

Hyde Park History

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History So Soon?

Pioneer Days of the Hyde Park Historical Society

*A talk given by Clyde Watkins, a founder of the Society,
at the annual meeting, February 20, 1999*

The title of “founder” is probably undeserved, because it implies an image of some lone and far-sighted character doing things by himself. That was never the case with us—we were a typical Hyde Park committee from the start. If the organization we celebrate was indeed my idea, I must assume that others had at least considered it long before I ever did. What spurred me to action, however, was the confluence of two forces in my life.

First, in the late 1960s after I was out of college—and therefore it was too late to change my major one last time—I began to develop an interest in U. S. history, especially Chicago history, between about 1870 and 1910. Plenty of others were ahead of me in that, fortunately, and there is a lot of wonderful literature, plus many enthralling photographs, available for study.

Second, I always had a thing about that great little building. Throughout my undergraduate years at the University, whenever I would pull an “all-nighter” in yet another vain attempt to salvage some term paper—or worse yet, an entire course—I would inevitably end up around 6:00am savoring the 42 cent



Clyde Watkins, HPHS Founder

special at Steve's Lunch. (For that price you got two eggs, bacon, potatoes, toast and coffee!) I loved the building, and continued to fantasize about what I later learned to call “adaptive reuse.” No doubt my first notions were along the lines of a swingin' bachelor pad or the nightclub I yearned to run at that age. But as I matured, I continued to watch the building through its subsequent incarnations and its decline. I knew it was somehow associated with the great Illinois Central Station from the World's Colombian Exposition, but at that point I wasn't exactly sure how, and there was no one to tell me—or so I thought.

By 1974 the building had sunk to the level of a storage shed for the two-wheeled carts they used for delivering newspapers, and it was clearly headed for ruin.

Coincidentally, Albert Tannler, assistant curator of special collections at Regenstein Library at that time, had just completed the first edition of *One in Spirit*, > 2



◀❶ the pictorial history of the University, and it captivated me, primarily because of its many references to the concurrent development (or disintegration and redevelopment) of the neighborhood. And that was the moment of my epiphany. A local historical society could undertake the research and preservation of its past in context of the city of Chicago and the nation. And such an organization could house itself in my favorite structure (the true identity of which I now appreciated). Let the psycho-historians ponder which was the means and which the end; in my mind the two were linked from the start.

Here are a few dates and events that led to our eventual founding:

- April/May, 1975.
Tom Jensen, a U-High classmate, and I organized the first public forum to discuss the establishment of a proposed “Hyde Park-Kenwood Historical League.” We met at St. Thomas Church and Len Despres was our speaker. (I cannot find the exact date, but I believe a copy of the flyer from the meeting is already in our archives.)
- June 24, 1975.
Several of us met at Jean Block’s apartment for lunch to discuss how to get organized and moving. It took a while, as it turned out. . .
- January 13, 1976.
A larger formation was hosted by Victoria Ranney in her home.
- March 22, 1976.
Another planning meeting was hosted by Thelma Dahlberg at her home, followed by yet another in April. These meetings continued throughout the following eight months.
- June 15, 1976.
My calendar indicates that this was my first meeting with Win Kennedy to discuss acquiring the building.
- November 8, 1976.
Jean and I called on Muriel Beadle to ask her to become our first president. She agreed on the spot and decreed that the name of the organization would be the Hyde Park Historical society. She hosted our first official board meeting at her home two weeks later on November 22.
- January 28, 1978.
The Hyde Park Historical Society received its official charter as an Illinois not-for-profit corporation.
- March 27, 1978.
Robert and Lucille Rouse, owners of 5529 South Lake Park, finally signed the bill of sale for the property, for \$4,000, after continued and heroic efforts by Len Despres to close the deal. Kennedy, Ryan, Monigal Associates was our agent.

- February 2, 1979.
Our first lease for the land under our building was signed with the Illinois Central Gulf Railroad — five years at \$20 per year.
- July 20, 1980.
The “Completion Fund,” our \$45,000 capital campaign to purchase and renovate the headquarters, kicked off on July 4, 1978, initiated by a “Charter Membership” drive for 100 members at \$100 each. Encouraged by a \$10,000 challenge grant from the Field Foundation of Illinois, the drive was successfully concluded. Jean Block was instrumental in this effort.
- October 26, 1980.
The Grand Opening of our magnificently renovated and restored new headquarters took place, thanks to Dev Bowly’s endless talent, work and sacrifice. We began with a parade down Lake Park Avenue and concluded with speeches that will live forever, assuming anyone remembered to keep notes, which I doubt.

