

PRESERVATION MATTERS

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Classic Revival Splendor in Urbana

The Alice J. (Busey) and Augustus T. Freeman House

By Brian Adams



"Gus Freeman and family are moving into their elegant new home on West Elm street"
(Urbana Daily Courier, April 2, 1903, p.5)

When I moved to Urbana in the late 1980s, I was impressed by a large, magnificent house in the 500 block of West Elm Street, which seemed to have been transported from the antebellum South. Though it had long been converted to apartments and was poorly maintained, the house still radiated an air of elegance and sophistication of former times. While combing through old newspapers to research a home I had purchased one block to the east, I was surprised to learn that Urbana architect Joseph William Royer had designed the stunning old mansion for a man named Gus Freeman. Learning of plans to demolish this and other historic buildings on the block to



Gus Freeman

make way for a student housing complex, I helped campaign to save this remarkable building and

have it designated an Urbana Local Landmark in 2007. Preparation of the landmark nomination required additional research of the house and family, and the results of that work are presented here.

Augustus T. and Alice (Busey) Freeman

The house at 504 West Elm Street was built for Augustus and Alice J. Freeman (nee Busey) in 1902/1903. Augustus ("Gus") T. Freeman was born March 16, 1856, in Crawfordville, Indiana. He moved to Urbana in 1871 and found work at the Indiana, Bloomington, &



Jessie Artemesia Freeman, Gus and Alice Freeman's daughter, wrote on the back, "Ralph (Campbell) and I were married here. Oct. 10, 1907 Urbana, Ill."

Western Railroad (I.B. & W. R.R.) roundhouse. In October 1877 he married Alice J. Busey, daughter of Simeon and Artemesia Busey. Simeon was one of the founders of Busey Bank. Gus and Alice would have five children (Simeon, Jessie, Helen, John, and George), two of whom died in infancy. By the time of their marriage, Gus worked for the Champaign, Havana, & Western and the Indiana, Bloomington, & Western railroads as a fireman and later engineer. Between 1889 and 1904 he was employed by the Illinois Central Railroad as an engineer. After this, Freeman worked in real estate and the insurance business, and eventually came to own the Princess Theatre on Main Street in Urbana. Gus was a member of the Masonic order, the Elk's Club, and the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers. In 1924, the latter awarded him an honorary "gold engine" badge for his service on the Illinois Central Railroad. Gus Freeman died on December 7, 1937 at age 82.



Gus and Alice Freeman

Alice J. Busey was born on March 15, 1858 in Urbana. Her obituary (6 March 1945) states:

"Her entire life was devoted to church and club work up until the last three years of her life when health failed her. She was a member of the First Baptist Church, Urbana, for 75 years and was the oldest living member."

Alice joined the Champaign-Urbana Woman's Club one year after its founding, and served three successive terms as president (1905-

1907). The club honored her by planting 1,000 trees in her name in the cooperative forest plantation in Mason State Forest. She also served as corresponding secretary of the 19th district, Illinois Federation of Women's Clubs. In 1914 and 1922, Alice served as president of the Urbana Women's Club. To honor her service, the club dedicated an acre of land for tree plantings in southern Illinois in her name. She died at age 86 in March 1945.

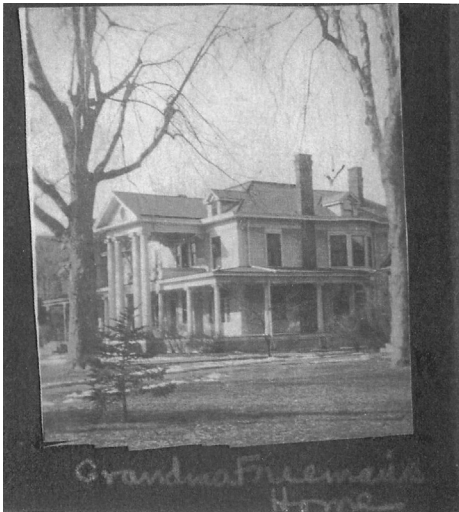
The Freeman Residence, 504 West Elm Street

In the summer of 1902, the Freemans purchased Lot 2 of Sutton's Subdivision and in July of that year hired Joseph W. Royer to draw up plans for a residence. In August 1902, they awarded the contract for construction of their new residence to Urbana contractor Edward Benton. In November 1902, the massive paired pillars on the mansion's façade had been put in place and by April 1903, the Freeman family had moved into their new home.



