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Champaign's Sesquicentennial Neighborhood

An Early History of the 200 Block of West Vine Street, Champaign

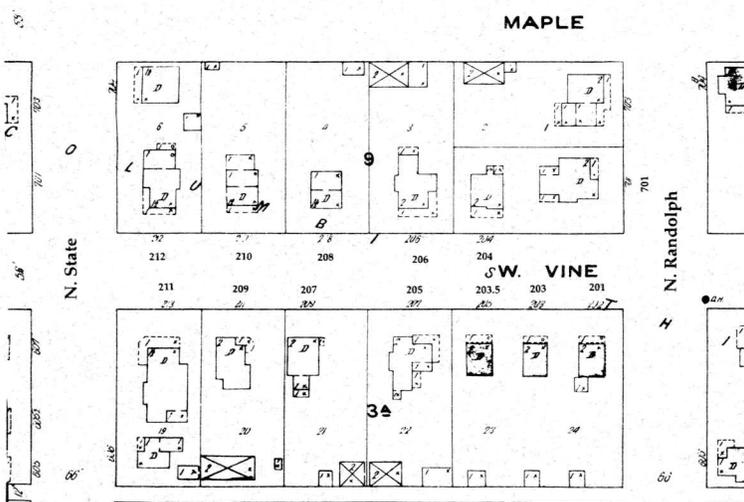
The broad neighborhood from just north of the Wabash and Big Four tracks south to Washington, and from Neil St. west to Elm St. is all part of the Columbia/Vine/Maple Neighborhood Association. Most of this area is Champaign's oldest existing residential neighborhood. With pride it is called "Champaign's Sesquicentennial Neighborhood" as its 150th year anniversary is just a few short years away.

The 200 hundred block of West Vine was not the first area to be built upon in the neighborhood, although it was one of the earliest; but rather, it is unique for the extent and quality of its preserved historic residences. The 200 block of West Vine is the archetype of where Champaign's downtown small business owners, managers, head clerks and skilled craftsmen lived.

Useful Resources

Research on the history of individual houses requires the use of a variety of resources and, at times, reasonable guesses. Early maps and county and city directories are a prime resource. The directories do have some inaccuracies, but they are still a major source of aid. The files of the Champaign County Historical Archives are helpful for identifying long-time residents in the area.

Legal records, especially mortgages, can indicate the approximate date of construction of a house. A large increase in a recorded mortgage over the vacant lot sale price often indicates the financing of construction. It is important to compare contemporary vacant lot sales to help sort out construction from mere appreciation and inflation. Subsequent large increases in mortgages could indicate large additions to a house. It was not uncommon to demolish the first house and build a new one in its place. Another practice was to



1915 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map showing lots (#1 -6 and #19 -24) and buildings. Current addresses are shown toward the middle of the street.

move entire houses. Either of these may have happened in the 200 block of West Vine. Unfortunately, it would be difficult to verify such an occurrence.

There are several early "Birdseye View" maps of the City. The 1858 map combines Urbana and West Urbana. There are also two maps of the City of Champaign dated 1869 and 1884 respectively. These maps depict actual streets, yards and houses in existence at the time. They provide excellent benchmarks for determining construction dates. There are also maps created for insurance ratings called the Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps which also show lots and buildings. They are much less picturesque than the Birdseye maps but are very accurate as to detail and scale. Unfortunately, the first of these maps that shows all of Champaign is from 1909.

Using this combination of maps, the approximate age of houses can be determined. This reduces the amount of material that needs to be searched to determine actual age. The maps are a great help as there are no building records from those years. Nor are there tax assessor documents that might indicate construction of a house. Other aids are newspapers, marriage certificates, court cases,

abstracts and death certificates from the era. Actual street addresses did not come into use until the end of the 19th century. When they were first used there was not a clear system in place and many early addresses were later changed. Only current addresses have been used in this article.

Lot Sales

The 200 block of West Vine Street is part of Curtis F. Columbia's third addition to the City of Urbana filed on July 8, 1858. At this time Champaign was known as the Village of West Urbana. The first two lots (209 & 211 W. Vine) were sold on January 30, 1860 with the bulk of the lots sold before the end of the Civil War. The last lots, 22, 23 & 24, were sold in 1888 to George Beardsley, owner of the Beardsley Hotel.

The first sales of lots were often to speculators. Celestia A. Wolfe was an early player. The Langley family (he was a lawyer and county judge) also bought and sold lots in the new addition. Two other early speculators were George Beardsley and grocer James Dodson, Jr. In the majority of cases, houses were built as rental property rather than the owner's residence.