Some of the earliest board members are still serving: Dev Bowly, Carol Bradford, Alta Blakely and Richardson Spofford. Other early members were Ted Anderson, Margaret Fallers, Gary Husted, Muriel Beadle, Jean Block, Berenece Boehm, Randy Holgate, Anita Anderson, Michael Conzen, Rory Shanley-Brown, Thelma Dahlberg, Phillis Kelly, Betty Borst, Eleanor Swift, Leon Despres, Charles Beckett, Maggie Bevacqua, Malcolm Collier, Emma Kemp, Gerhardt Laves, John McDermott, and Clyde Watkins. ❶

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Papa John Remembered

by Devereaux Bowly, Jr.

When I was a kid at the Lab School and U-High in the 1950s and early 60s, there was a street vendor at 59th and Kenwood. He was called Papa John and sold delicious kosher hot dogs for 25 or 35 cents. He had a small white painted wooden and glass push cart with an antique copper alcohol burner to keep the dogs hot and the rolls warm and moist.

Papa John was a small man, not five feet tall, who talked little, other than to ask what the customer wanted on his or her hot dog. His home base was a tiny brick building, which no longer exists, on the southeast corner of 56th and Lake Park, next to the IC tracks. The building later housed Chicken-A-Go-Go, run by Morry and his son, who developed delicatessens on 55th Street, in Hutchinson Commons and elsewhere. Papa John's building should not be confused with the wooden hot dog shack which was located one block east, on the southwest corner of 56th and Stony Island, surrounded by a Yellow Cab dispatch station.

As I remember it, each school day in good weather Papa John, who seemed to me to be in his seventies or eighties, would slowly push his cart over to the Lab School at about 2:30, and stay for a couple of hours before returning. At some point he disappeared without explanation. We would appreciate hearing from anyone who knows more about Papa John. ☺



The Powhatan Building

(and Narragansett just to the west) c. 1930

Postcard from the collection of Stephen A. Treffman

MORE ABOUT THE POWHATAN ON PAGE 4.

Hyde Park Historical Society

COLLECTING AND PRESERVING HYDE PARK'S HISTORY

*Time for you to join up or renew?
Fill out the form below and return it to:*

5529 S. Lake Park Avenue • Chicago, IL 60637



Enclosed is my _____ new _____ renewal membership
in the Hyde Park Historical Society.

_____ Member \$15 _____ Sponsor \$50
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Name _____

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This Newsletter is published by the Hyde Park Historical Society, a not-for-profit organization founded in 1975 to record, preserve, and promote public interest in the history of Hyde Park. Its headquarters, located in an 1893 restored cable car station at 5529 South Lake Park Avenue, houses local exhibits. It is open to the public on Saturdays and Sundays from 2 until 4pm.

Telephone: **HY3-1893**

President...**Alice Schlessinger**

Editor...**Theresa McDermott**

Designer...**Nickie Sage McDermott**

Regular membership: **\$15** per year, contributor: **\$25**,
sponsor: **\$50**, benefactor: **\$100**



photograph by Nancy Hays

Barbara Mirecki of the Powhatan Building Corporation accepts the award for the "meticulous restoration of the building's Art Deco lobby." **Ward Miller** accepts for Judith Bromley and Dr. Serifino Garella "for the exterior and interior renovation of their home, Frank Lloyd Wright's Heller House. He also accepts for Vinci/Hemp, Inc., Architects, for their work on both of those projects.

Renovation of The Powhatan Lobby Wins Paul Cornell Award

By *Ward Miller, Vinci/Hamp Architects, Inc.*

The Powhatan is a 23-story residential co-op building, located on the lakefront at 4950 South Chicago Beach Drive in Hyde Park. The building was designed in 1929 by two architects, Robert Degolyer and Charles Morgan, in a thoroughly modern "skyscraper style" reflecting the structure of the building's skeleton beneath. This type of building style and construction is now associated with the "Art Deco" movement that flourished during the 1920s and 1930s in the United States. The colored spandrel panels on the south and east sides of the building, along with all of the ornamental features of the Powhatan and the adjacent Narragansett building are the work of the building's co-architect, Charles Morgan, who was an associate of Frank Lloyd Wright. In recent years The Powhatan has been designated an official Chicago Landmark.

