

# PRESERVATION MATTERS

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PRESERVATION AND CONSERVATION ASSOCIATION

## Urbana's Casey Jones:

### The History of the Mary Vickery and Zachariah Sharp House

By Brian Adams

*My business continued to improve, and my place of business became headquarters for the engineers of the then I.B. and W.R.R. All trains stopped in Urbana and changed engines. The engineers were a splendid lot of men, and many a pleasant hour I spent with them when they came in from their runs. (From Con Brio by Nathan H. Cohen\*)*

The house at 412 West Elm Street was built by Mary Vickery Sharp in 1899. At this time, Mrs. Sharp was the widow of Zachariah F. Sharp, veteran locomotive engineer for the I.B.&W (Indianapolis, Bloomington, & Western Railway Company) / "Big Four" Railroad. Prior to the construction of the residence at 412 West Elm Street, the Sharps resided at 402 East Illinois Street, Urbana.

The house is Queen Anne in influence, with a Colonial Revival porch. Characteristics of the style as expressed on the house include asymmetrical massing; various window groupings in single, paired, and triple sets; an exaggerated cut-away bay on the west elevation's gable pavilion, and a front/south gable pavilion with a second story semi-hexagonal bay. Narrow clapboard wall treatment is in contrast to wood



412 W. Elm St. Urbana

trim as a water table, division between first and second stories, second and third stories, and framing the paired upper half story windows in the front. A low-pitched pediment over the entrance bay on the front porch, as well as the porch balusters and newel posts also reflect the Colonial Revival style.

Mary Vickery was born on September 21, 1847 in North Nassau, Rensselaer County, New York. In 1854 she accompanied her widowed mother and four brothers and sisters to Lee County, Illinois, where they settled in Paw Paw. There she married Zachariah F. Sharp in 1865, and the couple moved to Lafayette, Indiana,



412 W. Elm St. Urbana

where they resided until 1870, when they moved to Urbana, Illinois. At this time, they resided at 402 East Illinois Street. Late in life she became completely deaf, and enjoyed reading. The Sharps had only one child, a daughter named Minnie, who was adopted. Mary Sharp was closely associated with the First M.E. Church in Urbana, where she taught Sunday school class, and was also recording secretary for the Ladies' Home and Foreign Missionary society of the M.E. church. Daughter Minnie also became a kindergarten teacher at the Urbana Methodist Church. In September 1890, the Sharps hosted a reception by the Christian Endeavor Society of the Methodist Church for Mr. and Mrs. Frank Crane, who were departing for new work in Bloomington. Mary Sharp had a sister in Mendota, Illinois, whom she visited occasionally.

Zachariah F. Sharp was born in Lovington County, New York, and had six siblings. He became a respected

locomotive engineer and, like his wife, was closely associated with the Methodist Church in Urbana. From the late 1870's until his death in 1899, events in the life of Zachariah F. Sharp were commonly reported in local newspapers, and he truly became a local, working-class celebrity in post-Civil War Urbana.

Mr. Sharp was a member of the Knights Templar (Urbana Commandery, No. 16). He was elected an "officer" in this organization in 1874, "senior warden" in 1877, and in 1883 was elected "eminent commander". In 1878, Mr. Sharp was appointed vice-president of the Urbana Free Library by Mayor Cunningham, following the resignation of C.D. Webster.

Zachariah F. Sharp is intimately associated with the emerging importance of the railroads in the history of Urbana, and events in his life recorded in local newspapers

mirror many aspects of this way of life for countless numbers of Urbana railroad workers. His railroad career began in 1863 as a fireman on the Wabash Railroad. In 1870, he became an engineer for the Peoria & Eastern and moved to Urbana. By 1879 he was a member of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers, Division 143 of Urbana. In 1892 he was elected Secretary and Treasurer, and by the time of his death held the highest position in the organization ("chief"). Over the years, Z.F. Sharp served as delegate at several meetings of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers, and often brought his wife Mary with him on these trips. These included trips to Indianapolis (1881), Baltimore (1881?), San Francisco (1884), Denver (1889), and Atlanta (1892). In 1882, Sharp succeeded Wm. E. Rapson as general secretary of the Engineers & Fireman's association of the I. B. & W. system.

Until 1880, Sharp's run was between Urbana and Peoria. After this time, his main route was between Champaign and Indianapolis.



Zachariah F. Sharp

According to the Champaign County Gazette (Wednesday, December 10, 1890, p.8), average wages for an engineer on the Peoria division of the Big Four railroad in November 1890 was \$118.03 (firemen made \$60.46 and shop-men \$38.52/month at this time).

