

Oak Park Tours - Oak Park & River Forest History

Early History

The earliest settlements in America were along waterways that provided natural routes for travel. The Oak Park-River Forest area was part of the settlement phase that followed. The inducements were high ground (it was the first ridge at the edge of the swamp around Fort Dearborn), groves of hardwood trees, and a location on an old Indian trail from east to west. We now call that trail Lake Street.

In 1831, two Chicago men erected a steam sawmill on the Aux Plaines (now the Des Plaines) River near Lake Street so the hardwood they cut could be moved easily to Chicago's construction sites. This mill was said to be the only one within 20 miles of the city. Joseph Kettlestrings, a Yorkshireman, traveled here in 1833 from England via Cincinnati, Ohio, with his wife and three small children. He purchased 160 acres bounded on the south by what is now the site of the CNW Railroad and the streets we now know as Harlem, Chicago and Oak Park Avenues. He worked at the sawmill, and in 1835 he built himself a home (some say an inn) near what's now Pier One on Lake Street in downtown Oak Park. This was the first permanent house in what is now Oak Park. (The village was then called Kettlestrings' Grove and later Oak Ridge.) To secure a better education for his children, Kettlestrings moved to Chicago in 1843. This was before the Old Red Schoolhouse, a simple frame building, was built at Lake Street and Lathrop Avenue in River Forest in 1851.

In 1835 Ashbelle Steele also came to work at the sawmill and, a year later, built himself a home closer to the river. This was the first permanent house in what became River Forest. Growth of the area was stimulated in 1848 when the construction of the Galena & Chicago Union Railroad reached as far as River Forest. (This rail line originated in Chicago and was not an extension of an eastern railroad.)

In 1855, Temperance Hall, the first public meeting place, was built in Oak Park. It served as a gathering place, church, and school. That same year Kettlestrings returned to his farm and began to divide and sell the property. Reuben Whaples, who had purchased the land west of the Kettlestrings property in what is now River Forest in 1845, sold it in the early 1850s to Henry Quick, a retired merchant from the Harlem area of New York City.

In 1856, John Henry Quick, the son of Henry Quick, divided the property into blocks, named the streets (including one for himself), and built sidewalks. By 1859 the Oak Ridge School at Lake Street and Forest Avenue in Oak Park was built, and the Harlem School at Lake Street and Park Avenue in River Forest followed in 1860. Both were substantial brick buildings, but only the latter remains and continues to be used by the River Forest school administration. Commercial development along Lake Street was forced into Oak Park by Quick's reluctance to sell his land for business use.

By 1864 the Galena & Chicago Union Railroad had become the Chicago & Northwestern Railroad Co. The Northwestern moved the station from River Forest to Oak Park, and the Oak Ridge name began to fade away.

The boom in the villages did not develop until after 1871. The Great Fire sent many people fleeing from Chicago to find a safer location for their new homes. The distance from

Chicago appeared to be ideal since there was transportation and the 30-minute ride downtown was inexpensive. Most of the early homes were built within walking distance of the railroad along Lake Street, or within two blocks on either side. The Great Fire and the building of the railroads may well have been the most important events in the 19th century development of Oak Park and River Forest.

During the 1870s, local businesses increased both in number and in size. All were related to the needs of the residents: grocery stores, butcher shops, dry goods stores, and harness and blacksmith shops.

In 1873, Henry Austin bought all three saloons in Oak Park, closed them, and persuaded the Cicero town board (of which Oak Park was then a part) to issue no more such licenses for Oak Park. In 1880, the area west of Harlem Avenue made the same choice when several small settlements, each with its own name, combined and incorporated as the Village of River Forest.

By 1882, the population of Oak Park totaled more than 2,000. Many fine homes were built on Forest Avenue. By 1886 nine families were living on Chicago Avenue between Austin Boulevard and Harlem Avenue, but the area was still predominantly fields and wooded groves with an occasional small farm. Trolley cars began operating on Chicago Avenue in 1895, but the street was not paved until 1918. Forest Avenue was graded, curbed, and macadamized in 1889, and asphalt was laid in 1900. It was the first paved street in Oak Park.

