

Urbana Landmark Encompassed Era of 'Gracious Living':

Century-Old Busey Mansion to Be Razed



By Dorothy Wetzel

Almost 100 years of Urbana history, encompassing the period of "gracious living" here, will come to an end soon when the old Busey mansion will be torn down.

The Busey home, in the 500 block of W. Main Street, built in 1870 by one of Urbana's early residents, Col. Samuel T. Busey, will be torn down to make room for an apartment building.

Taking its name from this historical landmark, a newly formed corporation, Landmark Apartments, Inc., plans to begin construction soon on 96 modern apartment units in one building, with parking for 44 cars underground. On land across Griggs Street to the north an additional 26 units will go up. Additional parking and recreation space will be provided.

Developer Henry Voigtlander, present owner of the Busey home and surrounding property, said Wednesday he and his family have enjoyed living in the house and regret having to tear it down. He said he had originally hoped to erect an apartment building on one side of the property and retain the house which he divided into apartments shortly after purchasing it four years ago.

Bought From Family

The Voigtlanders have been the only owners of the

Built in 1870, Old Busey Mansion Still Retains Much of Its Early Charm

THE CARE AND FEEDING OF DOOR LOCKS

U. I. C. U.

the property from Mrs. James Klassen, the former Catherine Jane Tawney, granddaughter of Col. Busey.

Voigtlander originally sought to have the area zoned for R-4, thus permitting the construction of an eight-story apartment building. However, neighbors objected, and the city council vetoed the rezoning request. The apartments slated to go up soon will be legal under the present R-2 zoning.

Probably one of the last social events in the house to be torn down was a recent open house for the pleasure of many who had not had an opportunity to see it.

Stepping through heavy, carved double front doors, one enters a bygone era. Although the house has been converted into apartments, much of its early charm still exists. A room-size front hall is graced with a hanging chandelier of etched glass. A dark walnut staircase has rich red carpeting starting from a magnificent carved walnut newel post. Decorative plaster of paris moldings enhance every room. Ceilings are 12 feet high.

Bath Per Bedroom

There were five bedrooms in the original house, and later, when city life included bathrooms, one was added for each bedroom. A clay tub in the first floor bath was built on the spot and weighs 1,700 pounds. There are only two like it in Urbana. Ceramic tile in all the baths is set in cement; each bath is a different color and two or three have old-fashioned oval washbowls.

Twelve-foot doors close off the hall from what was the parlor, or living room, and a music

room or perhaps second parlor. The colonel installed dark walnut paneling in many of the rooms.

He built the house to last. All interior walls behind the paneling are of solid brick—18 inches thick. Mrs. Busey had a solarium added to the west front of the house for her indoor plants. This conservatory has curved walls of leaded glass. Originally there were several fireplaces, but the colonel's daughter, Marietta Busey Twanney, had all removed and one, in a study her husband added to the back of the house.

Visitors to the home once had a choice of hitching "Old Dobbin" to iron horses' heads beside the front walk, or near the barn, now a garage, in the back. A long curved drive was added when cars came into style. The colonel's granddaughter, Mrs. Klassen, added paved tennis courts on the east lawn when she lived in the house. However former residents of that area recall when the colonel and his family had courts laid out on grass two generations earlier.

Site of Busey Cabin

It is believed the house stands on the same spot where early Urbana pioneer Isaac Busey had his cabin.

Urbana was a young county

seat with a population of about 2,000 when the house was built. The University of Illinois had just been founded.

The Buseys owned land throughout the area. A large tract of timber north of Urbana is still known as Busey Woods. The colonel was in his early thirties when he returned to Urbana from the Civil War and built his home.

In 1870 W. Main Street ran diagonally across to University Avenue from the Busey Avenue intersection. Champaign was known as West Urbana shortly before the Civil War, and a street car drawn by mules served as transportation between the two towns.

The Busey family (actually at one time, eight families of Buseys lived in Urbana) has been prominent in the growth of Urbana. In 1836, three men—Samuel T. Busey, his brother, Simon H., and Dr. E. R. Earhart—started what is now known as Busey First National Bank.

It is the oldest business in Urbana and the second oldest bank in the county. Descendants of the colonel still retain control of the bank after 90 years.

The colonel served four terms of office — from 1880 to 1889—



Col. Samuel T. Busey

as mayor of Urbana. The family has always been active in civic affairs.

The Urbana Free Library is a memorial to members of the family, and the Frances Nelson home is built on land donated by descendants of the colonel. The land on which the new Urbana First Presbyterian Church will sit formerly was Busey property.

Samuel T. Busey built his home to last, and last it did, for almost 100 years.

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