

February 7, 2016

To: The President and Members of the Champaign Unit 4 Board of Education
From: Susan K. Appel, Champaign
Re: Important Central High School Expansion Information

I am writing to alert the Board to a serious issue that may affect your January 25, 2016 agreement to option for purchase a group of eight properties near Central High School for its expansion. The problem lies in the historic nature of the architecture among these properties, which you should be aware of before planning for the Central expansion proceeds further.

There are good reasons to argue that the potential demolition of most of these properties would be ill-advised on historic grounds. Research is ongoing concerning the other properties, but **today I especially want to bring to your attention the one that is probably the most important among them – the substantial Queen Anne style home at 603 West Church Street that should be known as the Albert C. and Julia F. Burnham House.**



This house is noteworthy for both its historic and its architectural excellence. **Designed by the renowned Chicago firm, Burnham & Root, it was completed in 1884 for Albert C. and Julia F. Burnham,** important figures in Champaign's history, who were the driving forces behind two extraordinarily important local institutions, Champaign's first hospital, the Julia F. Burnham Hospital (now gone), and its first permanent public library, the Burnham Athenaeum (still standing). These projects demonstrated the Burnhams' concern for the welfare and enhancement of their community.

A. C. Burnham was extremely successful financing the development of agricultural properties in central Illinois following the Civil War. He **founded the oldest banking firm in Champaign in 1861** (eventually the Bank of Illinois, now merged into Busey Bank). **Julia Burnham** was also a person of accomplishment. It was she who **put forth the idea for a local public hospital** in 1893, and she **oversaw preparations for it** until her death, late the next year. She served on the **State Board of Charities** and, significantly, **was one of the first women in Illinois to serve on the Public School Board.** **It would be ironic, at the very least, if the current School Board saw fit to destroy her home to pursue the expansion of Central High.**

To avoid demolition, the **School Board could look east across North Lynn Street** to the block also bounded by West Church, North Elm, and West Park for another possible path to and beyond West

Church Street. This block currently contains a number of inconsequential buildings – historically and architecturally speaking only – ***with the exception of the Mattis House and Carriage House (Heath & Vaughn Funeral Home), which should certainly not be disturbed.*** The idea has arisen of closing some streets or bridging above streets to avoid interrupting traffic. Perhaps the bridging could go to this adjacent block instead, then straight north across West Church to the former YMCA property.

I am sympathetic to the Board's very difficult task of finding a way to enlarge Central High. At the same time, I see no evidence of careful thought or investigation of the historical value of the properties selected for the option group, most especially the Burnham House. We all know that the area around Central is packed with historically interesting architecture that speaks to the development and nature of Champaign over a very long time. **But I encourage you to recognize that the Burnham House is one of the very most important and really must be avoided in any plans to expand Central High.**

My concern comes out of my many years' experience teaching architectural and art history, as well as serving on the Champaign Historic Preservation Commission and the State Historic Sites Advisory Council. I would be happy to share additional information with the Board on this important issue.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Susan K. Appel

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Properties Optioned for Purchase by the Champaign Unit 4 Board of Education (January 2016)

603 W. Church (The Albert C. & Julia F. Burnham House)



606 W. Park (originally the Burnham Carriage House)



201 N. Lynn



203 N. Lynn



606 W. Church & carriage house



Former McKinley YMCA/Phillippe Mansion, 500 Block of W. Church



Christian Science Church (602 W. Church) & Reading Room (605 W. Hill)