By the 1890s, civic improvements had been made in both communities: water and sewer systems were installed, telephone lines were strung to Chicago, electricity was available, and fire hydrants and firefighting equipment were ready when needed. Hot water for heating, a by-product of generating electricity, was also available, piped underground as far north as Chicago Avenue through the Yaryan system. Wooden sidewalks were largely replaced by more permanent ones of brick, stone, or concrete.

In addition to the Chicago & Northwestern Railroad Co., the villages were served by the Chicago, Harlem, and Batavia Railroad, which ran from 40th Street (Pulaski Road) in Chicago through both villages (west on Randolph Street in Oak Park and Washington Boulevard in River Forest and south along Park Avenue as far as Harrison Street). Its service was infrequent and erratic (its nickname was the *dummy line* because wooden side panels on its small locomotives were used to deceive skittish horses), and its life was short. The Wisconsin Central followed the present railroad right-of-way along the Eisenhower Expressway, turning north at Des Plaines Avenue to Park Avenue, and leaving River Forest on the northwest. It is now the Soo Line. Both railroads had several stations in each community. With three railroads, the local residents had several choices for travel to Chicago. A local street railway was running trolley cars on Lake and Madison Streets by 1889. A Chicago elevated company extended its tracks on the ground as far as River Forest by 1900, giving residents still another means of travel.

Most of Frank Lloyd Wright's clients built in west-central Oak Park (between Harlem and East Avenues, Madison Street and Chicago Avenue), with a half dozen buildings in River Forest. By 1909, when Wright left Oak Park, east Oak Park was expanding. South Oak Park was the last area to be developed.

River Forest expansion began south of Division Street from Harlem Avenue to Lathrop

Avenue, and south of Chicago Avenue from Harlem Avenue to Thatcher Avenue. Edward C. Waller owned and farmed the area from Division Street to Chicago Avenue west of Lathrop Avenue, none of which was offered for sale until 1920. In 1927 the area north of Division Street to North Avenue was annexed; growth thereafter was rapid throughout River Forest.

In An Autobiography, Wright commented on the large number of churches in Oak Park, which he dubbed *Saints' Rest* 2. The villages also had more than the usual number of educational institutions. River Forest has two colleges and a Catholic priory within its boundaries.

The first public high school building was erected on Lake Street at East Avenue in 1890. It was replaced in 1905 by the nucleus of the present building, which has been added to several times, with the last and largest addition in 1967. This joint high school has been supported by both the villages of Oak Park and River Forest since the late 1800s.

Cultural activities were not neglected once the basic necessities of food, shelter, religious, and educational needs were supplied. James Scoville gave land and money for the first Oak Park Public Library building, which was known as the Scoville Institute and which was dedicated in 1881. The Romanesque structure was replaced in 1966 by a second building, which was enlarged in 1976. In 2003, a third and larger structure was constructed at the same site to serve the Oak Park community in the 21st century. The River Forest Library, designed by William Drummond, moved to its present home in 1929. The Nineteenth Century Women's Club was organized in 1892. (Anna Lloyd Wright, Frank Lloyd Wright's mother, was one of the founders and a member of the board of managers. Catherine Tobin Wright and Mamah Borthwick Cheney were also founding members.) They met in homes, churches, and the Scoville Institute until the present building was built on Forest Avenue in 1927. It is now known as the Nineteenth Century Charitable Foundation.

Rejecting Chicago's 20-year effort to annex the unincorporated area, Oak Park formally became a village in 1902. By 1910, there were 19,500 residents. Today, it still is a village with a population of about 55,000 and an area of 4.5 square miles. Oak Park, bordered on all sides by other communities, cannot expand but must concentrate on preserving and upgrading its buildings and businesses.

River Forest is also bordered on three sides by other communities, with forest preserves and the Des Plaines River on the fourth. River Forest's population has hovered about 11,500 for many years. It, too, is still incorporated as a village.

