

History of Ownership and Use of Frank Lloyd Wright's Oak Park Home and Studio

This is a brief overview of the ownership and use of the Home and Studio (H&S). It is taken from the ownership sections in a full research report on the history of the H&S. This full report is being prepared for the 2018 Wright Plus event on May 19, 2018 and sponsored by the Frank Lloyd Wright Trust. It is titled "Frank Lloyd Wright Home and Studio", and will be available at the John G. Thorpe Restoration Resource Center in Oak Park, Illinois when finished. From the report, we summarize here key knowledge of the ownership and use of the Home and Studio from the time they were designed by Frank Lloyd Wright in 1889 and 1898, respectively.

Summary of Ownership and Use

- The Home, built in 1889, was financed principally by a loan of \$5,000 from Louis Sullivan to Frank Lloyd Wright. Wright, age 22 at the time, worked for the Adler & Sullivan architecture firm in Chicago, where Louis Sullivan was a partner and Wright's boss. Frank Lloyd Wright spent 20 years living in the Home, leaving in late 1909 to spend 1910 in Europe assembling his Wasmuth Portfolio. When he returned to the U.S. a year later, he converted the Home and Studio into three apartments. He took out loans totaling \$20,000 from a client, Darwin D. Martin of Buffalo, New York, to make this conversion. These loans were not repaid (though \$4,000 of them appeared to be written off as "forgiven" by Martin).
- Frank Lloyd Wright left his wife Catherine and their six children in 1911 to build Taliesin in Spring Green, Wisconsin. Two of the three apartments in the Home and Studio were rented to others at that time, with Catherine and the children who were still at home moving into the Studio as reconfigured into an apartment. The Wrights, divorced in 1922-23, continued to own the Home and Studio until 1925, when it was sold to John Bastear and Alva Thomas, local real estate agents, for \$28,250. The money for the purchase by them, plus unpaid interest and taxes, came from a loan by Darwin D. Martin, Wright's client from Buffalo, to be repaid in full within five years.
- As early as 1922, artists began renting space in two of the three apartments, and in 1924, the Austin, Oak Park and River Forest Art League (now the Oak Park Art League) began using the Studio as its first permanent home, leaving in 1929 to move to a new venue. All of this made the Home and Studio a *de facto* artists colony, and it continued as such until the property was sold in 1943 to Norman and Elizabeth Beggs and their family for \$18,000.
- Bastear and Thomas failed to make most of their required loan repayments to Martin within the required five year period, and allowed the premises to physically deteriorate.
- This led Darwin Martin to sue Bastear and Thomas, and associated other parties with financial claims on the property, in 1930 to recover his loan to them. Martin won the court case in 1933 because he established that he was the primary claimant on the property. The property went into foreclosure, and was purchased

that year by Isabelle Martin, Darwin's wife, in a public auction for \$33,000 (so the Martins were out this amount in addition to previous largely unpaid loans by Darwin, first for \$20,000 to Frank Lloyd Wright in 1911, and then \$28,250 to Bastear and Thomas in 1925. Isabelle deeded the property to the Buffalo Phoenix Corporation, a firm set up by Darwin in the late 1920s to manage his financial affairs, and operated by the Martins' son Darwin R. Martin.

- The Buffalo Phoenix Corporation appears to have continued renting the property to various artists until the Beggs family bought it in 1943.

- **To summarize ownership from the above: Darwin D. Martin and then his Buffalo Phoenix Corporation were the primary claimants on the Home and Studio from the time of Martin's loans to the Wrights in 1911 until the sale of the property to the Beggs family in 1943. This resulted from failure to repay the 1911 loans to the Wrights and the 1925 loan to Bastear and Thomas. So, in effect, Darwin Martin and Buffalo Phoenix Corporation were the "real" owners of the property from 1911 to 1943, despite whose names were on the chain of title to the property.**

- The Beggs family occupied the Home and Studio until 1946, at which point they sold it to Clyde and Charlotte Nooker. The Nookers began to restore the somewhat rundown Home and Studio, and in the 1960s, Charlotte began giving limited tours through the historic property (Clyde died in the late 1960s).

- Concerns about the deterioration of the iconic Home and Studio property among Oak Park area communities led to the purchase of the property in 1974 by a combination of the National Trust for Historic Preservation (Washington, D.C.) and a newly formed Frank Lloyd Wright Home and Studio Foundation (Oak Park, Illinois, an now called the Frank Lloyd Wright Trust). The purchase price was \$196,807.92, a major share of which was provided by the Avenue State Bank of Oak Park. The price was split evenly by the two trust organizations. The Frank Lloyd Wright Home and Studio Foundation was given a 40 year lease for restoration and maintenance of the property at that time. Restoration ran from 1974-1987. The Foundation began giving public tours through the property in 1974, and continues that today.

- The National Trust for Historic Preservation took title to the property in 1975. In 2012, the Frank Lloyd Wright Trust repaid the National Trust's investment from 1974, and took title to the property.

Title Owners listed by the Cook County, Illinois, Recorder of Deeds

The above summary details who the "real" owners of the Home and Studio property were during the 1889-current period. In particular, they show that Darwin D. Martin and then his financial firm Buffalo Phoenix Corporation were the "real" owners of the property from 1911 to 1943.

Because of legal proceedings affecting the title, particularly Martin's unpaid loans to Frank Lloyd Wright in 1911, and Martin's lawsuit against Bastear and Thomas *et al.* in 1930 for failure to pay a 1925 mortgage, the Cook County, Illinois Recorder of Deeds lists the following as holders of the title to the property:

- Prior to 1866: Henry W. Austin (founder of the Austin neighborhood in Chicago, adjacent to Oak Park)
- 1866-1889: John and Jane Blair
- 1889-1893: Louis Sullivan (loan to Frank Lloyd Wright to build the Home)
- 1893-1925: Frank Lloyd and Catherine Wright
- 1925-29: John Bastear and Alva Thomas
- 1929: Alva Thomas *et al.*
- 1930-1933: Anna Kulisek (apparently a niece of John Bastear)
- 1933: Darwin Martin, resulting from his winning 1930 lawsuit against Bastear and Thomas *et al.*
- 1933: Isabelle Martin, purchased at foreclosure auction
- 1934-43: Buffalo Phoenix Corporation
- 1943-46: Norman and Elizabeth Beggs
- 1946-74: Clyde and Charlotte Nooker
- 1974-75: Avenue State Bank, Oak Park (major loan to purchase the property)
- 1975-2012: National Trust for Historic Preservation
- 2012-present: Frank Lloyd Wright Trust

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