

Rollin J. Furbeck House
Frank Lloyd Wright, Architect, 1897
515 Fair Oaks Avenue
Oak Park, Illinois



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Research Report
Bryan A. Schneider**

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Rollin J. Furbeck House Frank Lloyd Wright, Architect, 1897

Statement of Significance

(This section is primarily sourced from William Kundert, *Rollin Furbeck House Research Report*, Wright Plus 2014.)

In 1893, Frank Lloyd Wright left Adler and Sullivan and established his own practice. The next seven years were to be a period of experimentation, derivation and innovation, and differing design strategies, culminating in 1900 with the B. Harley Bradley and Warren Hickox houses in Kankakee, Illinois, generally considered to be the first of the Prairie Houses. Much innovation occurred with the William Winslow residence (River Forest, Illinois, 1894) but this was to be somewhat of an outlier in Wright's path to Prairie until the appearance of the Isidore Heller (Chicago) and the Rollin Furbeck houses in 1897 (the Heller House was designed first, but both were completed in 1897). Both combined Prairie elements, such as strong horizontal lines, hip roofs, and broad chimneys, with strong vertical elements and Sullivan-esque ornamentation. With the Heller House, the verticality is somewhat of a necessity due to the narrow city lot, and it appears less "contained" than the Furbeck House due to the third-floor "monitor," a third story added above the main eaves, smaller than the other floors, and capped with its own hipped roof. For the Furbeck House, given its more spacious suburban lot, the verticality seems to have been a conscious decision of Wright's.

The Heller and Furbeck Houses are also the first of four of Wright's true three-story houses; the remaining two are the William Fricke House (Oak Park, 1901) and the William Martin House (Oak Park, 1902). I refer to them as "true" three-story houses since the third floor is not just a finished attic and the first floor is the main public living area. Wright did other three-story houses, such as the Joseph and Helen Husser House (Chicago, 1899, demolished 1923), the Frank Thomas House (Oak Park, 1901), and the Frederick C. Robie House (Chicago, 1908), but in these houses, the first floor was a service/servant's quarters/ playroom area (essentially a raised basement) and the main living area was on the second floor.

Jack Lesniak has written:

This early period of Wright's work from 1893 to 1897 were years of development and release; a procession through traditional styles of Classical, Tudor, and Shingle, with definite echoes of the architecture of Silsbee and Sullivan and hints of Wright's own future Prairie style.

The period of 1897 to 1900 was a time of refinement and continued experiment. During this time, Wright, more and more, developed his palette of devices that became the details of the Prairie Style – hip roof, extended overhangs, water table, and horizontal line, simplicity of material, hidden entries, and Roman brick. The Sullivan-esque and Classical still occur, but to a diminishing extent....

The 1897 Rollin Furbeck House is an example of Frank Lloyd Wright's evolving design ideas during the 1890s that would lead to his mature Prairie style of architecture. This dignified structure exemplifies the young (30) architect's struggle to break from the historic style of his day and develop an original architectural style that severed all visual ties to the past. The Rollin Furbeck House has also retained excellent integrity, and its front façade is virtually unchanged from its original appearance.¹

The Rollin Furbeck House was named an Oak Park Historic Landmark by the Oak Park Historic Preservation Commission on January 7, 2002.

The House

The Neighborhood

(This section is primarily sourced from Nicole Cioper, *Rollin Furbeck House Research Report*, Wright Plus 2000.)

The house is located in the Fair Oaks Subdivision and is part of the Frank Lloyd Wright Historic District, which in 2010 was named by the American Planning Association as "One of America's Ten Great Neighborhoods."

The neighborhood was developed over a number of years, with the major activity coming after 1910, and represents a wonderful assemblage of varied architectural styles. There are many Prairie-style or Prairie-inspired houses, including several by Wright. North of the Furbeck House on Fair Oaks Avenue and across the street is Wright's William Fricke House (1901). Immediately in back of the house, on East Avenue, are Wright's Edwin Cheney House (1903) and Harry C. Goodrich House (1896). Further north on East Avenue is Wright's William E. Martin House (1903.) Also represented in the immediate neighborhood are houses by E. E. Roberts, Vernon Watson, Tallmadge & Watson, Charles E. White, and John Van Bergen. Almost immediately across Fair Oaks Avenue is 532 Fair Oaks, which when the Furbeck House was being constructed was the home of the William Van Bergen family. Here, the then 11-year-old John Van Bergen would have been able to watch as the Furbeck House was being erected and may have even occasionally glimpsed Wright on the property supervising the construction. John Van Bergen would go on to serve for about a year in Wright's Oak Park Studio as an apprentice and then carve out a distinguished architectural career for himself, concentrating on Prairie-style homes during the early part of his career.

In 1890, the population of Oak Park was recorded as being 4,589. In 1895, it was 7,520, and by 1900, the village had expanded to 9,353 residents. This period of growth inspired many businessmen to deal in land speculations and improvements. One such speculator was Henry W. Austin, who in 1864 "bought property along the turnpike to Galena at the first stop of the

¹ Jack Lesniak, *Rollin Furbeck House Research Report*, Wright Plus 2005, p. 1.

railroad out from Chicago....within the year, he built his own home and subdivided a 280-acre farm.”²

In 1872, Austin, along with a group of men by the names of Schmidt, Morey, and Slentz, purchased two 70-acre tracts of land north of Chicago Avenue.³ Village children used this land in the 1880s and 1890s for skating and recreation. It was termed the “North Slough” by these children before it was marketed to the public as the Fair Oaks Subdivision.⁴ By 1889, Austin lost interest in his share of the property and sold the land to an assemblage of ten real estate investors (“Kohlsaat Bros., Soper Bros. of the Soper Lumber Co., two Chalmers of Frazer and Chalmers, Kennedy of Oak Park, Hale, Street and Bryant”).⁵

By 1894, the investors had already made several major improvements to the property to encourage the sale and development of the plots. In that year, Fair Oaks was described as “the highest land and best improved subdivision in Cicero. [It] is partially covered with a grove of native oaks. Streets are macadamized and stone curbed, water, and sewer connected with each lot; stone sidewalks laid, and fine Elm, Linden and Arbor-Vitae shade trees are artistically placed. Streets lighted by electricity. Building lines established and all residences to cost not less than \$5000.00.”⁶ The state of real estate growth in Oak Park was healthy, and the opportunity to profit from that growth was appreciated by speculators, contractors, agents, and transportation giants.

It is during this period that Oak Park resident, Warren F. Furbeck, first invests in property in the Fair Oaks Subdivision. This initial investment may have only been intended to improve properties in the new subdivision by constructing a house which would encourage future growth in the north end of the village.

The House at 515 Fair Oaks

(This section is primarily sourced from Mark Scott, *Rollin Furbeck House Research Report*, Wright Plus 2010 and Jack Lesniak, *Rollin Furbeck House Research Report*, Wright Plus 2005 , with additional sourcing from Nicole Cioper, *Rollin Furbeck House Research Report*, Wright Plus 2000.)