A renewed interest in the two communities has focused on the outstanding examples of architecture found there. Long acknowledged by architects and historians, the area's varied and historic architecture has increasingly become a subject of popular interest. Stimulated by this growing attention, architectural historians Paul Sprague and Wilbert Hasbrouck were commissioned in 1971 to undertake a thorough survey to locate, identify, and evaluate significant buildings in Oak Park. Their report selected 328 structures of particular merit, with about half of these examples in Prairie-style structures. The most outstanding examples from this group are by Frank Lloyd Wright. Among the 61 structures of national and international importance, 25 are by Wright, 25 by Tallmadge & Watson, and the rest composed of works by George Maher, John S. Van Bergen, Spencer & Powers, Charles E. White, E. E. Roberts, and Lawrence Buck.

Because of this unusual concentration of significant structures and to encourage their preservation as a group rather than naming individual buildings, it was decided in 1972 to designate approximately one square mile of Oak Park as a "Village Historic District". In December 1973, the Frank Lloyd Wright Prairie School of Architecture Historic District was accepted for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places kept by the National Park Service.

Although a number of properties within the district also have been individually listed in the National Register, only four have received the top classification of *Registered National Historic Landmark*: Unity Temple (1971) and the Home and Studio (1976), both by Wright; Pleasant Home, the Farson-Mills House (1972), designed by George Maher; and the Arthur Heurtley House (2000), also by Wright.

Village of Oak Park

The Village of Oak Park began operating under the village manager form of government in 1953. Under this type of government, the village president and board of trustees select a professional manager to oversee village operations. The village board is in charge of policy formulation.

The village enjoys a high degree of citizen involvement. Approximately thirty appointed boards and commissions assist the village board through studies and recommendations. In 1976 the community was designated as an All-American City. This award recognizes citizen involvement. Three activities were cited as symbolic of this important award: the formulation of the Frank Lloyd Wright Home and Studio Foundation (since 2000, the Frank Lloyd Wright Preservation Trust), the development of the Oak Park Village Mall (renamed *Downtown Oak Park* in 1988), and the formation of the Oak Park Housing Center.

The Frank Lloyd Wright Prairie School of Architecture Historic District

In 1972, as a result of the Hasbrouck-Sprague architecture survey, the Oak Park board of trustees designated the historic district and established a landmarks commission. In 1973, the district received federal designation. Each community defines the regulations governing its own historic district. In Oak Park, the landmark commission's authority is limited to advice and does not extend to the personal tastes of the homeowners (i.e., colors or cosmetic alterations).

Until 1980, any structure within a national historic district could apply for federal restoration maintenance funds. This money, channeled through the state's department of conservation, was awarded on a 50-percent matching basis. A brown sign with a red square, indicating federal support, was displayed during exterior construction. Currently, the program has been disbanded.

During the life of the program from 1974 to 1980, 22 private homes in Oak Park received matching funds for an average of \$3,000 per home. Four public buildings received funds for an average of \$22,000 per building. Unity Temple, the Frank Lloyd Wright Home and Studio, and Pleasant Home (the Farson-Mills house) were the only Oak Park buildings to

receive funds for interior restoration.

Federal funds were also used for historic preservation in the renovation of commercial buildings (Community Development Block Grants), notably for the Scoville Building at Oak Park Avenue and Lake Street (E. E. Roberts, architect) and the Cicero Gas Company building at 115 North Oak Park Avenue (Patton & Fisher, architects).

Ridgeland/Oak Park Historic District

In 1977, a study was undertaken to assess the housing stock in an area south of Lake Street, west of Austin Boulevard, east of Maple Street, and north of Washington Boulevard. It was felt that a second historic district would benefit both commercial and residential buildings in this area through federal tax credits. The proposal was shelved and reviewed again in 1983. In 1984, the Ridgeland/Oak Park Historic District was declared a "National Historic District." This district, with larger boundaries than originally planned, recognized the critical development in the growth of Oak Park between 1870 and 1920. There was a return to simpler architectural styles and the introduction of multi-family buildings into a single-family residential community.