



Preservation Matters

PRESERVATION AND CONSERVATION ASSOCIATION

Volume 28

May-June, 2008

Number 3

Focus On: Joseph W. Royer's and N.H. Cohen's Forgotten Urbana Post Office

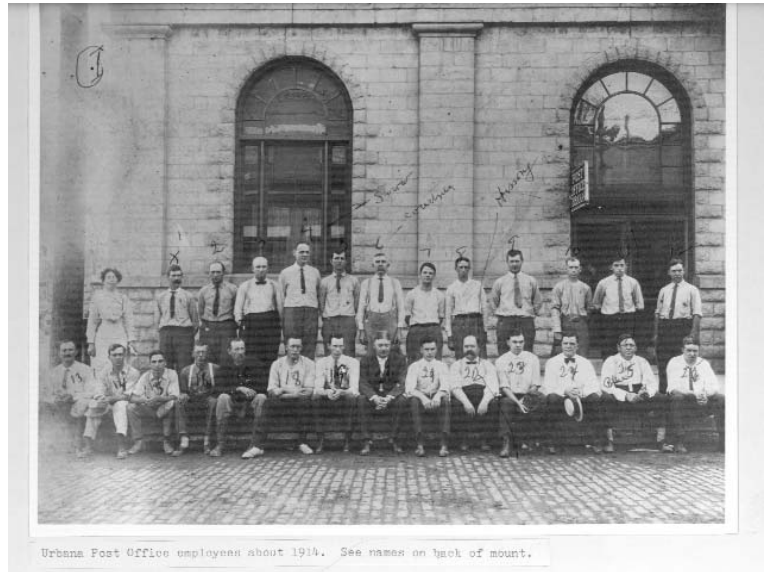
Prior to the construction of the post office building at West Elm and Broadway streets in 1914, the City of Urbana's post office was located at 106 North Race Street. This post office, which was designed by Joseph W. Royer, was built in 1906 and replaced an earlier post office located in the old (pre-1907) Cohen building at the corner of North Race and West Main streets. The 1906 Royer post office is especially significant as it likely represents the earliest concrete block structure designed by the architect. Stories published in the *Urbana Courier-Herald* and other local papers between April 1906 and March 1907 present a fascinating history of Urbana's "forgotten" post office.

The 1906 post office was built by "Colonel" N.H. Cohen on a lot he owned north of a building block that housed his cigar factory as well as an earlier post office. An article in the April 4, 1906 edition of the *Courier-Herald* suggests Cohen was negotiating for the site with post office officials in Chicago at this time, but a decision on a site had not yet been reached. By the end of April 1906, it was announced that Joseph W. Royer had completed plans for the new post office building (*Champaign Daily Gazette*, Wednesday, April 25, 1906):

The plans represent a building covering N.H. Cohen's entire lot at the rear of the present postoffice. The toilets and carrier rooms are to be in the concrete basement. On the first floor is to be the postoffice, postmaster's private office, clerk's workroom, carrier's work room and a large corridor for the public. It is expected the contract will be let within the next 10 days.

Preparation for construction began in late April when sheds on the lot were razed,

The staff of the Urbana Post Office poses in front of their new building constructed in 1906. It was designed by Joseph Royer. Photo courtesy of the Champaign County Historical Archives of the Urbana Free Library.



Urbana Post Office employees about 1914. See names on back of mount.

and excavations for the foundation began during the first week of May, 1906. About this same time, five bids had been received from contractors to construct Royer's building. It is interesting to note that in addition to the removal of sheds from the construction site, the old *Courier* building "...opposite the present home of the *Urbana Courier-Herald*..." was also razed (*Urbana Courier-Herald*, Tuesday, May 15, 1906). The location of the old *Courier* building is clearly depicted on the 1902 *Sanborn Fire Insurance Map*. Towards the end of May 1906, the old *Courier* building was down, and its bricks were being salvaged for use in the foundation of the new post office building.