In March 1896, Judson Whaples (brother-in-law to Warren Furbeck) purchased lot 117 from Walter S. Sykes. By June, Whaples sold the property to Warren Furbeck, who in turn sold the land to his second eldest son, Rollin, in September 1896, for the sum of \$2,250. As purchased by Rollin, the lot measured 50 feet wide by 172 feet deep. As he made plans for a house for the property, Rollin Furbeck became concerned that the lot would not be big enough, so in early April of 1897, he purchased an additional fifteen feet of the property to the north from John, Tucker, owner of lot 116, to give him an aggregate width of sixty-five feet.⁷

² Ann Durkin Keating, *Building Chicago: Suburban Developers & the Creation of a Divided Metropolis*, (Ohio State University Press, Columbus, 1988, p. 22).

³ William Halley, *Halley's Pictorial Oak Park*, (William Halley, Publisher, Oak Park, 1898), p. 16.

⁴ Gertrude Fox Hoagland, ed., *Historical Survey of Oak Park, Illinois: Compiled Under Federal Works Progress Administration Project #9516*, (Oak Park, Illinois: Oak Park Public Library, 1937), p.40.

⁵ *James Scoville Papers*; 22. *Corres. To J. Scoville from H. W. Austin; Aug. 1889*, (Collection of Historical Society of Oak Park and River Forest).

⁶ Oak Park Real Estate Broadside distributed by Kennedy & Ballard, 1894. Collection of Historical Society of Oak Park and River Forest.

⁷ When the house was built, its address was 611 North Scoville. From the late 1880s until 1915, all streets in Oak Park were gradually renumbered, with the East-West streets being done last. By 1906, the Furbeck House had become 515 Fair Oaks. The Scoville/Fair Oaks dichotomy is an interesting story. According to Frank Lipo of the

Who actually commissioned the house is unclear. It may have been commissioned by Warren Furbeck. Some accounts suggest that it was Sophia Whaples Furbeck, Rollin's mother, who was influential in choosing the architect. The idea of Wright as architect may also have come from Mr. and Mrs. Charles E. Roberts, good friends of the Warren Furbecks, who had Wright remodel their home in 1896.⁸ Often heard is the story that Warren Furbeck gave the house and land to Rollin as a wedding gift, and that he did likewise for another son, George. There is no documentation that either of these houses were gifts and this story appears to be without foundation. It is clear that Rollin purchased the land for the house, and family recollections were that Warren made loans to both of the sons to build the houses, and these loans were repaid over time.⁹ The cost of the Rollin Furbeck House, as listed on the building permit, was \$6,000, exclusive of the \$2,250 cost for the land.

Wright was commissioned for the house in the spring of 1897. The announcement of the house's construction was reported to Oak Park on the society page of *The Oak Park Reporter* on April 23, 1897, when it was announced that "Mr. Rollin Furbeck [was] building a residence on Fair Oaks Avenue." Two weeks later, *The Oak Park Vindicator* further described the home in the following article:

Charles Norling, the Austin contractor and builder, is erecting for Mr. Rowland [sic] Furbeck, on Fair Oaks Avenue, just north of Chicago Avenue, one of the handsomest dwellings in Oak Park. The dimensions of the main part are 40 x 60 feet, two-story, with attic and stone basement. It will be lighted by either gas or electricity. The structure is of mixed style of architecture and is from the office of Frank L. Wright, the Oak Park architect. It will be brick veneered, with trimmings of Bedford stone. The interior finish will be in quarter sawed white oak and birch and hardwood floors. It will be finished by September, at a cost of \$6,000. It will be an ornament among the many fine dwellings in its vicinity.¹⁰

In December 1898, little more than a year after occupying the house, the Furbecks sold the house and property to John S. Hubbard and commissioned a new home to be designed by George Maher in the area of Warren Furbeck's house at 126 Home Avenue. The reason for the short period of residency is unknown, but it may be that Rollin was seeking a more established neighborhood than the Fair Oaks neighborhood which was still very much under development.

Wright's original drawings for the Rollin Furbeck House have disappeared. The archives of the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation at Taliesin West in Scottsdale, Arizona have "no drawings, no records" of the house. They do have, however, seven drawings for the George Furbeck House.¹¹

Historical Society of Oak Park and River Forest (conversation held on March 28, 2014), there was some contention within the village as to whether the street name should be Fair Oaks, reflecting the subdivision name, or Scoville, honoring one of the village pioneers. For example, the 1900 and 1902 *Oak Park Directory* show "Scoville", while the 1901 *Directory* shows "Fair Oaks." Evidently, by around 1906 the issue had been resolved in favor of "Fair Oaks."

⁸ Leonard K. Eaton, *Frank Lloyd Wright and Howard Van Doren Shaw – Two Architects and Their Clients*, p. 78.

⁹ "It has long been believed that the houses were wedding gifts to the brothers from their father, Warren, who moved to Chicago in 1861 and settled in Oak Park in 1866; later family recollections, however, suggest that the brothers repaid their father over time." Patrick Cannon, *Hometown Architect*, p.53.

¹⁰ *The Oak Park Vindicator*, May 7, 1897.

¹¹ E-mail from Margo Stipe, Taliesin Archivist, to Jack Lesniak, December 12, 2005.

The current square footage of the house is approximately 3,641.

The Exterior

(This section is primarily sourced from Jack Lesniak, *Rollin Furbeck House Research Report*, Wright Plus 2005)

The house is a complex structure with a variety of intersecting masses, including a rectangular central tower, square plan, hipped roofs, and square front porch and porte-cochere projections. It is an architectural development of the Heller House of 1897, one of Wright's earliest explorations of three-story residence designs. The structure also features a wide range of materials, including brick, stucco, Bedford limestone trim, wood banding, and cedar shingles. Later Prairie Houses would be much more streamlined and simplified in terms of their massing and use of materials. The house exhibits a variety of features that Wright would soon abandon, such as the angled buttresses, brick corbelling, octagonal piers, modified dentil molding, Sullivanesque decorated columns, and the entry porch.

Also evident are premonitions of Wright's mature Prairie style, notably in the low, horizontal hipped roof and overhanging eaves rather than the high pitched gabled roof lines and dormers so common in his earlier residences. Other hints of the Prairie style are a central broad brick chimney, the extension of the brick base to the second story sill, and the continuous plaster bands situated between the brick walls and the roof lines. The preponderant window design is an unequal sashed double-hung window. The upper diamond patterned sash is smaller than the bottom clear glazed sash. This allows for an uncluttered view to the outside and a simple overall design, as does the large plate glass picture window facing the street. It is the first example of a picture window used in Wright's residential designs. The house is higher than the sidewalk or street, so privacy is not a problem even with the large expanse of glass. Sight lines from the public way are too low to see directly into the home.

