

THE A. A. SMITH HOUSE

With restoration complete, the house should still be standing tall a century from now.



The A. A. Smith house in the Naperville Historic District was home to the first President of North Central College.

by Bartley J. Madden

Although not something I wanted, my family's house has become perhaps the most widely photographed house in Illinois. It is the place where the three Lemak children were murdered in 1999. Regrettably, many are unaware of the actual historical significance of the house to Naperville and its importance, in particular, to North Central College.

I would like to share with you the history of the house which was built for Augustine A. Smith, the first president of North Central College, and some highlights of its restoration. It is the story of 121 years of history and recent restoration work, and why Naperville residents find the restoration so uplifting.

“... a house with a long history that people should remember as a whole.”

Bill Nauman, grandson of Henry C. Smith, visited us soon after we moved into the house. He told us a great deal about the house and we appreciate his gift of photographs of the original owners, the Smith family. In a 1999 newspaper interview, Bill said, “My first thoughts were like everyone else's. I thought of the children and I grieved for them. But I want people to know the history of the house, to show it also was a place of joy. No one knows about all the good things that happened there ... The house, in a way, is a parable of life. In all our lives there is good and bad. Things we want to remember and things we want to forget. Here, now, is a house with a long history that people should remember as a whole.”

Augustine A. Smith

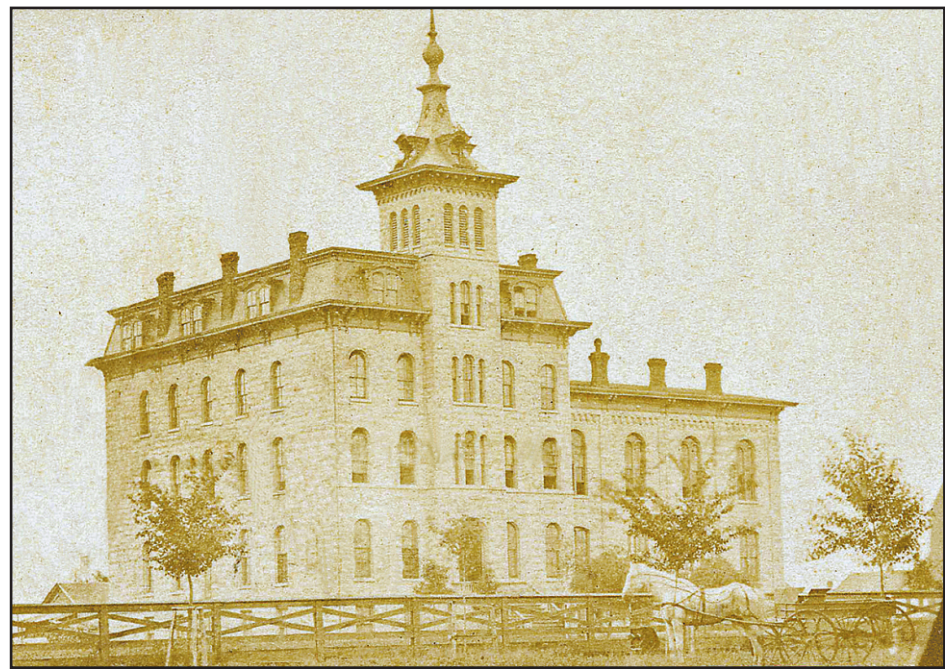
Augustine A. Smith was elected president of Plainfield College in 1861. Plainfield College moved to Naperville in 1870 and later took the name North Central College. For the 125th anniversary of the college in Naperville, President Harold R. Wilde reminisced about the Evangelical Christian leaders of the college, and the farmers and townspeople who brought limestone from the local quarry to erect the Old Main building which housed all of the college's activities in the early 1870's. In fact, Old Main was the entire college — classrooms, dorms, and administration were all housed in Old Main.

President Wilde noted: “From the start there was a mixture of generous instincts and practical motives ... commitments to the classical liberal arts and applied learning ... deep religious convictions and a careful concern for the bottom line. Above all, there was faith — in God and a larger purpose to life; faith in family and the virtue of hard work; faith in the capacity of humanity to learn and grow; faith in the future. These were not timid men and women. They were builders and developers, not afraid to embrace change, but wise enough to know what to hold onto.”

In 1872, two blocks from the majestic Old Main building, A.A. Smith purchased a corner lot. In 1885, his son and daughter-in-law, Henry C. and Mary Smith, built a classic Victorian house in the Eastlake style.