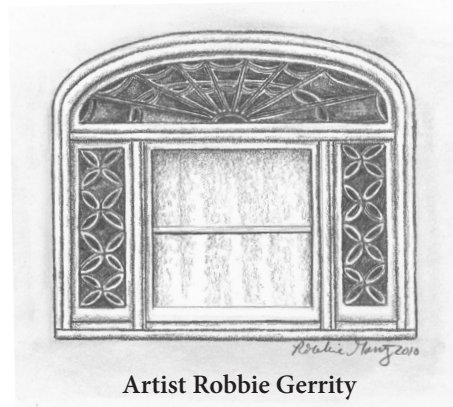
Leaded glass window

The Freeman House is an excellent example of the Classical Revival architectural style, which was particularly popular for bank buildings and public buildings such as libraries. The style gained a surge in popularity following the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago and the 1901 Pan-American Exhibition in San Francisco. While sharing the use of classical elements with the shorter-lived Beaux-Arts style, Classical Revival was simpler in its effect, using more post and lintel or temple forms and Greek classical forms. Characteristic elements of this style preserved on the house include symmetrical elevation, prominent projecting two-story portico, one-story full-width porch, pedimented dormers, pilasters, large one-over-one-light double-hung windows with wood surrounds and wide hood molds, and elegant classical and federal style details in the windows and entry.



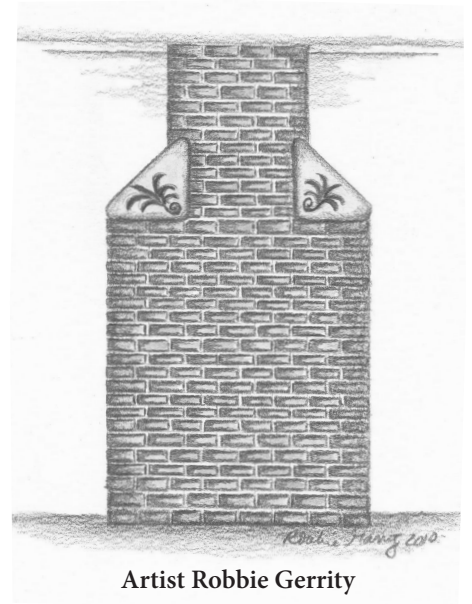
Simple wood steps lead up to the projecting two-story entry portico whose fluted Ionic columns support a full entablature with dentils and pediment. The pediment's tympanum has a center oculus sash with finely detailed leaded-glass tracery;

elaborate foliated swags curve upward around the sash. Dentils ornament the pediment rakes, while the wide overhanging eaves are sheathed in artificial siding. The body of the house has its original narrow clapboard siding above the brick foundation with wood watertable. Tall, fluted pilasters ornament the corners and a



Artist Robbie Gerrity

classically-inspired semi-hexagonal entry is centered in the facade. The entry door is flanked by extremely narrow sidelights, and a large, wonderfully executed fanlight with leaded-glass tracery is set over the entry; a narrow paneled architrave with decorative corner blocks surrounds the entryway. Flanking the entrance are double-hung lozenge



Artist Robbie Gerrity

sash with similar tracery fanlights, spandrel panels, and narrow paneled architrave with corner blocks. To the east and west of the entrance are similar window groups consisting of a wide double-hung window with ornately patterned beveled-glass sidelights; similar tracery fanlights are set over these window ensembles. Centered in the second story is a wood balcony set into the porch's roof and under the portico. This balcony has a low open balustrade with paneled pedestals. A center door with flanking





double-hung lozenge sash opens onto the deck. To either side are one-over-one-light windows. A truncated hip roof covers the residence. Broken apex pedimented dormers flank the portico. The dormers have pilasters, dentils, and round-arched leaded-glass sash-over-one-light windows. The west elevation continues many of the details found on the façade and includes a triple one-light sash surmounted by an elaborate stained-glass transom. Like the west elevation, the east elevation continues many of the details of the façade, and includes a brick exterior chimney with decorative foliated stone shoulders and an ornate oval window with leaded-glass tracery set in a rectangular surround. The interior includes two beautiful fireplaces still on the first floor. Also on the first



floor is an intricately detailed wooden staircase.

The Freemans lived in their Elm Street home for 36 years. Following the death her husband in 1937, Alice Freeman moved to Champaign to reside with her daughter Jessie (Freeman) Campbell. The next owners of the Freeman property were Jenna Mae and James R. Harris, who purchased it from Mrs. Alice Busey on July 5, 1939. Mr. Harris, a contractor, and his wife occupied the building until 1948, after which they began to use it as a non-occupant rental. On April 20, 1964, Jenna Mae Harris sold the property to Donald Wayne Neibel, who continued to use it as rental property. Records from May 5, 1964 describe the property as a frame building with 12 apartments. Currently, the building is still used as an apartment complex.