The rear of the house is sided with cedar shingles, unlike the brick and stucco of the other three sides. This rear elevation has had major changes to it over the years. The earliest was in 1907, when it is thought that the change was to extend the dining room to the exterior edge of the original back porch and perhaps to enclose the porte-cochere (the building permit only states that there were to be \$2000 worth of "Alterations and repairs.")¹² Wright may have been the architect for this remodeling.¹³ (Writer's note: The primary source for Wright's involvement, and the enclosure of the porte-cochere, appears to be William Allin Storrer. He probably assumes Wright did it because the leaded glass windows added as part of the remodeling are in a style consistent with Wright, but there is no actual documentation that it is Wright's work. The enclosure of the porte-cochere is even more of a mystery. Presumably, Storrer assumes it was done as part of this remodeling because of the significant cost associated with the work, but again there is no documentation. There has been speculation that the enclosure actually occurred in 1917 when the first garage was built. Comparison of Sanborn maps from 1908 and 1930 both show an unenclosed space for the porte-cochere (i.e., with no windows), but that could mean that either the porte-cochere remains or it is a screened porch. The only thing that can be stated with certainty is that by 1940, based on photographs of the time, the porte-cochere had been enclosed.)

¹² Building Permit No. 1524, November 1, 1907. On file at the Oak Park Building Department and the Oak Park Public Library.

¹³ William Allin Storrer, *The Frank Lloyd Wright Companion*, (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1993), p. 41.

In the 1980s, additional changes were made to the rear of the house which expanded the second floor. Research done by John Thorpe, the restoration architect, determined that originally on the third floor, there was a cantilevered balcony, one of Wright's first uses of the cantilever. (See the Exhibits for Thorpe's rendering of his interpretation of the original west elevation of the house.) At some point, this balcony was enclosed. This 1980s second-floor expansion pushed the second floor out underneath this cantilever. This remodeling also installed a wood shingle roof, very similar to the original roof. In the 2000s the kitchen was further expanded by extending the west wall to the edge of the former back porch.

Two garages have been added to the property, the first in 1917 and the second in 1956. At some point, the driveway from the street was removed.

The Interior

(This section is primarily sourced from Mark Scott, *Rollin Furbeck House Research Report*, Wright Plus 2010)

First Floor-Interior

The Furbeck House is a major transitional work from the early square and rectangle plans to the Prairie cruciform and pinwheel designs. The house features a square plan with front and rear porch extensions and a port-cochere on the south. If one eliminates the floor plate extensions that form the "pinwheel" shape, the Furbeck layout is very reminiscent of the original plan for Wright's own Oak Park home. Both layouts circle around the fireplace and one can navigate through the entire first floor without doubling back on oneself. The placements of the entry, living room, and dining room are also similar in both houses.

Entry to the house from the outside reflects the "path of discovery" that Wright would explore and develop in many of his designs. The approach is indirect and almost hidden. Once in the foyer, partial glimpses of other rooms can be seen. Upon entering the living room, the inglenook and fireplace, a common early element in many of Wright's designs, present themselves but in an unusual way. This fireplace has precast concrete panels and the benches are also precast concrete with storage spaces built into them and are accessible from the top. This arrangement in the Furbeck House is unique among Wright's inglenook designs.¹⁴ The inglenook had been significantly altered over the years, and the current owners have restored it to its original configuration.

The feeling of openness expands the living room with its large picture window and views to the outside that are augmented by the double-hung windows. The difference between the elevation of the windows and the lower sidewalk elevation outside allows for privacy within. The ceiling of the living room has wide banding on it.

The entry foyer has a mezzanine on the north (right) side that is a short level up. It creates a small intimate space that has three diamond-paned casement windows (original) in the bay that overlook the front porch. The other three windows in the area facing north are double-hung. The split staircase with wood trim has an original balustrade with balusters that are similar to the ones used in the balcony of the playroom at Wright's Home and Studio.

¹⁴ Patrick Cannon, *Hometown Architect*, p. 58.

Powder Room

A powder room that is sunken and located beneath the stairs is accessible from the hall between the entry foyer and the kitchen. This arrangement is unusual for Wright in that in other similar situations, he created compact layouts combining a powder room with the stair tower structure, but it usually contained a stairway from the powder room to the basement. This half-flight of stairs from the hall down to the powder room is the original design. There was never an access to the basement.

The marble vanity top is original, as is the built-in dresser, ceramic tile floor, and the unique storage area. It is not known if the shelves are original or were added later.

Kitchen

The design of original kitchen reflected Wright's utilitarian views of this particular room and its function in the household. The current owners have enlarged the kitchen by extending its west wall to the edge of the former back porch. The present kitchen is now state-of-the-art, offering the advances in appliances and the beauty of today's materials and design. The windows in the family area of the kitchen are original.

Part of this most recent remodeling relocated the basement stair at the northwest corner of the house to what had been a closet area behind the living room fireplace.

Dining Room

The dining room contains a large picture window that is flanked on either side by leaded glass side lights with green and gold hues. It is conjectured that they were added in 1907 (perhaps by Wright) when the original dining room was enlarged. One of these windows is original to the 1907 remodeling; over the years, the other one was destroyed, but it was recreated in 1985. Also included in this remodeling was the addition of a china cabinet on the north wall and possibly on the south wall. The cabinet doors echoed the leaded glass side light design, but this cabinetry is now removed and may be seen only in an historic photograph. The full-height window/door on the south wall is a carriage access to what was the south driveway.

Porte-Cochere

The porte-cochere has been enclosed to create an all-season sun room. Originally it was an open shelter over the driveway from the street for carriage or auto access. The date of the enclosure is unknown, and it may have originally been converted into a screened porch before windows were added. The original driveway from the street has been removed and filled in with additional lawn area. The area under the port-cochere was excavated and remodeled in the 1950s. It included a small kitchen, bath, and dining area for the then-owner who was suspected of managing an illegal rooming house upstairs. Remodeling by the current owners included a volume ceiling and replacement of all windows.

None of the lights on the first floor are original to the house. Light fixtures in the dining room are replicas similar to the original style of the home. Light fixtures in kitchen and hall chandelier are modeled after similar items in the Dana Thomas House in Springfield, Illinois. Light fixture in

enclosed port-cochere is modeled after similar item from Browne's Bookstore in Chicago, Illinois.

Second-Floor Interior

Entry to the second floor is from the mezzanine platform using a split-staircase arrangement often used by Wright. This allows for traffic flow for servants between the kitchen and upstairs, and for the family between the first and second floors.

The second floor has been reconfigured by the current owners. In the original design, the master bedroom took up the entire south side of the second floor. The room had a coved ceiling, diamond-paned windows on three sides, and original fir flooring with a dressing area bordered on either side by long built-in closets.