According to a diary kept by Henry's daughter, Fannie Smith, the house was filled with three generations of the Smith family and was the nucleus for a highly active social life. Professors and dignitaries were guests at the house, which was always filled with music since all of the Smith children possessed a special gift for playing musical instruments.

Today, an antique photograph stand is in the front foyer displaying pictures of many of these parties. Seeing the Smith family members eating at a crowded dining table, or playing musical instruments, takes you back in time to the happy days recorded in Fannie's diary.



The same limestone used to build the college's first building, Old Main (shown above circa 1880's) was used to build the A. A. Smith house foundation.

Restoration

In 1999, my wife, Maricela, and I were searching the historic district for a grand old Victorian. Our daughters, Miranda and Lucinda, had recently been adopted from Guatemala and ideally we wanted an old Victorian with a large upstairs play area for the girls. The A. A. Smith house met our needs, and we quickly purchased it. Some rooms had the original stained glass windows, multi-layered wood pocket doors, carved columns, and the like, while other rooms had little original material left.

Maricela's background in art and enthusiasm for design and detail were enormously useful during the restoration. She developed the plan for saving as much of the original house as possible. And she coordinated the interior design and selection of antique furniture made in that now bygone era when artists used wood for their creations.

Many of the top craftsmen in the local area worked on the house continually over a four and a half year period. The library, kitchen, and master bedroom and bathroom were completely torn apart and rebuilt. Custom woodwork was designed and made to coordinate with the other areas of the house. Extensive work was done in all areas. Plumbing, wiring, floors, roof, and heating and air conditioning were improved to ensure long-lived structural integrity.

The original front doors had long ago been removed. As such, we felt comfortable in creating panels of old stained glass to insert in the existing front doors. The stained glass doors now radiate strikingly beautiful colors, especially when illuminated at night from the inside.

The carriage house was completely rebuilt and now functions as Maricela's art studio. The landscaping mimics that of the time when grand Victorian homes were built. The final project (I hope) was the recent installation of curved arches under the roof gables. The arches were constructed to match arches shown in a very early photograph of the house and apparently they were later removed.

The Future

Our neighbors have given their heart-felt support for not only our restoration work on the house, but also for bringing two delightful girls to the local Saint Peter and Paul school community. We are both thankful for, and inspired by, our neighbors in the Historic District who care a great deal about people in addition to caring for their historic homes.

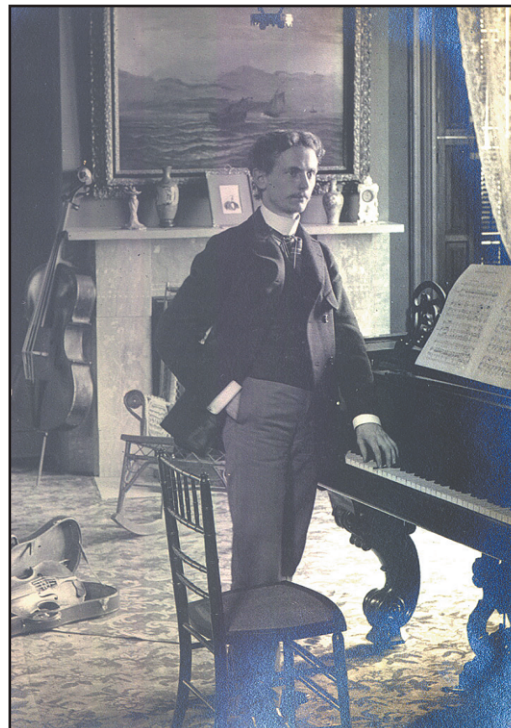
Similar to the Naperville residents of the 1870's, the Naperville community today is also concerned with “faith in family and the virtue of hard work; faith in the capacity of humanity to learn and grow; faith in the future.” The Naperville community long ago dealt with its grief for the tragedy which happened in the house and has moved ahead to build a better future.

The same long-lasting blocks of limestone used in building Old Main were used for the foundation of the A. A. Smith house. With restoration complete, the house should still be standing tall a century from now.

My family believes the same Naperville entrepreneurial spirit that created North Central College is alive and eager to be heard. I hope you will join me and my family in accentuating the positive legacy of this house's place in Naperville's history by referring to it the way it was known for over a century — the A. A. Smith house.

This info submitted and paid for by © 2006 Bartley J. Madden

Electronic copies of this article can be freely downloaded for personal use from my website, www.LearningWhatWorks.com.



H. C. Smith's son next to the piano in the front parlor.