Iron work began arriving at the post office construction site in mid-June 1906, and masonry work on the foundation was about ready to commence. However, it was reported at this time that apparently an error had been made in the dimensions of the foundation, and an additional four feet had to be excavated to the north of the existing excavation (*Urbana Courier-Herald*, Thursday, June 28, 1906). Disaster

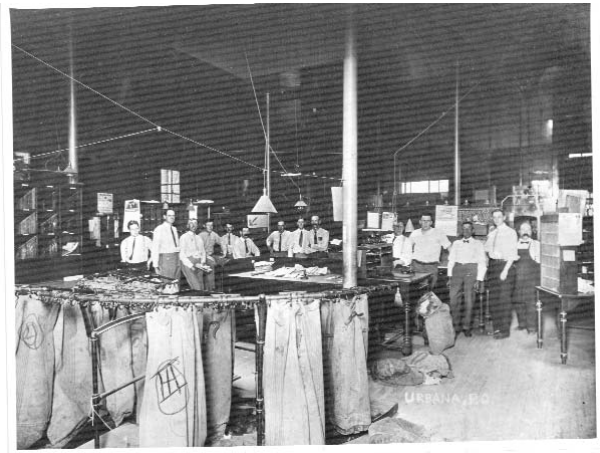
soon struck when the north wall collapsed, "...a portion of the alley just north of the excavations giving way and sliding into the hole" (*Urbana Courier-Herald*, Friday, June 29, 1906). While no workers were injured, work was delayed in order to clean out the collapsed material as well as shut off and repair a broken water pipe.

By the first week of July, 1906, work had resumed on the post office and by the middle of the month, cement blocks were being hauled to the site in readiness for construction of the superstructure. The use of concrete blocks for the building generated some interest and controversy at the time, suggesting this was an uncommon or unfamiliar construction technique in the city. A brief article in the July 17, 1906 *Courier-Herald* reports the following:

Laying Concrete Blocks. The first concrete blocks for the new postoffice building were laid today and the building will now rise rapidly in the direction of the skies. These blocks are laid by the regular brick masons, it being directly in line of work for men of the trowel.



Post office staff pose inside the building (right). The Rose Bowl Tavern now occupies the space of the historic post office (left). Its facade was covered with permastone circa 1950s, but vestiges of the original textured concrete block are extant on the side elevations (lower right). Photos courtesy of the CCHA at the Urbana Free Library.



On Thursday, July 19, 1906, the *Courier-Herald* reported that Colonel Cohen had demanded work cease on the building as he was not satisfied with the appearance of the concrete block work (*Urbana Courier-Herald*, Thursday, July 19, 1906). No details of Cohen's concerns are given at this time, but a subsequent article published the same month indicates the crisis revolved around the use of lime mortar and the appearance of joints. Apparently at Cohen's request cement mortar was to be used instead and rounded or beaded joints formed between blocks. Despite resolution of the mortar/joint crisis, work had still not resumed by the end of July, 1906. The *Urbana Courier-Herald* (Tuesday, July 31, 1906) reported that "...the hitch is said to be between the architect and the contractor in regard to plans and it is said that after this has been straightened out work will again proceed." Whatever the problem was, work had again resumed by the second week of August, 1906.

By the second week of September 1906, the building was still not finished, but Cohen assured the *Urbana Courier-Herald* reporter that it would be ready for occupancy by October 1, 1906. The use of cement block construction continued to generate interest. An article published on Monday, September 10, 1906 states... "It is a substantial structure and a great many are waiting to see whether the cement blocks are practical in inclement weather - wet and freezing." Clearly there was concern about the ability of the cement blocks to withstand exposure to the elements.