The master bath was a very large room located in the center of the floor plan directly behind the diamond-paned casement windows that are behind the exterior columns of the front elevation. The master bath has been relocated to the original northeast bedroom on the second floor, and the original master bath has been remodeled into the new master bedroom

The original second bedroom (the current master bath) was accessible from either the master bath or the hallway. It had a coved ceiling, diamond-paned windows, a large closet, and original fir flooring.

The third bedroom, in the northwest corner of the second floor, remains in the same location, but in the 1980s was expanded to the west to provide an enclosed porch. Original diamond-paned windows, fir flooring, and two closets characterize the room. This bedroom also had its own private full bath.

Third-Floor Interior

The original interior is mostly intact. Its original purpose was for the servants' quarters, as indicated by the presence of a bathroom at this level.¹⁵ These rather spacious arrangements for servants, however, will not carry over into other later three-story Prairie houses such as the William Fricke House and the William E. Martin House, which feature billiards and playrooms on the third floor. The Furbeck third floor is made up of two bed chambers connected by a 15-foot hallway with built-in dressers on one side and casement windows with original diamond-paned windows.

The front (east) bedroom has the diamond-paned casement windows looking out toward the exterior columns, a coved ceiling, and built-in three-drawer dressers and bookcases. The shafts of the columns are the original pine. There is access to a storage area housed in the second-story hipped roof through the built-in dressers. Screens are also used on the casement windows in this room.

The large tiled bath has a built-in dresser with six drawers and original diamond-paned windows.

The back (west) bedroom is the space that originally looked out to the cantilevered balcony. This bedroom also has a coved ceiling and an excellent view of the back yard.

¹⁵ Storrer, p. 41.

Changes

(This section is primarily sourced from Mark Scott, *Rollin Furbeck House Research Report*, Wright Plus 2010)

Changes to the Rollin Furbeck House, with corresponding permits on file at the Oak Park Building department and Cook County Records:

- Owners Henry and Mary Barlow purchased 10 feet of the adjoining lot to the north from Merrick Richardson at the same time they purchased the property in 1904 (*Cook County Records, Document No 3608565, Warranted Deed, September 14, 1904. North 10 feet of the south 25 feet of lot 116.*)
- Major “alterations & repairs” also by the Barlows in 1907, probably the expansion of the dining room to the west and perhaps the enclosure of the port-cochere, cost \$2,000 (*Oak Park Building Permit No. 1524, November 1, 1907*)
- Owners Arthur and Helen Hamilton built the first garage on the property in 1917, 13’ by 19’ for a cost of approximately \$200. (*Oak Park Building Permit No. 7639, April 20, 1917*)
- Owners Everett and Gertrude Brewer built a 16’ by 22’ addition to the existing garage in 1925 (*Oak Park Building Permit No. 16477, October 19, 1925*)
- During the ownership of George Kotin, “alterations to basement of one family dwelling” were made under the porte-cochere installing a bath and a kitchen for all cooking. The permits for this remodeling were applied for by Linda Sharris. This raised concerns with the Oak Park Building Department that the building was being used as a rooming house. Inspections were made, but the matter was never pursued. (*Oak Park Building Permit No. 27895, November 12, 1955*)
- Linda Sharris next added another garage in March, 1956 (*Oak Park Building Permit No. 29373, March 27, 1956*)
- In the 1980s and 1990s, owners William and Linda Ryan installed a wood shingle roof, an addition to the second floor at the rear of the house, and had a complete historical paint analysis of the exterior of the house performed by Robert Furhoff. In accordance with this analysis, the exterior colors were restored to the original. The Ryans also restored the entry court at the front of the house in 1994. John Thorpe was the restoration architect throughout this process. They also replaced the second-floor exterior column capitals of the original bathroom window. The original horsehair/canvas/plaster capitals had deteriorated badly and were reproduced and installed. The present owners have pieces of the original capitals and the mold used in the reproduction process. (From January 30, 2010 conversation with current homeowners.)
- In 1998, the current homeowners purchased the home. They began by enlarging the kitchen by extending the west wall to the edge of the former back porch. They restored the living room inglenook and have painted the first floor rooms in a Prairie style color palette. They changed the configuration of the second-floor rooms as described in the section above on the second floor interior.

The Architect

(This section is primarily sourced from William Kundert, *Rollin Furbeck House Research Report*, Wright Plus 2014.)

Frank Lloyd Wright (1867–1959) came to Chicago in 1887, only 19-years-old, but already determined to contribute significantly to the architectural hotbed that Chicago had become as it continued to recover and rebuild after the disastrous Chicago Fire of 1871. His first employment was in the office of architect J. Lyman Silsbee, an established architect whose practice encompassed both commercial and residential structures. Other architects in the office at the time who would later go on to successful careers on their own included George Maher, George Elmslie, and Cecil Corwin. (Corwin, in particular, became a friend of Wright and is said to have introduced Wright to Chicago's social life.) Residentially, the office was particularly known for its Queen Anne and Shingle styles; Silsbee is said to have introduced the Shingle style to Chicago.

After about a year with Silsbee, Wright left to join the established architectural firm of Adler and Sullivan. Dankmar Adler was the “rainmaker” who worked to get commissions and was also a masterful structural engineer, particularly with acoustics. Sullivan was the avant-garde designer with a passion for ornamentation combined with simplicity of overall form, and Wright regarded him as his mentor. From both, Wright learned a great deal about architecture and composition. The practice was primarily commercial, but as a convenience to customers, they would occasionally do residential designs. Sullivan had little interest in these, so they would often fall primarily to Wright. While each house was probably done differently, most likely the general concept would be Sullivan's, while the details and execution would be Wright's. Perhaps the most significant of these collaborations was the Charnley House (Chicago, Sullivan/Wright 1891), which broke new ground. As Grant Manson notes, “It stands today, clean and challenging among its outmoded neighbors, a ringing statement of belief in a new future for architecture.”¹⁶

Wright was, at the time, making an excellent salary, particularly for such a young man. However, as Ada Louise Huxtable writes, “...[A]s the financial burdens of the exploding family and his expensive lifestyle became more pressing, he was caught in a nonstop financial shell game of loans and defaults. He became known in Oak Park as much for his unpaid bills as for his flair for elegant living.”¹⁷ His agreement with Adler and Sullivan, signed as a condition of receiving the loan to build his house, allowed no outside work. The financial pressures, however, led him to design a series of “bootlegged homes,” as he described them. The exact number of homes he did is somewhat open to question, but they probably number between eight and ten. The houses were of varied styles – Colonial, Dutch Colonial, and Queen Anne/Shingle. But while the styles are to an extent derivative, Wright is bringing to all of them a freshness pointing to his future directions. For example, in the interior of several of them he introduces spindled screens, which enclose a room but also allow a feeling of openness. In the exteriors, he is introducing ribbon windows, which would later play so prominently in his Prairie designs.

¹⁶ Grant Manson, *Frank Lloyd Wright To 1910, The First Golden Age*, (Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, New York, 1958), p. 27.

