

Lamp House History Outline

Prepared for the Ad Hoc Committee on the Lamp House Block

John O. "Jack" Holzhueter, October 22, 2013

I. Frank Lloyd Wright and Robert M. Lamp

A. The boys met at the Second Ward School in Madison about the fall of 1879—Wright then 11 and Lamp 12. They shared June 8 as a birthday. They maintained close friendship until Lamp's death in 1916 of kidney disease, perhaps a complication of the withered leg with which he had been born. (He got around on crutches.) Lamp was red-headed; Wright called him "Pinky," a nickname he gave his own son, David, according to Wright archivist Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer. Wright's autobiography gives the nickname as "Ruby."

B. Wright appropriated Lamp's collegiate biography for his own in his autobiography. Lamp lacked only a thesis or a few credits for a bachelor's in English—Wright's story about himself. Wright took only three courses at UW.

II. Wright's first work for Lamp

A. Wright left Madison to work in Chicago late in 1886. By 1891 he had designed a "camp" for Lamp and a fellow sailor Melville Clarke, cashier of the First National Bank. It consisted of three very small "shacks" on Rocky Roost, an islet off Governor's Island on Lake Mendota. (A drawing by Wright of the camp is held by the New York Public Library—the only attribution for it.)

B. In 1901, Wright designed a single two-story cottage or camp, incorporating the three earlier small shacks, on Rocky Roost. It took two or three years to build and burned in 1935 or 1936. It is the subject of many postcard views since from a distance the cottage appears to float on the lake. It had a picturesque windmill whose water source was not the lake but a well drilled into the stone lakebed.

III. The Robert M. Lamp House (built), 1903, and a House for Investment (unbuilt), 1904

A. The first few years of the twentieth century in Madison saw tremendous population growth and an increase in population density on the central isthmus. Many 120-foot lots were subdivided; some housing was built to the rear of previous housing; large houses were divided into apartments. In 1903, Robert entered into partnership with a paternal uncle, Fritz Lamp, a real estate developer, to subdivide a mansion-sized lot in the first block of North Butler, moving and reconfiguring the mansion into apartments (20 North Butler), providing a lot for Wright's Lamp House (22 North Butler), and a third lot for House for Investment, also by Wright. Lamp sold that lot to a different developer. He built a standard and unremarkable 2 ½-story mid-Madison apartment (24 North Butler).

B. Apart from redevelopment along East Washington Avenue and the erection of the Odessa, these were the last buildings—all dwellings—erected on the block.

IV. Site development and construction sequence on the Lamp property

A. The mansion (20 North Butler) was moved from the center of the block, losing two wings and gaining a redesigned, Prairie-like rear, probably designed by Wright or his project supervisor, Walter Burley Griffin, a member of his staff.

B. The Lamp House was erected (of two layers of common, cream-colored brick) at the far rear of the lot, nearer Webster Street than Butler, because that was the high point of the block for views of the lakes and the city. The basement was raised well above ground level to achieve more height, thus improving visibility from the roof garden.

C. Site development. The long, keyhole driveway to the lot is part of the lot itself and about half the length of the block. It provides an interesting, compelling approach to the house, which first reveals its top two stories, then disappears from view as the surrounding fence intervenes, then reveals itself fully for the first time only after passing under the surrounding arbor. Lamp parked his car (early for Madison) at the top of the drive, which had a circular turnaround visible in the concrete.

D. The house at 24 North Butler came last, and the keyhole drive probably was not completed until after it was erected.

V. Importance of the Lamp House

A. It is Wright's most personal work in the city.

B. It is Wright's earliest surviving work in the city. (The earlier 1893 Lake Mendota Boathouse at the foot of North Carroll Street was razed. Rocky Roost—in Westport—burned in 1935 or '36.)

C. The floor plan is world famous. Walter Burley Griffin originated the plan a few years before joining Wright's studio. Wright, however, popularized it through publication in the April 1907 issue of *Ladies' Home Journal* (then the most widely circulated magazine in the United States) and it was subsequently copied uncounted thousands of times around the country.

D. The full roof garden with pergola (a Japanese-influenced open framework to demark space and provide a framework for vines and plants) is unique among Wright's designs. He created other partial roof gardens and many terraces and balconies. Lamp, perhaps with Wright's cooperation, filled in the roof garden for a playroom in 1911. In the fall of 1961 the surviving pieces of the pergola were removed because of roof leaks. (I was then living in the house and remember the roof leaks well.)

E. Intent of the roof garden

To provide the house with a feature from which the occupants could view the lakes, the city, and the outdoors. Wright famously integrated landscapes with his architecture, blending indoors and outdoors. In this instance, through the roof garden, he incorporated the heavens and their constellations. This was an early instance of such an approach, which he frequently used in his later Los Angeles houses and at Taliesin West. In 1903, city lights would not have interfered with Lamp's views of the skies. Also, Lamp particularly enjoyed boating and boating races on the lakes. A newspaper account in 1903 states that he looked forward to watching races, through binoculars, from his roof.

F. Hardscaping and landscaping

1. Hardscaping of retaining walls, walks, and fences enabled the rear placement of the house and assisted with providing privacy, heightening the sense of discovery of the house, and providing an intricate approach. A Cambridge University professor spelled out nine steps to enter the Martin House in Buffalo. There are eleven here.

2. First, street to sidewalk; 2, the long walk; 3, steps to the yard; 4, passage under the arbor; 5, curving walk to the terrace steps; 6, first terrace steps; 7, platform; 8, second terrace steps; 9, terrace; 10, porch door and porch; 11, entry vestibule with compression and release, once the front door is opened, into the living room. This may actually be twelve stages of entry. I do not know of a more elaborate approach in Wright's work.

3. Landscaping. Typical of Wright's work, the lawn or yard includes a constructed, sloped terrace. Adjacent to the north porch there was a fenced garden area. Some trees and shrubbery were planted on the north and west sides of the lot, and a bit of the south side. In back of these was an 8-foot privacy fence planted to grape vines. There was only a walk, curb, and short wire fence on the balance of the south side, adjacent to the back yards of the adjoining houses on Webster Street, one of which in the 1960s still had a garden, thus providing an additional garden view for the Lamp House.

VI. The Lamp House in the context of Wright's work

A. In 1903 Wright was already working towards abstraction and away from his Prairie Style. In Lamp, he was making initial exploratory steps toward the abstract—a cube, with defining half-pilasters at its edges. The house's confusing "top"—the filled-in roof garden—has prevented scholars from paying it the attention it might otherwise have been given, since serious Wright scholarship did not begin until the 1930s, long after Lamp had been disfigured by paint and the playroom.

B. The corner pilasters relate to Hillside Home School, a year earlier, but Hillside still had many Prairie elements, particularly the wide overhangs. But the pilasters and strict geometric form also relate Lamp to the famous 1903 Larkin Building in Buffalo, and to Unity Temple in Oak Park and the magnificent but unbuilt Yahara Boathouse project in Madison, both from 1905. These two designs generally are heralded as Wright's breakthrough to the abstract. That Wright's 1903 Lamp House

forerunner and the Yahara project both were created for Madison ought to be a source of civic pride for the capital city.

C. Two other and later Wright houses based on the Lamp House/Griffin floor plan are already museums: the Gardener's Cottage on the grounds of the Martin House complex in Buffalo and the Stockman House in Mason City, Iowa, where it is a major tourist attraction along with Wright's bank building and inn, recently restored to the tune of \$24 million.