Z.F. Sharp, or "Zach" as he was known, engineered passenger trains, and had a reputation as one of the safest, yet fastest, engineers at the time. A local paper printed the following on December 29, 1880: "When is one of the I.B. and W. passenger trains considered safe? When the engineer is 'Sharp'". In August 1881, Sharp was given the responsibility of engineering a special train from Indianapolis containing several railway officials making a thorough inspection of the bridges on the entire line for the purpose of ascertaining the additional strength which would be needed to sustain the weight of the new 50-ton engines to be put into service. On October 1, 1890, it was reported that "...Z.F. Sharp, passenger engineer, is, from the official report, the most economical engineer in the use of fuel during the past month, the average being 55 27-100 miles to a ton of coal. Charley Baccus comes next, making 54 24-100 miles to a ton." In 1886 Sharp was assigned passenger locomotive number 138, an especially large locomotive built for high speed, on its first trip to Indianapolis.

Work on the railroad was hazardous in many ways, and contemporary newspapers constantly report accidents in the shops and on the road. Z.F. Sharp experienced several accidents and dangerous encounters during his tenure as an engineer. In 1880, Sharp slipped while exiting his

engine in Peoria and put his hand through one of the glass cab windows, severely cutting his hand (Champaign County Herald, Wednesday, February 11, 1880, Vol. 3. No.11). Due to this injury, he took off a week from work. In the summer of the same year, an article entitled "Vicious Tramps" was published, describing the attempt of four "tramps" to board passenger train number 8 (Z.F. Sharp engineer, Bliss Lott, fireman) in Pekin on way to Peoria. One tramp jumped on the train and pointed a revolver at Sharp, then moved towards conductor Palmerton on the baggage car. Palmerton grabbed the tramp by the collar and forced him to ground, kicking him in the mouth. The other tramps fired two shots at brakeman Frank Clark ("...one ball grazing his back the other passing between his legs."). The four tramps were apprehended and arrested. (July 21, 1880). In 1888, the story "A Narrow Escape" was published, recording Zack Sharp's accident on the I.B. & W. express between Bloomington and Peoria. Sharp suffered a sprained shoulder when his engine successfully crossed a washed out culvert, but the remainder of the train fell into a ditch. In July of 1890, Sharp and his fireman, Jerry McLaughlin, narrowly escaped death when the left side rod of the engine broke, and revolving sliced off the cab on that side. McLaughlin "... was thrown violently to the top of the cab but sustained no serious damage. The accident took place near Pekin when going down grade at about forty miles an hour. Mr. Sharp says this is the first accident of the kind that he has ever had" (Champaign County Herald, Wednesday, July 23, 1890, Vol. XIII, No. 36, p.1).

By 1892, the Sharp's adopted daughter

Minnie was a kindergarten teacher at the M.E. Church. In March of 1893, Minnie moved to Winchester, Kansas to live with an uncle, and by October of this year was teaching school in Waterville, Kansas. Minnie married Henry D. Nash of Waterville, Kansas on March 24, 1894 at her parent's home on East Illinois Street, Urbana. The ceremony was performed by the Reverend U.Z. Gilmer, and the couple returned to Waterville, Kansas.

In 1897 Zachariah Sharp purchased the residence property of Arthur Alley with the intention of building "...a large and beautiful residence thereon..." (Wednesday, April 14, 1897) \*\*. On Tuesday, April 27, 1897, local papers reported "...Z. Sharp is preparing to build one of the finest residences in Urbana, during the coming summer. He has architects at work preparing plans, and those who know say it is his intention to build one of the coziest homes in the Twin Cities for himself and wife".

Newspapers record that Zachariah F. Sharp became ill early in 1898 and never fully recovered. He died December 29, 1898 at his home on East Illinois Street at age 62. The funeral sermon was given by Rev. J.W. Miller, and services were under the auspices of Urbana Commandery, No. 16, Knights Templars and the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen. Pallbearers at the funeral were S.S. Small, E.W. Julian, Prof. Ricker, John N. Beers, F. E. Eubling, and Judge J.O. Cunningham, all brother Knights.

An interesting story appeared in local papers on Monday, February 6, 1899 entitled "Both are Now Gone": Engine No. 570, "...that was for

many years on the local run between Champaign and Indianapolis, is being broken up at Urbana and put in the scrap pile. It was one of the oldest machines on the road and was run by the late Zack Sharp. It is quite fitting that the veteran engineer and his machine should pass from the scene of action within a period of a few weeks”.

Following Z.F. Sharp’s death in December 1898, Mary Sharp apparently continued to plan for the erection of their “dream home” at 412 West Elm Street. Local papers announced on Wednesday, January 11, 1899, that Mrs. Sharp inherited about \$5,000. On April 8, 1899, it was announced that Mrs. Sharp received \$3000 insurance money for her husband from Charles W. Cole, Secretary of Division 143, Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers. On Wednesday, May 10, 1899, it was announced that “...the contract has been let for the erection of Mrs. Z.F. Sharp’s new residence”. On Wednesday, September 6, 1899, Mrs. Mary Sharp has moved into her new residence on West Elm Street.