Vinci/Hamp was hired by a committee of individuals from the building to repair the original terrazzo floor which had been obscured by wall to wall carpeting, concealing its rich auburn colored field bordered with black terrazzo. This work included the repair of cracks in the terrazzo as well as restoring the floor's luster. The existing furnishings and finishes within the lobby space were also re-designed at the same time.

Published historic photographs indicate that the lobby of The Powhatan was once a richly ornamented

space, later obliterated by a series of remodelings. Investigations within the wall cavity by Ward Miller of Vinci/Hamp Architects, Inc., revealed the presence of original finishes, including pigmented plaster sgraffito mosaics by Morgan. Removal of the walls further revealed the original stepped terrazzo fireplace, fluted pilasters, decorative cast-iron grills, and mosaics. All original finishes were repaired and restored in the course of this project, including the stylized fluted pilasters, the figured walnut paneling and the original color scheme.

Two artists, Ms. Jo Hormuth and Mr. John Phillips of Chicago Architectural Arts, were hired to clean and remove subsequent layers of paint from the mosaics and to reinvent Morgan's original techniques, which facilitated the repair and replacement of missing tiles. The original "stylized geometric" wood and glass entry doors were found by Mr. John Graaman, the building's superintendent, in an attic storage room and were reinstalled. On the east wall above the windows, an air-conditioning system was integrated into a reconstructed soffit, which had been destroyed. All plaster surfaces were repaired or recreated by Luczak Brothers Plastering Company of Chicago. The original silver/gold paint colors with luminous metallic particles were supplied by the Cres-Lite company, a Chicago firm, and applied by Onassis Painting and Decorating Company of Kenilworth. Furniture and carpeting were selected to complement the remaining original furniture pieces. ▶



Powhatan lobby before restoration. Walls conceal mosaics and pilasters.



Original fireplace, fluted pilasters and mosaics after being uncovered. Note damaged/painted mosaics...



Restored fireplace and sgraffito mosaics. The destroyed mosaic of Chief Powhatan has been replaced with an etched glass mirror with geometric pattern.

photographs by Ward Miller

Other Cornell Award Winners...



photograph by Nancy Hays

Devereaux Bowly presents the Paul Cornell Award to **Marian and Leon Despres**...a lifetime achievement award “for their promotion of interest in Hyde Park and Chicago History as well as in architectural preservation.”

THE CHICAGO ARCHITECTURE FOUNDATION offers tours of the city and surrounding areas...

Hyde Park

HPHS board member, Doug Anderson, invites you to walk with him through the University Campus and along the streets of Hyde Park with its houses dating from the 1860s to the 1950s, including the interior of Frank Lloyd Wright's Robie House.

Sundays, 1:30pm

June 20, August 15, October 17

Meet at Rockefeller Chapel, 59th & Woodlawn

Cost \$8 (CAF members \$3)

Jackson Park — 1893 Revisited

A pictorial re-creation of the Fair of 1893 examines how Frederick Law Olmsted transformed marshes and dunes into the beautiful park which is now listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Also visit Osaka Garden.

Saturdays, 10:30am

August 14, September 25, October 9

Meet at Clarence Darrow Bridge

Cost \$5 (CAF members free)

Call Doug Anderson, 773-493-7058, for information

Do you know how many birds live in—or visit—Hyde Park?

On May 8th, the 25th Annual Spring Bird Count for the area of Jackson Park, took place.

This year's report states:

Birds were generally in good numbers...the total number of species was among the highest ever observed in a day at Jackson Park. Warbler diversity was especially high at 29 species, including several notably scarce species. During the course of a given spring one is lucky to find such species as Prairie, Cerulean, Worm-eating, Kentucky, and Hooded Warblers at all; and seeing all of them in a single day has little precedent.