¹⁷ Ada Louise Huxtable, *Frank Lloyd Wright*, (The Penguin Group, New York, 2004), pp. 69 – 70.

In 1893, Sullivan found out about the bootleg houses, which led to a rather heated meeting between them, after which Wright left Adler and Sullivan. Whether he resigned or was fired is open to debate, but he was now in business for himself, with a studio in downtown Chicago.

This period of 1893 to 1900 was a period of experimentation for Wright, one in which he was trying to develop a cohesive design philosophy, culminating in the Prairie houses beginning in 1900. But the path to the Prairie houses was far from a direct path, with Wright trying different directions, sometimes in the same house.

Certainly, Sullivan and Silsbee continued to be influential in his thinking. Grant Manson wrote:

After Wright set himself up in independent practice in 1893, and until the turn of the century, most of his designs incorporated elements so strongly reminiscent of Louis Sullivan that the seven years of this period might be called the Sullivanesque phase of his career. This derivative quality in Wright's early work had been submerged in the "bootlegged houses," but, once the break with Sullivan had been made, it blossomed forth. Nor was Lyman Silsbee wholly forgotten; we still see echoes of his picturesque style in an occasional high roof or polygonal bay. At times, too, there is a dimming of Wright's intuitive feeling for the domestic in architecture through use of elements too impersonal for a house; this marks a temporary deflection of the course of his genius which puzzles us until we remember that he had just experienced the closest contact with a man whose great gift was for public architecture.¹⁸

While Wright was not an unknown quantity during this period, he was not a dominant figure in the Chicago architectural scene; other architects had much greater access to Chicago's powerful businessmen and "older" (for Chicago) money. Alan Hess has noted, "Perhaps a strategy has not occurred to him at first, as he scrambled to get commissions to keep his family afloat with buildings like the Moore House, in acceptable traditional styles, and many remodelings."¹⁹

While there were some Prairie elements in the William Winslow House, real exploration of the Prairie themes does not seem to come until the Heller and Rollin Furbeck Houses. Yet even here, as Jean Guarino has written in the *Furbeck Oak Park Landmark Nomination*:

The Rollin Furbeck House visually demonstrates Wright's evolving ideas in residential design during the 1890s that would lead to the mature Prairie House. The structure exhibits a struggle between vertical and horizontal forces, with its combination of a soaring central tower contrasting with a low, hipped roof, overhanging eaves and continuous plaster banding. After 1900, Wright largely abandoned vertical elements, such as the central tower, in favor of horizontal, ground-hugging structures typical of the Prairie style. However, two exceptions are the three-story William G. Fricke (1901) and William E. Martin (1903) Houses in Oak Park.²⁰

In discussing this juxtaposition of vertical and horizontal, Brendan Gill posits:

¹⁸ Manson, p. 60.

¹⁹ Alan Hess, *Frank Lloyd Wright, The Houses*, (Rizzoli International Publications, New York, 2005), p. 55.

²⁰ Jean L. Guarino, *Oak Park Landmark Nomination, Rollin Furbeck House*, (Oak Park Historic Preservation Commission, Oak Park, 2001), p. 4.

If Wright was indeed working his way toward the horizontal Prairie House, why these experiments in the vertical, which was also the most conspicuous dimension in the Furbeck, Fricke, and W. E. Martin houses? I suspect that they are the fruit of that incessant, wide-ranging observation and study of the practice of his fellow architects abroad that Wright kept up throughout his life and was always at pains to disabuse; do we not observe in them hints of German and Austrian originals?²¹

It is also interesting to speculate what impact Wright's involvement in the design of Adler and Sullivan's Schiller Building/Garrick Theater (Chicago, 1892) may have had on the concepts for the Heller and Furbeck houses. (Wright was apparently significantly involved in the design of Schiller, although probably not as involved as he would later claim.) Certainly, the strong central tower of the Schiller and its ornamented colonnades are reflected in both Heller and Furbeck. Further, the overall massing of the Schiller, with its vertical central tower flanked by lower wings and lower adjacent buildings, could be thought of as having informed the massing of the Furbeck House.

In spite of all of the experimentation, multiple directions, and derivation, Grant Manson perhaps offers the best summary of this period:

In the main, however, the buildings designed between 1894 and 1900 are first of all Wrightian, no matter how noticeable the trace of Sullivan, and Wright at once began to concentrate upon and develop the principles of a new architecture which he had outlined in the Charnley, Harlan and McArthur houses. There was little immaturity in Wright's career. Some of his designs for the period now in question are patently experimental, but they are seldom awkward and never trite. The driving purpose behind them gives to each a dignity that often rises higher than the sum of its component parts; we see that these experimental buildings are genuine evolution, obeying a new set of laws.²²

Family Information

Rollin J. and Elizabeth Furbeck, 1897–1898

(This section is primarily sourced from Jack Lesniak, *Rollin Furbeck House Research Report*, Wright Plus 2005)

Rollin Judson Furbeck was born on June 4, 1875, the second son of Warren Fuller and Sophia Whaples Furbeck. He was raised in Oak Park; his earliest listing in the Oak Park directories is in 1893: *Furbeck, R. J. student, Oberlin, Ohio.....126 Home av.* At the time he was an 18 year old student attending the Oberlin Academy, a department of Oberlin College similar to a modern day high school, having entered the school in 1891. Rollin was married at 21 on September 30, 1896, to Elizabeth M. Allen, born January 23, 1877, in Rockford, Illinois. The ceremony was at the Chicago home of Elizabeth's uncle, Z. G. Wolf, at 3426 Calumet Avenue. Rollin's older brother, George, was the best man and Elizabeth's sister, Edith, was the maid of

²¹ Brendan Gill, *Many Masks, A Life of Frank Lloyd Wright*, (Ballantine Books, New York, 1987), pp. 507 – 508.

²² Manson, pp. 60 – 61.

honor. They honeymooned on the east coast and upon their return, made their home at 115 South Euclid in Oak Park. Rollin and Elizabeth had two children, daughters Edith (born 1898) and Phyllis (born 1905).

Just about a year after their wedding, Rollin and Elizabeth moved into their new home at 515 Fair Oaks. They remained there for only a little over a year, selling it to John S. Hubbard on November 30, 1898 for \$8,000. In February 1899, Warren Furbeck hired architect George Maher, rather than Wright, to design a new home for Rollin, to be located across the street from his own residence at 200 Home Avenue:

*Mr. Warren Furbeck has had a sketch made by Mr. Mayer [sic], the architect of Mr. Farson's new home, for a residence to be built at the southeast corner of Home Avenue and Pleasant Street. The cost will approximate \$12,000 and it will be one of the many handsome houses on the south side. His son, Rollin Furbeck, will occupy the house.*²³

George Washington Maher may have been selected by Warren Furbeck because Maher's design for John Farson, also at Pleasant and Home streets, was near completion in 1899. Warren could look out the window of his house at 126 Home, see the new construction, and consider a similar but lesser scale house built on the southeast corner for his son Rollin.