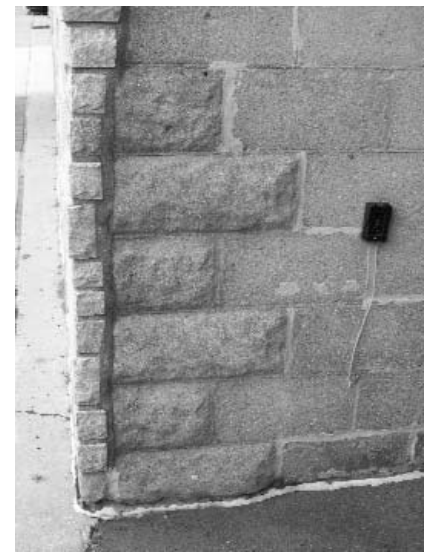
Completion of the Royer Urbana Post Office building was announced in the October 13, 1906 edition of the *Urbana Courier-Herald*, and by October 24, 1906

the building had been occupied by postal staff. Concern about the durability of the concrete blocks used to construct the building continued. On March 26, 1907, the *Urbana Courier-Herald* wrote:

The Urbana postoffice is today being covered with a waterproof composition which will stop the concrete blocks from absorbing water. It will prevent discoloration.

The North Race Street post office designed by Joseph W. Royer was in operation for a period of about eight years. By 1914, it had been succeeded by the current building at the corner of West Elm and Broadway streets, now owned by the Independent Media Center but still functioning in part as a post office. City Directories indicate that between 1916 and 1920, the Royer Post Office was used as an auto dealership (Lumley Bros., Rewerts & Ehler) and auto repair/garage (R. H. Snyder & Co.). In 1921/1922, the building housed the "Playmor Billiard Parlor," and in 1924 the address is indicated as vacant. In 1925 (J. E. Gibson) and 1928 (F. C. Whittaker) the building at 106 North Race Street is again listed as a billiard parlor. In 1931 it is listed as vacant.

Surprisingly, Joseph W. Royer's and N.H. Cohen's 1906 post office building still stands in the City of Urbana. It currently houses the "Rose Bowl Tavern" and although the facades and north walls have been altered, the general features of the Royer-designed building are still perceivable. In particular, the original concrete blocks are visible on the southwest and northwest corners, as well as portions of the east and south walls. One can even see the rounded cement mortar joints requested by N.H. Cohen. A photograph taken



around 1914 in front of the North Race Street post office indicates that the original Royer facades of the structure was executed in the Romanesque style, with exterior walls of large block construction with windows and entrances separated by bas relief columns (pilasters). The tall windows and doorways were round arched, with alternating long- and short-block trim (quoins).

This article was researched and written by Brian Adams, Assistant Director of the Public Service Archaeology & Architecture Program at the University of Illinois' Department of Anthropology. He has been actively involved in historic preservation efforts in Urbana and recently helped with the successful local landmark designations of 502 (Sutton House) and 504 (Freeman House) West Elm Street in Urbana. Adams is especially interested in researching the life and works of Urbana architect Joseph W. Royer.

From the Executive Director

After twenty-six plus years working with the boards and members of the Preservation and Conservation Association, I have begun a phased retirement. Over the next year, I will be relinquishing various duties. The Board of Directors is seeking an individual or individuals to help run the organization. Director duties are varied and require differing amounts of time depending on monthly activity. Some of the duties include maintaining the membership list and other clerical work; coordinating the publishing of the newsletter (six issues/ year); dealing with phone and e-mail messages; organizing the annual meeting; arranging for the Heritage Awards; monitoring the Heritage Grant Program; testifying in preservation related cases before the preservation commissions, plan commissions, and city councils; working on special projects (Solon House, endangered buildings, and the like); supervising volunteer "staff"; and general administrative duties. Although minimal, there is some monetary compensation.

If you are interested in the position or would like to help with just a part, such as clerical work or newsletter production, etc., please contact me or a board member. I hope to make the transition easy for all.

It has been a pleasure to work for PACA for so many years. I have had a great deal of fun, as well as sadness at the loss of important buildings and sites, but it is time to join my husband in his retirement. I know that PACA will continue its important mission as it has such a solid base of community support.

Karen Kummer

Website Volunteers Needed

PACA is in the process of updating its website into a useful resource for the community. We have committed resources and have in-kind commitments from a professional graphic design firm. However, we need a few volunteers for a short time to support the graphic designers. Volunteers will be responsible for gathering material (information and photos) for lay-out and assembly by the graphic artists. Volunteers only need an interest in preservation and the ability to commit some time over the next few months. No web editing experience is necessary.

