when the Solon House was built of course, so the only memories we now have of that time are in whatever written records have survived, as well as the intangible ones embodied in the building itself. Indeed, one reason preservation work can be so rewarding is because we are still surrounded by so many remnants of our cultural history, and all of these places and things are able to tell us stories about ourselves, even though surprisingly few people know how to, or have an interest in deciphering them. The

more you learn about such things though, the more you find doors to the past opening to you, because all of these places — from the grandest to the most modest — are memorials to how we lived, what we valued, and what we aspired to. Our works from the past tell us quite a bit about who we were when we made them, and knowing that can help us understand more about who we are now.

The Harwood-Solon House is full of such memories, and partly because of this it may very well be the most

recognized historic property in the city of Champaign. Built by William C Barrett between 1865-69, this Italianate style structure stands out both because of its size and prominent location, but also because of how little it has changed over the years.

While other buildings around it came and went, or were altered beyond recognition, the Solon House seemed to ignore the passing of the years. Man fears time they say, but time fears the Pyramids, and as the years slowly creep by, the Solon House seems

determined to someday achieve a similar distinction for itself.

Thankfully, for a change, the story I'm writing here is not an epitaph, but a celebration. In 2005 when the Drenckhahn and Morris families — descendants of Francis Emory and Abbie Solon — donated the Solon House to PACA, I don't think that very many of us would have dared to hope that this house's story would turn out as well as it did. We just wanted to save the place, and that was a big enough job all on its own.

The building is officially known as the Harwood-Solon House because Abel Harwood was the first person to both own and live there, and the Solon family were the ones who owned it the longest. Abel Harwood purchased the home in 1869 (for \$12,000) and lived there until his death in 1891. His wife stayed on until 1903 when she also passed away. The house was then rented until it was purchased in 1907 by Francis Solon and his family (again for \$12,000), and that family and their heirs owned it until 2005, when it came into PACA's hands. PACA cleaned it up, boarded up the windows and installed a metal roof, but that pretty much exhausted our ability to do much to help the place and so it continued to sit, its ongoing decay arrested to some extent, but only barely so. Things began to finally look up again when then State Senator Michael Frerichs and State Representative Naomi Jakobson enabled PACA to get two \$250,000 grants in order to help us preserve the house.

Thanks to this money PACA was able to remove and reconstruct the two rotting porches; repoint, rebuild, and

replace the exterior masonry from the footings up to the attic; regrade the surrounding grounds so that water would run away from the house rather than towards it; fight back some stubborn termites that had taken up residence, and basically take on a variety of disparate projects necessary to stabilize the house and provide a good foundation (both figuratively and literally) for someone to step in and bring the house back to its former glory. All of this hard work ultimately led to a point where we were able to hold a very successful open house in May of last year and shortly after that, a would-be buyer stepped forward, and PACA sold the Solon House to Dr. Chris Knight of Champaign.

The two events are not actually connected though, Chris was familiar with the house before the tour. He has admired the place since he was an adjunct professor of Chemistry at the U of I. Chris came here in the 1980s in order to do post-doc work at the University of Illinois, and ended up staying for reasons entirely unrelated to his academic work, eventually opening the Blind Pig Company, and most recently, a brewery with the same name.

"I am thrilled to be the new owner of the Solon House because it is such a beautiful and elegant home" Chris told me when I asked him about what drew him to the house. "unlike almost all the big Victorian homes around town, it has not been broken up into apartments, or indeed modified much at all. It is still almost exactly as it was when it was built in the 1860s."

One of the things that makes Chris such a great fit for a house like this, is his willingness to listen to the stories

it has to tell. "The house is steeped in history" Chris said, "and that's palpable from the instant you open the front door."

"Walking into the Solon House is somewhat like walking into a museum, like going back to another era. A quieter time, when there were no cars or planes, no electrical devices, no plastics, and no phones, a time when the United States was healing from the ravages of the Civil War. And that's unique, and special."

Chris has an appreciation for the stylistic elements of the house as well. "... from the high ceilings, tall thin doors, straight, steep staircase, and the floor to ceiling windows, the vertical element of the design draws the eye in. Looking at the imposing front facade, you are struck not just by its stately beauty, but by the elegance of its proportions. The wide front door, surmounted by the 2 windows of the 2nd floor, and above them the 3 windows of the cupola. The symmetry, and proportions, are perfect. This is classic American architecture, and I love it!"

We at PACA are very pleased to turn over custodianship of the Solon house to Dr Knight, and we're looking forward to watching, along with the rest of the CU community, the metamorphosis of this old house as it goes from being the stately, if rather austere monument it has long been, to the warm, living home it has always had the capacity to be.

By Thomas Garza





Colonel Wolfe School

By Thomas Garza

Most locals have learned that if they want to get from Champaign to Urbana in any reasonable amount of time, they absolutely must avoid driving through the campus, and eventually taking these circuitous routes becomes such second nature that even during the Summer months we still tend to give the whole campus area a miss, but when we do that we are also missing some really special architectural gems that live there. We're all familiar enough with Altgeld Hall and the Natural History Building of course, but well within what we generally tend to think of as 'the University', but not really a part of the campus proper, are some lesser known but still very important structures hidden in and amongst the mind-numbing

and faceless array of apartment buildings that overwhelmingly dominate the near-campus landscape.