Observers began at 5:10am at four sites along the lakefront...Two pre-sunrise finds were a Nighthawk at Promontory Park and a Common Moorhen at 64th Street. The last observation of the day was at 7:20pm—a Worm-eating Warbler feeding along the sidewalk at 56th and Harper!

Other highlights included four Great Egrets, the Park's first spring count Snow Goose, 115 Canada Geese, 16 Blue-Grey Gnatcatchers, and even one Tennessee Warbler! Total number of birds counted: 3,542! To participate in bird-watching, call Doug Anderson, 493-7058.



MEMO

To: **HPHS Members**
From: **HPHS President, Alice Schlessinger**
Re: **Update on our headquarters repairs**

The Society has encountered a number of structural problems during the last year. Our roof badly needed replacing and our plumbing connection to the outside sewer had become clogged with tree roots. Thanks to Devereux Bowly and Bert Benade, our Building Committee, these projects have been successfully completed. The handsome new roof, which is consistent with our 19th Century building, should last for many years. The plumbing obstruction has been removed—a major project which required investigation with a video camera and excavation

below the office floor.

Our little headquarters building is ready for you to visit though we still have more work to do. We hope to complete it over the summer months.

Thanks to our members who responded to a single letter with such generosity—over \$5,000 has been contributed—and to the University of Chicago which has awarded us a grant of \$3,000, we have not had to dig too deeply into our reserve funds to cover the expenses incurred.

We thank the following contributors to this Special Fund:

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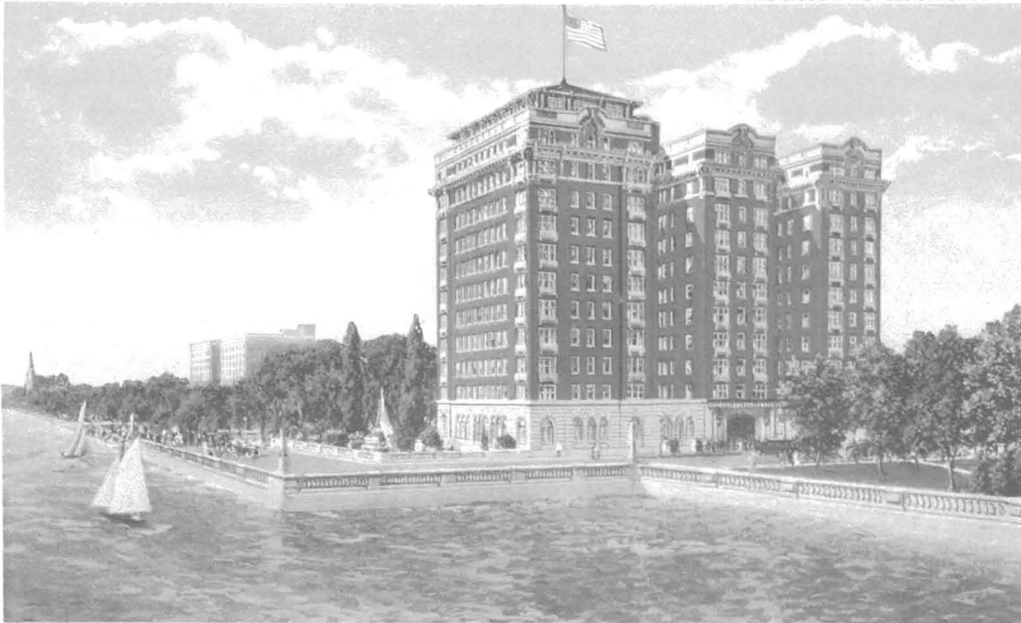


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THE SISSON HOTEL, CHICAGO.



The Sisson Hotel, 53rd Street at Lake Michigan
Postcard from the collection of Stephen A. Treffman

UPCOMING EXHIBIT...

THE BOOM YEARS: 1916-1930, second in our two-part exhibition on Hyde Park's historic hotels, will present views from the second great wave of apartment hotel construction, the period in which much of the architectural landscape of modern Hyde Park took shape. The exhibit is scheduled to open later this summer after repairs to our headquarters are completed. In the meantime, we are still seeking printed materials, menus, photos, or souvenirs of these hotels for this exhibit. We will welcome any items our readers wish to contribute, loan, or allow us to photocopy. For more information, please call Steve Treffman at (773) 241-5528.