It is likely that Rollin and Elizabeth Furbeck moved into Warren Furbeck's spacious house on Home Avenue during the construction of the Maher home, which began in April 1899 and was completed by October of the same year. However, Rollin probably never occupied the home due to a career change that took him to New York in the fall of 1899. This move was precipitated by his father Warren's departure from the North Chicago Railway Company, probably due to the unsavory business dealings of the Company's President, Charles T. Yerkes.

Yerkes was in trouble with State of Illinois and the City of Chicago for his questionable methods in trying to gain complete control of Chicago's streetcar network. The situation culminated in Yerkes selling his interest in the street railway company and moving to New York and then London, where he started all over again. His legacy was his involvement in the creation of Chicago's Loop Elevated Transportations System and the donation of funds to the University of Chicago for the creation of what has become known as the Yerkes Observatory in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin.

Following Warren Furbeck's departure from the North Chicago Street Railway, Warren briefly worked for the banking firm of A. L. Dewar & Co. (as did his son Rollin) before forming the stock and bond firm of W. F. Furbeck & Co. with Rollin.

Rollin and Elizabeth Furbeck moved to New York in September of 1899, where Rollin assumed the position of the New York representative for W. F. Furbeck & Co. Their new residence on Home Avenue was still under construction and by October of 1899 was up for sale before it was completed. The Furbecks lived in New York and Connecticut for many years and Rollin continued his career as a stockbroker/banker with a seat on the New York Stock Exchange. Elizabeth Furbeck died suddenly on February 2, 1927 in New York at the age of 50. By 1930, Rollin had remarried and was living in the Stratfield Hotel in Bridgeport, Connecticut with his second wife, Stella. Rollin Furbeck died on September 2, 1951 in Norwalk, Connecticut at the age of 76. He was divorced and a resident of Ridgefield in Fairfield County, Connecticut.

²³ *Oak Park Reporter*, February 16, 1899, p. 4.

Subsequent Owners

John S. and Annie Hubbard, November 1889–October 1900

The 1900 *Oak Park Directory* show “J. S. Hubbard” as a manager for the Ute Smelting Co.

Edgar and Gertrude Thompson, October 1900–September 1904

The 1901 *Oak Park Directory* lists “E. B. Thompson” as an engineer for the Chicago and Northwestern Railway.

Henry and Mary Barlow, September 1904–March 1913

The 1910 U. S. Census shows the house occupied by the “Darlow” (*sic*) family: Henry (59), Mary (52), Louise (18), Frances (13), and a servant, Clara Oreson (22). Mr. Barlow’s occupation is shown as a traffic specialist for a commerce association. The 1910 *Oak Park Directory* lists Mr. Barlow’s occupation as a manager for the Chicago Association of Commerce.

Arthur and Helen Hamilton, March 1913–August 1924

The 1920 U. S. Census shows the house occupied by the Hamilton family: Arthur (43), Helen (41), Parker (18), Arthur L. Jr. (13), and a servant, Hilda Johnson (26). It shows Mr. Hamilton’s occupation as President of a “toy manufacturing co.” The 1922 *McCoy’s Oak Park, River Forest, and Forest Park Directory* lists Mr. Hamilton’s occupation as “President – International Tag Co.” Based on the 1920 Census, I believe this is a misreading of the original source document and should read “President – International Toy Co.”

Everett and Gertrude Brewer, August 1924–May 1928

The 1925 *McCoy’s Oak Park, River Forest, and Forest Park Directory* lists Mr. Brewer’s occupation as broker.

Fred and Maude Stambaugh May 1928–August 1945

The 1920 U. S. Census shows the Stambaugh family residing in River Forest, Illinois: Fred (43), Maude (44), Jack (14), and Mary L. (6). The 1930 *McCoy’s Oak Park and River Forest Directory* shows Fred as a Department Manager for Sears, Roebuck, and also John H. as being in sales.

Elvin and Georgiana Foster, August 1945–May 1951

Anthony and Pauline Cerami, May 1951–January 1954

The 1940 U. S. Census shows the Cerami family living at 333 South Taylor Avenue in Oak Park, Illinois: Anthony (46), Pauline (39), Anna (17), and Joseph (13). Mr. Cerami is listed as a self-employed barber.

George and Gertrude Kotin, January 1954–1984

This period of time is somewhat of a mystery, both as to ownership and to occupancy. George Kotin purchased the home in 1954, and the property was placed into trust in 1955, so details on ownership are difficult to come by. We have uncovered no documentation that would indicate the Kotins ever occupied the property.

George N. Kotin was a lawyer with offices at 77 West Washington, Chicago, and owned apartments in the Austin area of Chicago.²⁴ Newspaper reports from the 1960s indicate that he was evidently somewhat of a pioneer in Chicago for the racial integration of housing²⁵. He was born in New York in 1901 and was married in 1921 to Gertrude Kotin (*nee* Geller).^{26 27} They are listed in the 1940 U. S. Census as living at 7063 Greenview in Chicago with four children: Merritt, Lawrence, Lois, and Gary. At some point the Kotins moved to Florida; Gertrude died in 1976 and George, in 1979.²⁸

The apparent resident at 515 Fair Oaks for much of this period was Linda Sharris/Linda Vasilopoulos. She first appears at this address in the May 1955 Oak Park Yellow Pages in the Dressmaker category as "Linda Sharris." She also shows up in December, 1955, on a remodeling building permit as the "owner and contractor."²⁹

Linda Sharris was born in Greece in 1924, and was evidently a war bride.³⁰ Her husband, Angelo Sharris, was born in 1919 and joined the U. S. Army in 1942.³¹ Immigration records for September, 1946, show her entering the U. S. through the port of Baltimore, with her first name shown as "Lida" and her family name as "A. Sharris."³² She became a naturalized citizen in 1948.³³

Phone book and property records show Linda Sharris and/or Angelo Sharris living at 515 Fair Oaks at least through July, 1971.³⁴ During this period, newspaper reports show her as owning property in the Austin area of Chicago.³⁵ At some point, she remarried to Kostas Vasilopoulos, who appears in the Oak Park phone books at 515 Fair Oaks in 1974 and 1980. A 1973 *Oak Leaves* article noted that "Mrs. Linda Vasilopoulos of Fair Oaks Av." was the administrator of a charitable group, International Concern Missionaries, which was sponsoring an international review of modern music by young people to be held at the Auditorium Theater, Chicago, in August, 1973.³⁶ She is shown as living at 1847 North 77th Avenue in Chicago in 1995.³⁷

Angelo Sharris died in 1986 and Linda Vasilopoulos died December 27, 2002.³⁸ The obituary notice from the December 30, 2002, *Chicago Tribune* reads: "Linda Vasilopoulos, beloved wife of the late Solon Vasilopoulos, the late Angelo Sharris, and the late Gus [writer's note: Kostas?] Vasilopoulos..."³⁹

²⁴ "An Expert Tells ATOS of Problems With Tenants in Upgrading Bldg.", *Community Publications*, February 2, 1966, p 2G.

