



Preservation Matters

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A Crown Jewel, Lost

In the grand tradition of Champaign-Urbana, a spectacular fire has once again robbed the city of what has been described as “the architectural jewel of downtown Champaign.” The Bailey-Rugg building is gone, burned to the ground on the morning of November 7th, 2008.

Affectionately known as the Metropolitan Building, it stood on the southwest corner of Neil and Church streets since it was built in 1871. Home to numerous drugstores, countless small businesses, shops, and lodge halls, it was the site of the original Robeson's Department Store.

A massive red brick structure of three stories, it boasted elegant round-headed Italianate windows, limestone trim, soaring twenty-foot ceilings, and a magnificent bracketed entablature. It anchored its corner for generations, even after it lost its sister buildings on the other corners: the Swannell Block at 1 Main and the Kariher Block to the northwest.

The Metropolitan stood proud when Champaign's streets were still a sea of mud. It saw the coming of the trolley car and the gradual replacement of the horse and carriage by the automobile. It witnessed the demolition of the Walker Opera House at the other end of the block and the fantastic original offices of The News-Gazette across the street. It survived a scheme by owner C.F. Hamilton in 1917 to replace it with a twelve-story hotel building, capped by a luxurious glass winter garden with a retractable roof that would have towered over downtown Champaign. The plans were drawn, everything in place, the contracts let for its demolition, but long-time tenant Tucker Drugstore held out just long enough. America entered WWI, steel production was diverted to the war effort,

and Hamilton's plan was put on the shelf, never to be revived.



In a well-known photo of WWII VE day, the Metropolitan stands proudly over the throngs of celebrating citizens, a city bus stranded in the jubilant crowd at the front door. The Metropolitan slowly began to show its age in the post war years, and by the 1970s the upper floors were empty and full of dust, a faded sign for a long gone furrier the only indication they were ever occupied. The building saw down-



town Champaign fade out, witnessed the ill-fated pedestrian mall on Neil Street, and the advent of the internet age. It even survived the Great Fire of 1987 that devastated the north side of Main Street. The building was listed on the National

Register of Historic Places in 1997 by a descendent of Daniel Rugg, Robert Hamilton Tilden. Finally the Metropolitan found a savior, when it was purchased in 2006 by Jeff Melander, Bob Balisrud and George Grubb. They immediately began an extensive restoration-renovation project that would have thoroughly transformed the building. Its facade was cleaned and repointed, the massive entablature was repaired, with the missing elements replaced and repainted. All of the tall elegant round-headed windows were sent off to be painstakingly restored and those that were beyond help were faithfully reproduced and reinstalled. The two upper floors were gutted and twelve beautiful loft apartments were being built, each of them taking advantage of the soaring ceilings and magical light. An elevator was discretely installed and a new lobby created in a space that few had seen in thirty years: a thirty-foot cube of space that once linked Frank Robeson's Church Street store with his store in the Metropolitan.

The whole city watched the progress, eagerly awaiting its completion and comparing the Metropolitan's elegance to the newer modern buildings around it. The new buildings on the block towered over the Metropolitan in size, but failed to overshadow it in style. Jeff Mellander thought they were perhaps a month, at most two, away from completion of the loft apartments. The shop spaces on the first story were being completely rebuilt after the recent move of THE ESTATE SALE to its new location on North Neil Street. Everything was looking up for the Metropolitan and most of us felt confident that it would remain as the Crown Jewel of downtown.

At this time, no one is sure what started the fire, but the alarm went out at 5

am and by the time the first fire trucks arrived, the building was completely engulfed in flames. Smoke, burning debris, and a fine orange dust billowed into the sky. Hot embers threatened other



Photo from "History in Postcards, Champaign, Urbana, and the University of Illinois," (or Italic) by Willis C. Baker and Patricia L. Miller, Illinois Heritage Association, 1993.

nearby buildings. The heat broke windows at One Main and set small fires at the uncompleted Main 2. Windblown embers set fire to the roof of the historic Orpheum Children's Science Museum. Luckily an employee at One Main spotted the smoldering roof and gave the alarm, averting another disaster. The staff at PACA's warehouse at Washington and Walnut streets even found cold embers in its salvage yard as did many other business and building owners to the north.

The Walker Building, south of the Metropolitan, its equal in age, suffered extensive damage to its roof and third floor and there is some question as to the structural integrity of the north firewall. There is nothing left of the Metropolitan Building but a great black gaping hole and the pitiful remains of the shop fronts on Neil Street.

But the owners are already talking about rebuilding. Jeff Mellander did extensive documentation of the original building, so reconstruction is not outside the realm of possibility. Mellander is not one to cut corners either. When he expanded the historic Atkinson Building into its neighbor to give his business, Precision Graphics, more space, he made every effort to make the jointure of the two buildings seamless. The same stone, same carving and fittings, all the details matched. If any one can give us back a new Metropolitan Building, it is Mellander and his partners, along with their talented crew of designers, workmen and crafts people. This author and the folks at PACA urge him to give the project a great deal of thought. Don't take

the easy route and give us another bland office building that pays little if any heed to its historical context. Don't add to the overpowering gigantification of downtown and campus town. Give us back the quiet red brick dignity of the Metropolitan we all knew and loved. History will thank you for it.