Soon after occupying her new home, Mary Sharp took in boarders. The Champaign County News of Wednesday, June 27, 1900 announced that “...Edward E. Rea\*\*\* of this city and Miss Callie Gidings (sic) of Danville were married Sunday noon at the residence of the bride’s parents, Mr. and Mrs. Albert Giddings on North Vermilion street, Danville. Rev. E.B. Randle performed the ceremony. Mr. and Mrs. Rea went to Mahomet where they visited the former’s parents a short time and then returned to this city, where they have taken apartments with Mrs. Z.F. Sharp

at 412 West Elm street”. The Rea’s had relatives in Danville and Mahomet. While residing at 412 West Elm Street, the Reas hosted social events, such as card games with the “Cardinal Club” (Champaign County Gazette, Wednesday, April 10, 1901).

During the early 20th century, Mrs. Sharp continued to teach Sunday school, and often took her students to Crystal Lake Park (July 16, 1902). Her adopted daughter Minnie died in April 1912 in Parson, Kansas. Mary Vickery Sharp passed away Saturday, July 2, 1927 at her home at 412 West Elm Street.

By the early 21st century, the house had been a student rental property for several years and was in poor condition. The east part of the wrap-around front porch had been enclosed and poorly maintained. In May of 2008, a fire partially destroyed the façade, and the interior suffered considerable smoke damage. Fortunately, the damage was not so extensive as to prevent renovations, and photographs provided during the fortunate visit by an individual who resided in the house as a child in the 1940s allowed the front porch to be restored to its original appearance. In 2010-2011, the house was completely renovated and converted to one of the “Roundtable Houses”, one of several international student residences in Urbana.

Thanks to Alice Novak for her description of the architectural style of the house.

Notes

\*Con Brio, by Nathan H. Cohen. In Lives and Voices: A Collection

of American Jewish Memoirs, pp. 35-113. Edited by Stanley F. Chyet. The Jewish Publication Society of America. Philadelphia. 1972.

\*\*Arthur Alley had purchased the lot at 412 West Elm Street from William Harvey of Tolono in early 1892 (Champaign County News, Saturday, April 16, 1892, p. 12), who in turn had had purchased the property from N.J. McConney in late 1889 (Champaign County Herald, Wednesday, December 11, 1889, p. 1, Vol. XII, No. 4). McConney had purchased property at this location from George Woodmansee in the fall of 1872 (Champaign County Gazette, Wednesday, September 11, 1872, Vol. 21, No. 45).

By January 1899, Arthur Alley had moved to West Main Street (Saturday, January 7, 1899). In the fall and winter of 1898, he had a saloon built on North Market street, which was open for business by December 8, 1898 (Champaign County News, Wednesday, October 26, 1898, p. 8; Wednesday, November 9, 1898, p.8; Wednesday, November 16, 1898; Saturday, November 19, 1898; Saturday, December 3, 1898, p. 8). R.Z. Gill was the architect of the 10-x-20 foot building (Tuesday, October 25, 1898).

\*\*\*City Directory of 1900 lists E.E. Rea: “works at County Clerk’s office”



### Call for nominations!

PACA’s nominating committee is seeking candidates for our Board of Directors. If you or anyone you know may be interested please contact [Elyse@pacacc.org](mailto:Elyse@pacacc.org) for more information.

## Extras

PACA would like to welcome Abigail Frank to our Board of Directors.

This past August, Board Member Zoe Zapel accepted the Assistant Rowing Coach position at the University of Rochester in New York. This position required a quick, cross-country move, so in lieu of her trying to attend board meetings remotely we opted to search for a replacement. The Nomination Committee was able to locate someone and in September Abigail Frank was unanimously elected by the Board to serve out the rest of Zoe's term.

Abbie has a passion for historic preservation. She attended Knox College in Galesburg and during that time, she had internships at the Illinois State Museum studying object conservation and the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library studying paper conservation. She also

had a practicum at Frank Lloyd Wright's Dana Thomas House in Springfield where she acquired first-hand knowledge of the care and consideration that goes into the restoration of a historic landmark.

Abbie attended graduate school at the Pratt Institute and received her master's degree in Interior Architecture and Design - a program that taught her how to work with existing buildings versus new construction.

After graduation, Abbie returned to Urbana to live in an 1860 farmhouse that has been in her family for five generations. When her grandfather retired from farming he had collected native plant species in order to convert the entire 120-acre farm into a lush and healthy prairie. The Barnhart Prairie Nature Preserve was thus born and is now protected by the state as a nature preserve. Abbie lives in the middle of the preserve as a steward of the land and the

animals that nest there.

She went on to create an adaptive reuse concept for her grandfather's farm shed and Bluestem Hall opened in 2017 as a venue for events and weddings. One of her favorite things is hearing some of the older guests walk in and tell her the stories of their own childhoods in similar buildings. She always wanted Bluestem Hall to be uniquely Midwestern; a love story to the Illinois farming and prairie landscape. A place where people from this area can go and immediately feel at home.

We just want to remind everyone that November is our renewal month and so it's time to renew your membership for 2020. You can fill out the form below and mail it with your check to PACA, Box 2575, Champaign, IL.

Thanks for helping to keep PACA strong!

MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION PACA BOX 2575, Champaign, IL 61825

### MEMBERSHIP STATUS

New  Renewal

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