²⁵ "Absentee Landlord Urges Plan to Screen Tenants," *The Garfieldian*, May 11, 1966, p. 1.

²⁶ 1940 United States Census.

²⁷ *Ancestry.com*, Cook County, Illinois Marriage Indexes, 1912 – 1942.

²⁸ *Chicago Tribune*, July 25, 1976; *Chicago Tribune*, May 11, 1979.

²⁹ *Oak Park Building Permit No. 27895, November 12, 1955.*

³⁰ *Ancestry.com*, U. S. Naturalization Record Indexes, 1791-1992.

³¹ *Ancestry.com*, U. S. World War II Army Enlistment Records, 1938-1946.

³² *Ancestry.com*, Baltimore, Passenger Lists, 1820-1948.

³³ *Ancestry.com*, U. S. Naturalization Record Indexes, 1791-1992.

³⁴ E-mail from Pam Reynolds to William Kundert, March 20, 1914.

³⁵ "Salesroom is Firm's Goal in Zone Plea", *Chicago Tribune*, January 16, 1964, p. W5; "Austin Unit Seeks to Raze 2d Theater", *Chicago Tribune*, May 6, 1965, p. W3.

³⁶ "Love Is Helping", *Oak Leaves*, June 13, 1973, p. 51.

³⁷ *Ancestry.com*, U. S. Phone and Address Directories, 1993-2002.

³⁸ *Ancestry.com*, U. S. Social Security Death Index, 1935-Current.

³⁹ *Chicago Tribune*, December 30, 2002.

We have been unable to discover the connection, if any, between the Kotins and Linda Sharris/Vasilopoulos. There had been earlier speculation that she may have been a daughter, but that does not appear to be the case. The closest we can come to a connection is that both George Kotin and Linda Sharris owned property in the same general area of Austin in Chicago.

(Writer's note: Just as I thought I had most of this figured out, I ran across an article from the *Oak Park News* dated April 23, 1980. The article notes that 515 Fair Oaks is for sale, and concludes with the following paragraph:

Though the present owner travels extensively and has never really moved in during her ten years of ownership, the previous owner has stayed on as tenant and caretaker. Well cared for, the house would not need much work to put it back into the beauty of its prime....)⁴⁰

William and Linda Ryan, 1985–March 1998

Oddly, no deed is recorded for this purchase, only mortgage activity in 1985 and 1986. Linda Ryan may be the homeowner, but nothing else in the recorded chain of title indicates this. William Ryan was a lawyer.

Current homeowners, March 1998 - Present

A Final Note on Frank Lloyd Wright

Edgar Tafel, for a number of years an apprentice to Wright at Taliesin, has written regarding the differences between Frank Lloyd Wright and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe:

The greatest difference between Mies and Mr. Wright, we felt, talking it over later, was that while Mies dedicated his entire life to the search for one style, refining and purifying, Mr. Wright kept evolving, growing, and developing new styles. He was never locked into one design establishment, which bore out his favorite phrase: "What we did yesterday, we won't do today. And what we don't do tomorrow will not be what we'll be doing the day after." By the time architectural copyists had caught on to an idea of Mr. Wright's, he was already on to something new. Mies' credo was just the opposite: "You don't start a new style each Monday."⁴¹

⁴⁰ "Sale of Wright Home Offers Unique Buying Opportunity", *Oak Park News*, April 23, 1980, p. 18.

⁴¹ Edgar Tafel, *Years With Frank Lloyd Wright, Apprentice to Genius*, (Dover Publications, New York, 1979), p.70.

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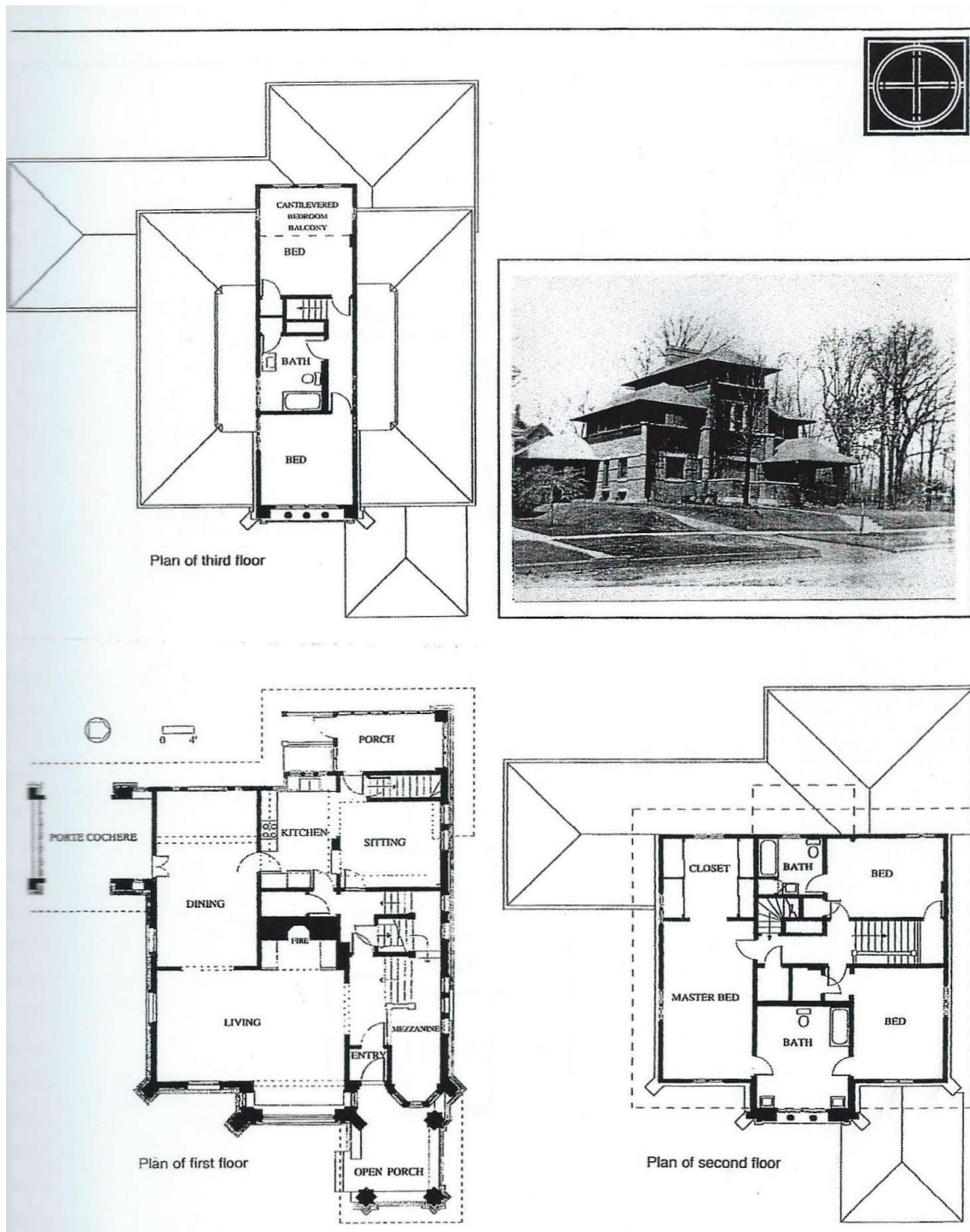
Exhibits