This article was written by Mark Chenail, who holds a master's degree in architectural history and is retired from the UI Library. He and Dan Leasure are the new editors of the newsletter.

A Magnificent Business Block

The Bailey-Rugg Building occupies lot two of the Farnham, Clark, and White Addition to West Urbana, which was platted in 1854. Records indicate that a frame commercial building was built on this lot by the above developers around 1857. A two-story building is illustrated on the 1858 Bowman Map.



1863 Bowman Map of Champaign County from Champaign County Historical Archives

In 1863, Daniel Rugg purchased the building at the southeast corner of Neil and Church streets for \$2,500. He immediately moved his boot and shoe store one door north to this building. J.S. Lothrop's City Directory of 1870-1871 discusses Ruggs as being the oldest and best shoe store. He also mentions that Rugg "is about to build a fine brick block where his store now stands, which will add much to the attraction of his well appointed store." Rugg took out a mortgage of \$9,000 to erect his three-story brick building.

The November 23, 1870 issue of the Champaign County Gazette remarked:

... A few days ago the Walker Bros., well known for their energy, enterprise, and go-aheadativeness (sic), closed a contract with Mr. R.A. Sutton, of Urbana, for an immense number of brick-ever so many thousand-with which they intend next season to

construct an immense furniture warehouse. The structure will be three stories high, with a substantial stone basement, will occupy the site of their present location and also the lot just to the south, now vacant. . . .

We also hear it stated upon good authority, that Mr. D. Rugg will erect a like building; of like dimensions, on the corner of Neil and Church streets, in the place now occupied by Faulkner's Drugs and Rugg's boot and shoe store. If this be done, . . . it will become, in that event, necessary for Mr. Bailey, who owns the frame buildings intermediate, to build in a corresponding style. We think we can vouch for Mr. Bailey in this matter, and do not believe he is the man to be found lagging where capital and enterprise are needed for the development of our thriving young city. The prospect is flattering, and next season, beyond a doubt, will witness the gradual rise of a magnificent business block, three stores high and 132 feet frontage. . . .

David Bailey and Daniel Rugg agreed to jointly erect a three-story building with common staircases. The building was completed within six months of foundations being started! It contained stores on the first floor, offices and storage on the second floor, and meeting halls on the third floor.

The building is often referred to as the "Metropolitan Building" and the two buildings (Bailey-Rugg and Walker Buildings) as the Metropolitan Block. Research suggests that the "Metropolitan" name was created by the Champaign County Gazette as individual street address numbers were not given to buildings in Champaign until the 1880s. Before then, location was given by landmarks or the specific names of buildings. Thus, when these new three-story brick buildings were constructed, there would have been some movement for naming the buildings. Newspaper accounts detail the discussion, including the following from the December 6, 1871 issue.

Agreeable to the suggestion made in our last issue Messres. Walker Bros., David Bailey and D. Rugg, took into consideration a proper cognomen for the elegant three-story block but lately erect (sic) by them on Neil Street. Upon the suggest (sic) of Mr. L.W. Walker, it was named the Metropolitan Block. So be it. Hurrah for the Metropolitan! For the men who built it and for him who named it.

But the next issue noted that the Walker Brothers changed their mind.

Upon information last week furnished us by one of the proprietors of the new block on Neil Street, we stated that said row of buildings had been named the Metropolitan Block. The Walker Bros. request us to say that the name was announced without their consent or agreement and they will not permit their part of the row to "sail" under the new name. We are sorry that any misunderstanding exists among the gentlemen most interested, and trust, for the sake of convenience in conversation and writing that no confusion of names will grow out of it.

As late as 1878, the Masons listed their hall as being in the "Metropolitan." It is likely the tag "Metropolitan," being a creation of the newspaper, was used until street numbers came into use in the 1880s. Although the Bailey-Rugg Building and Walker Brothers Building were similar, including having the same entablature, there was some difference in the detailing around the windows. There was also no physical connection between the two buildings.

The third floor halls were popular places. An opera house occupied the south meeting hall of Bailey's half of the building when it opened in November, 1871. However, the use of the building for an opera house was short lived as by January 10, 1872 the Champaign Masonic Lodge was a tenant in the space under a five year lease. The northern half of the third floor, owned by Rugg, was rented (1871) by the Independent Order of Odd Fellows (I.O.O.F.). In 1884, the I.O.O.F. built their own headquarters building at 111 North Neil Street. This building was demolished in 1981 for a parking lot. In 1898, the Masons moved to a building at 20-22 Main Street, to the west of the present-day Lincoln Building (1916). This building is also gone. In 1914 the Masons built their own lodge building at 202-204 West Hill Street, now the Jefferson

Building. During the 1920s, the Champaign High School used these third floor rooms for indoor six-man team football games and basketball games.