Conversations between the author and a descendant of Gus and Alice Busey residing in Virginia revealed that Virginia artist Robbie Garrity was so impressed with this building that she completed several drawings of the house and its architectural details, all of which have sold. How fitting that this residence, which is reminiscent of southern mansions, should be recognized for its architectural beauty by an artist in Virginia.



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 for more information.

The ideal candidate is willing to be an active preservation advocate, engage our community through educational outreach, develop collaborative partnerships, and assist in identifying and securing financial resources necessary for PACA to advance it's mission. A background interest in architectural design, historic preservation, local history, or neighborhood and community issues is useful.

In order to serve, a candidate must hold an individual or family PACA membership in good standing, and commitments include attendance at the monthly board meeting, attention to semi-regular email communications, and staying actively informed about ongoing projects in between meetings.

The deadline for nominations is March 11th.

If you or anyone you know may be interested please contact Elyse@pacacc.org for more information.

Thank you for your support of PACA.



2020 Heritage Awards

This year our Heritage Awards ceremony will be a little different.

Throughout our history we've presented our Heritage Awards as a part of our annual membership meeting, but it's never been an entirely comfortable mix since many of the people who come for the awards have no real connection to or interest in the business affairs of PACA, and the added length of the entire program can make it a strain on our regular members to have to sit through the awards in order to participate in the meeting. We've tried having the awards at the beginning or moved them to the end, but could never find the right balance.

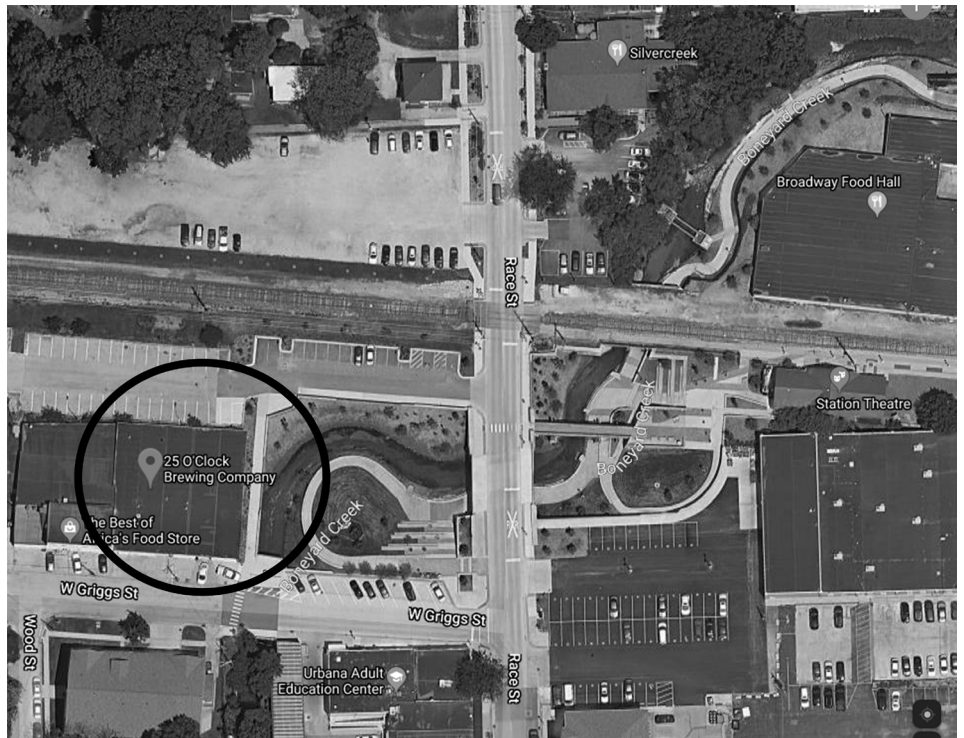
Because of this we've talked about separating the two events for some time and now, for the first time, we're going to try this out and see how it works.

Our awards this year will be held

on February 22nd at the Twenty-Five O'clock Brewery which is located at 208 W Griggs St in Urbana. The program will start at 6pm and will be a stand-alone event (our annual meeting this year will be on April 25th, venue to be announced), and we hope to make

it an enjoyable one for the award winners and interested PACA members alike.

I hope you'll consider dropping by to see the awards ceremony and to talk to the winners about their projects.



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