Isidore Heller House, Chicago, Frank Lloyd Wright, 1897
Image: chicagomag.com, c. 2011

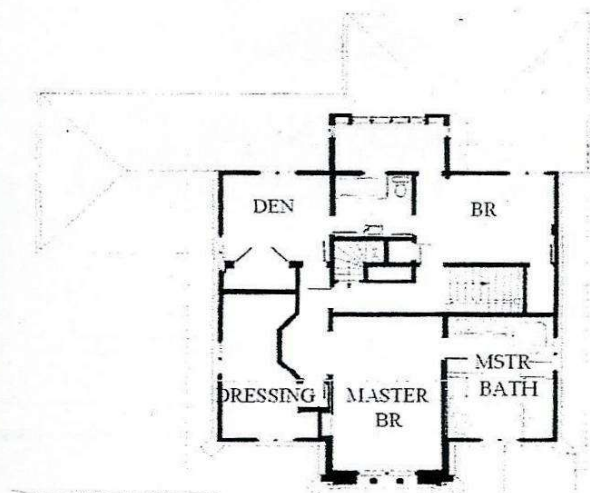
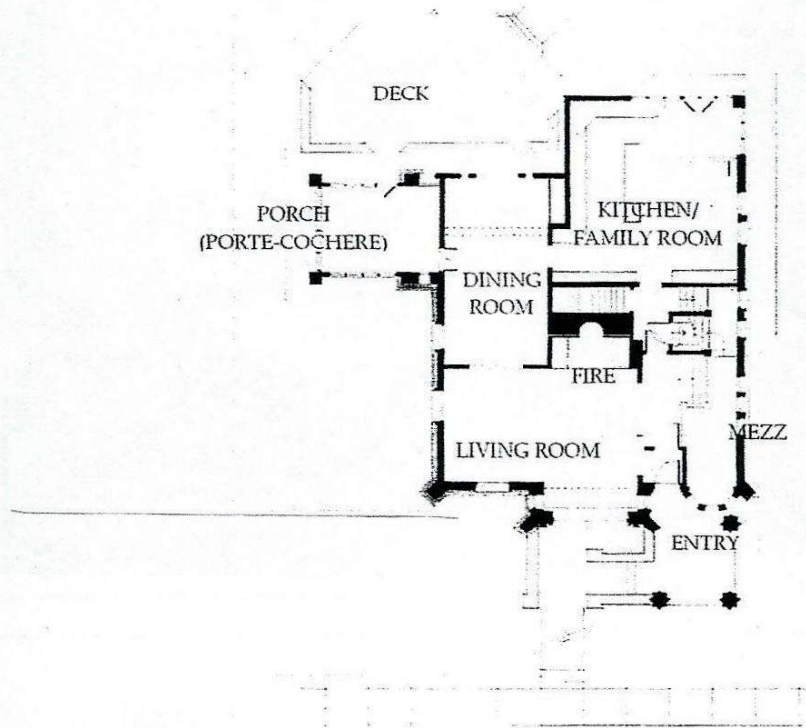
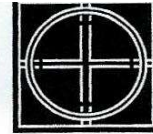


Schiller Building/Garrick Theater, Chicago, Adler & Sullivan, 1892
Image: [pinterest.com](https://www.pinterest.com), c. 1900



Floor plans of the Rollin Furbeck House as originally designed by Frank Lloyd Wright. The inset photograph at upper right shows the house in a photo by Philander Barclay in 1903.

Image: From Mark Scott, *Rollin Furbeck House Research Report 2010*, Frank Lloyd Wright Trust. Floor plan rendering by John Thorpe, AIA, Architect. Philander Barclay photo courtesy of *The Historical Society of Oak Park and River Forest*.



Current floor plans of the Rollin Furbeck House

Image: From Mark Scott, *Rollin Furbeck House Research Report 2010*, Frank Lloyd Wright Trust.



Rear view of Rollin Furbeck House as originally built
Image: Rendering by John Thorpe, AIA, Architect



Rear view of house c. 1940 after cantilevered third floor porch and porte-cochere were enclosed.

Image: Grant Manson Collection, courtesy Oak Park Public Library



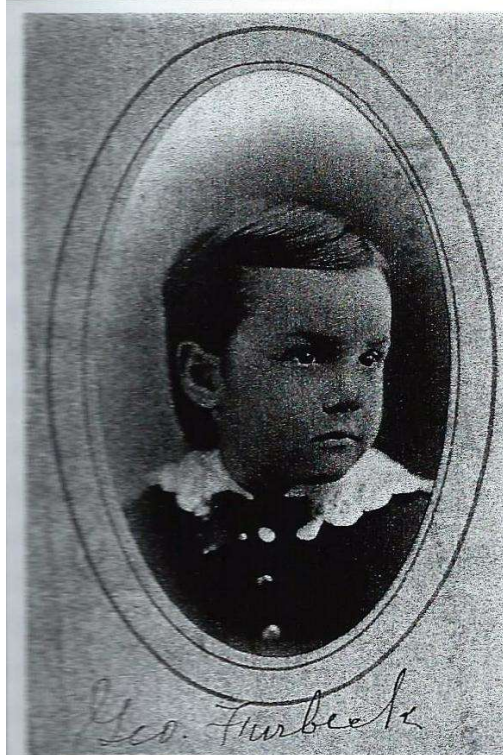
Current rear view of house

Image: From Mark Scott, *Rollin Furbeck House Research Report 2010*, Frank Lloyd Wright Trust.



WARREN F. FURBECK, Chicago.

Born Sept. 1, 1849, at Duaneburgh, N. Y. Removing to Chgo. in 1861; in 1863, entered the employ of First National Bank of Chgo.; 1882, Cashier for C. T. Yerkes; 1884, Cashier First National Bank, Sioux Falls, Dakota; 1884-86, Pri. Sec. to C. T. Yerkes and Vice-Pres. North Chgo. Street Ry. Co.; 1900, mem. of the firm of W. F. Furbeck & Co., brokers.



Photos of members of the Furbeck family. Mrs. Sophia Furbeck (top left), Warren Furbeck (top right), and as children, George Furbeck (lower left), and Rollin Furbeck (lower right.)

Image: From Mark Scott, *Rollin Furbeck House Research Report 2010*, Frank Lloyd Wright Trust.