Information that will be contained on the website includes: history of lost and saved historical properties, heritage awards and grants, newsletters (may include scanning or digitizing), salvage (warehouse, donations, reuse of material), preservation and salvage resources, calendar, historic neighborhoods, and education.

Please respond to Elisabeth Jenicek if you can devote some time to this one-time, limited-time volunteer effort: elisabeth.m.jenicek@us.army.mil.

Salvage Volunteers

April was a fantastic month for volunteers helping with salvage projects. A great crew helped move twelve large glass display cases from the Harding Band building into a waiting moving van for their journey to the German American Heritage Museum in Davenport, Iowa. Over three weekends, student volunteers from Architecture 232 helped clean and organize the warehouse side yard and straightened and organized hundreds of pieces of tin ceiling donated by the Hickory Apartment project. We want to thank Elyse Dinocemo, Cara Hyde-Basso, Tozi Wallace, Mike Miller, Barbara Willis, John Fricano, Tony Grice, Venera Kosti, Bethany Carroll, Mark McClughen, Bianca Colmenares, Sara Guaquil, Dylan Fischer, Suzanne Ashley-Wannemuehler, Tedra Ashley, Joe Pitlik, Betty Swisher, Ronna Stoddard, Suzanne Bachmann, Dan Leasure, Tom Garza, Matt Emmert, and Scott Schwartz.

PACA Volunteers also manned a six hour session of the March WILL fundraising telethon. We want to thank the following for giving up their Saturday evening. Antje Kolodziej, Robert Selby, Neil



"Second shift" PACA volunteers at the March WILL-TV telethon. PACA has volunteered at the event for a number of years.

P.A.C.A. Membership Application

MEMBERSHIP CATEGORY

- Adult \$15
- Student \$10
- Senior Citizen \$10
- Family \$20
- Corporate \$75

- Additional Contribution _____

TYPE

- New _____
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Contributions are tax deductible to the extent allowed by law.

Lasater, Marcia Lasater, Darcy Bean, Kelly Bean, Dorothy Neumann, Catherine Barbercheck, Jeannie Covert, Ralph Langenheim, Mary Tangora, Sylvia Sullivan, Cara Day, Michael Markstahler, and Janice Juraska.

Annual Membership Meeting

The 2008 PACA Membership Meeting was held on Sunday, April 20 in the auditorium of Lincoln Hall on the University of Illinois campus. At the meeting, two directors were reelected to a three-year term on the board: Elisabeth Jenicek and Brian Duffield. Robert Swisher was newly elected to a three year term; Bob had previously served a term in the mid-1980s. Currently serving on the board are Gerald Schmidt, Sarah Nemeth, Susan Frobish, Catherine Barbercheck, Kathleen Jones, and Tom Garza. Carol Knepp retired from the board due to her very demanding duties as the executive director of the Orpheum Children's Science Museum. At the meeting, the membership approved the 2008 budget. The 2008 Heritage Awards were also presented.



UI Architecture students volunteered to clean and organize the Salvage Warehouse. They also help salvage hundreds of pieces of tin ceiling. Photo by D. Leasure

Preservation Matters: newsletter of the Preservation and Conservation Association
 P.O. Box 2575, Station A, Champaign, IL 61825
 Brian Duffield, President
 Tom Garza, Vice-President
 Sarah Nemeth, Treasurer
 Elisabeth Jenicek, Secretary
 Karen Lang Kummer, Exec. Director

359-PACA: Telephone & Answering Service
 website: pacacc.org
 e-mail: pacaexdir@comcast.net



Salvage Donations

University of Illinois

New & Renewing Memberships (received since the last newsletter)

Charter Members (1981-1983)
 Susan K. Appel

Fantastic Supporters (Over Twenty Year Members)
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 Roger & Dolores Yarbrough
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Eleven to Twenty Year Members
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*Remember to check your mailing label for your membership renewal date. The date shown indicates when you **last renewed**; membership runs for one year from that date.*



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