On the first story of the building, Faulkner's Drug Store occupied their same corner position as before. To the south of Faulkner's was Rugg's Boot and Shoe Store. Faulkner Drugs moved out of the corner storefront in 1903 and S.C. Tucker moved his drug store into that location. Tucker had a large and handsome painted sign installed on the north elevation of the building for his drug store.

Sometime after 1878, F.K. Robeson's Dry Goods expanded into the south portion of the building. The dry goods firm also occupied storefronts in the Walker Brother's Building. In 1898, the firm took over Rugg's store space. F.K. Robeson's Dry Goods became Robeson's Department Store and as such erected a true department store building on the southeast corner of Church and Randolph streets beginning in 1915. For some time the firm continued its business in both locations--at the Walker Brothers and Bailey-Rugg buildings and at the new department store. However, by 1920 the store had consolidated in its own building.

In 1915 Charles Hamilton purchased the building from his father-in-law. A year later, Hamilton sold the building to the Hamilton Hotel Company, which took out a \$50,000 mortgage on the property in 1919 to remodel the building. Remodeling included lowering the first-story ceilings and the placement of large steel beams above the storefronts to open them up, the replacement of the storefront facades, and the removal of the first floor dividing wall between 223 and 225 N. Neil.

Later occupants of the building were varied.

After Robeson's moved out in 1920, Buehler's Meat Market occupied the storefront to the south of Tucker's Drug Store. By 1925, Sholem Fashion Boot shop opened in the storefront formerly occupied by Buehler's. The south store was Harvey's Ladies Ready-To-Wear Shop in the 1930s, Ralph Miller's Ladies Shop in the late 1940s, The Three Sisters Shop in the early 1950s, and later Lane's women's store. During the tenure of Lane's, the four windows on the second story were covered with a large metal facade. In the 1970s, a series of taverns opened in the building, while in the 1980s, the DSC Thrift Store occupied the building. Hilliard Lyons Investments was there in the 1990s.

In 1997, the great-grandson of Daniel Rugg, Robert Hamilton Tilden, had the building listed on the National Register of Historic Places after he had purchased the Bailey building in 1968 from the Bailey family. He sold both buildings in 2002 to the Fu Partnership, who installed their Soltec computer business on the first story. Jeff Mellander, Bob Balisrud and George Grubb then acquired the building and embarked on its restoration in 2006.

This article was condensed from the National Register for Historic Places nomination for which Michael Markstahler supplied much of the research.

PACA in Cyberspace

PACA has been lumbering away with a "temporary" web site for a long time. However, thanks to the mountain of work led by our website champion, Elisabeth Jenicek, a new and much improved PACA web site is up and running. Check it out at www.pacacc.org. Although the site went live at the beginning of November, there are still corrections to be made and

P.A.C.A. Membership Application

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more content, including photos, will be added in an on-going process.

A special thanks goes out to the enormously generous Precision Graphics for creating and hosting our site. Their staff was particularly helpful during every phase. PACA would also like to thank our previous web host, Shouting Ground, for all of their support over the past years. PACA is looking for member feedback on the new site. Please visit pacacc.org and let us know how we can improve the site.

A Special Thank You

PACA's Annual Membership and Volunteer Recognition Party was held in October. The Board of Directors wants to say Thanks to everyone who came out to help us celebrate our hard working volunteers. Their dedication truly makes PACA's mission possible.

We extend our thanks to our friends at Bombay Indian Grill, Chevy's Fresh Mex, and Garcia's Pizza-in-a-Pan for all the wonderful food served up again this year! A special thanks to David Spears at Radio Maria for the overwhelming selection of outstanding pastries and dessert specially made for the event. Please remember these generous supporters of PACA when you have a craving for a night out!

Thanks also go out to our regular volunteers from the warehouse, Linda and Darrel Foste for their help setting up for the party and for their ongoing supply of special treats throughout the year, for which the warehouse staff never stops

craving. In addition, all of the regular volunteers: Mike Miller, Bob and Betty Swisher, Suzanne Ashley-Wannemuehler, Brian Duffield, Jerry Schmidt, Al Friederich, Mark Chenail, and Dan Leasure, spent numerous hours cleaning and organizing the warehouse to make room for everyone. An extra double thanks goes to Becky Duffield for all her work taking care of many of the party details. A triple thank you goes to Dan Leasure, who once again organized the party.

Besides the faces behind the salvage effort, there are countless other PACA volunteers that deserve recognition for all of their help. These include our WILL telethon helpers, our Board members, Solon House volunteers, researchers, website developers, and many others behind the scenes who help in so many different ways. So Thanks to all of you for every-

New & Renewing Memberships (received since the last newsletter)

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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.

Preservation Matters: newsletter of the Preservation and Conservation Association

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