One of these hidden gems is the Colonel Wolfe School located at 401 E. Healey St in Champaign. Constructed in 1905 as an elementary school, Colonel Wolfe operated as a public school until 1964. It was purchased a year later by the University of Illinois Foundation and was then used as an elementary education research facility by the College of Education. After that it became an experimental nursery for special needs and gifted children.

Colonel Wolfe is the oldest surviving school building in the

city of Champaign and it's well worth seeing for it's design and workmanship alone. Built as an eight-room school house, the building is generally symmetrical but its overall design is such that every section is clearly delineated from the others and each seems to stand on its own while at the same time still working together to create an entirely coherent and very satisfying 'whole'. Of particular note is the bold use of contrasting yellow brickwork which is used both as banding to define the separation between levels, but it is also laid in a distinctive diamond pattern which serves as a decorative cornice beneath the deeply overhanging, bracketed eaves. There is more of interest to this place than its just being an attractive building, to begin with, it is a product of the

firm of Spencer and Temple -- the firm responsible for the Inman Hotel amongst other notable local landmarks -- but one of the firm's architects who participated in the design of this building was Walter T Bailey, the first African American to graduate with a bachelor of science in architectural engineering at UIUC in 1904, so the Colonel Wolfe school may have been one of his first professional efforts.

Mr Bailey went on to receive an honorary masters in architecture from UIUC in 1910. He was appointed the head of the mechanical industries department at Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, where he supervised planning, design, and construction of several campus buildings. He later designed the Mosaic State Temple



Walter T. Bailey

Building and Pythian Theater Building in Little Rock, Ark., and the Pythian Bath House and Sanitarium in Hot Springs, Ark. It is also important to mention the man the school is named after,

Colonel Wolfe himself.

On April 15, 1861, following the bombardment and surrender of Fort Sumter, President Lincoln



Col. John S. Wolfe

called for 75,000 volunteers to form a militia of the loyal US states. A day or two later, attorney John S. Wolfe addressed a public meeting in Champaign to enroll volunteers and was chosen to be captain of the company that came to be known as the Twentieth Regiment of Illinois Volunteer Infantry.

The initial enrollment was to be for 90 days as Lincoln had hoped to quell the rebellion quickly, however Lincoln's dream of a quick war was not to be fulfilled and the war ended up lasting four long, bloody years. The Twentieth itself fought for three of those years and even participated in the grand review in Washington at the close of the war.

They mustered out in Louisville Kentucky in 1865.

According to the Standard History of Champaign County Illinois: "One of the most original

and noteworthy men who ever practiced law in Champaign County was Colonel John S. Wolfe, who came from Carlinville in 1860, and took up his residence in Champaign...Colonel Wolfe was a man of excellent literary taste and studious habit. He was a wise counselor, an able advocate, a good speaker, and a first-class citizen."

After the war, Colonel Wolfe resumed his law practice, eventually becoming the local attorney for the Illinois Central Railroad. He died at his home in Champaign in 1904.

Speaking for myself, the Colonel Wolfe School has long been one of my favorite 'hidden' places in Champaign. It's not really hidden of course, but the first few times I saw it I couldn't remember afterwards where it was and had trouble finding it again, and so that gave it an air of mystery for me.

The University doesn't seem to be using the building anymore, and usually that spells trouble. What ultimately becomes of these types of places is up to us however. Individually we don't have much say of course, but collectively we can and do make a difference.

We, collectively, have the power to save our heritage if we're willing to use it.



PACA Annual Membership Meeting



Steve Marshack discusses the Natural History Building for the annual Heritage Awards

PACA held its annual meeting on March 29th at the Holy Cross Parish Center in Champaign.

Two new board members were elected -- Barb Oehlschlaeger-Garvey and Lisa Kidd -- and one previous member -- Pierre Moulin -- was re-elected to a second term.

We said goodbye to retiring board members Betty Swisher and last year's president Alice Novak. Both

women have done far more work for PACA than most members are aware of and we thank them for their service and wish them the very best.

The annual budget was presented and there was a brief discussion about the board's efforts at updating the constitution and bylaws and hopefully, a draft of those will be ready for circulation sometime later this summer.

The annual Heritage Awards were presented as well. This year's winners were the Bob and Betty Leach home at 901 N Broadway in Urbana, Hopscotch Bakery at 802 W John St in Champaign, the Kickapoo Rail Trail, a restored 1930s Auto Shop in Philo, the Stephens Building at 218 W Main St. in Urbana, and the Natural History Building at 1301 W Green in Urbana.

MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION PACA BOX 2575, Champaign, IL 61825

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44 E. Washington St, Champaign, IL 61825
217-359-7222 * www.pacacc.org

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The newsletter of the



PRESERVATION AND CONSERVATION ASSOCIATION
P.O. Box 2575
Champaign, IL 61825

NON-PROFIT
ORG.
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
CHAMPAIGN, IL
PERMIT NO. 133

Summer 2018, Volume 38
Number 1

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*If you would like to contribute
to the PACA newsletter, email
pacaexdir@gmail.com*

Warehouse: 44 E. Washington St., Champaign, IL

Hours: Tuesday – Saturday from 10am – 4pm

Telephone: 217-359-PACA

Web: <http://www.pacacc.org>

E-mail: pacaexdir@gmail.com