

The Lake Ellyn Park Recreation House

Lake Ellyn Park
Glen Ellyn, Illinois



Constructed: 1937

Citizens for Glen Ellyn Preservation
Historic Home Tour 2010

The Lake Ellyn Park Recreation House 1937



Significance

The Lake Ellyn Park Recreation House, an integral part of today's historic Lake Ellyn park, was designed in 1935 by the architect Frederick G. Walker.¹ Constructed in 1937 the building opened on November 12, 1937.

The name of the building was "The Recreation House" and was designed as a winter warming house for ice skaters and in all seasons provided a place to play ping pong and other table games; the 'juke box' also had a home in the Recreation House^{footnote}. The original layout consisted of the large gathering room with fireplace, men's and women's toilet rooms, coat rooms and a 120 square foot kitchen with pass-through counter. The main recreation room is 28' x 68'.

The cost of the project was shared by the Work Progress Administration (WPA) (an economic program under Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal) and the Glen Ellyn Park District.²

Special features in the original design included a removable wood floor system to provide drainage from the snow and prevent damage from the skate blades. Drawings note, "for

protection of Recreation Room floor during skating season.” Skater’s lockers and benches were also designed for the Recreation House.

With the design of the building also included a change in the shore line adjacent to the new building to provide a more pronounced emphasis on the east entrance into the Recreation House.

Today the Recreation House, now commonly referred to as the Glen Ellyn Boat House, has become the beloved center of Glen Ellyn activities from the Fourth of July through winter skating and summer weddings.

Footnote: The Wurlitzer family, famous for the large theater organs in silent movie houses, brought some of that same grand style to the jukebox. By 1937, Wurlitzer had sold more than 100,000 models.

Architectural Style

Designed by the architect Frederick G. Walker, the final plans for the building are dated 11-30-1935.¹ The construction permit is dated 01-13-1937.²

If we are to look at what was happening in domestic architecture in 1937, minimal traditional was the modern style at that time and perhaps can be closely related to the Recreation House architecture. This style emerged from economic tough times during the 1930s and displays traditional form but lacks the decorative detailing found in these traditional styles³. Roof pitches are low or intermediate (as in the Recreation House) rather than steep as found in the preceding Tudor style. Eaves are close rather than overhanging. Usually there is a large chimney (the Recreation House has two chimneys) in the minimal traditional building and often a front facing gable, both echoing Tudor features. In the years immediately preceding and following World War II this minimal traditional style was used in great numbers in domestic architecture and was often built with a mix of wood, brick or stone.

While it appears that most of the design work that Walker is known for is in the Tudor Revival style, by 1935 with his design for the Recreation House Walker had left the preceding style of Tudor Revival and turned to a more minimal approach.





The building is a one-story building with the main facade facing east. The structure is a side-gable with a rear cross-gable centered wing forming a T shaped ground plan. To the front is a front facing gable forming a full height entrance to the building. There are many windows, expected from a recreation house, offering views across the Lake. The windows are double hung with 6 over 6 small window panes.

The building is clad in wooden clapboards with vertical board and batten within the gable ends. The boards on the board and batten siding are finished with a scalloped edged detailing on the lower edge. The wooden cladding is painted a dull reddish color. The roof is constructed of unfinished cedar shingles aged to a rustic silver grey color. The variable sized shingles are laid in a coursed shingle pattern (each course aligned).

Exterior

EAST FAÇADE

The East Facade is the main facade of the building facing the lake. The main entrance is housed in a front facing gable structure and reached from a wooden deck at the water's edge. The shoreline was changed in 1937 when the building was constructed to provide a more pronounced emphasis on the east entrance into the Recreation House. The double hung windows are grouped (five contiguous windows) on either side of the main entrance. Small windows are present in the side walls of the entrance gable. The kitchen addition, constructed in 1959⁴, can be seen extending to the south.

On the roof line two flared eyebrow shaped vents can be seen. These vents are not on the original 1935 architectural plans, and it is not known if these utilitarian yet decorative elements were installed in the original building. Certainly they are present in a sketch provided by the architects Perkins and Norris proposing the kitchen addition (addition added in 1959 by architect Francis W. Allegratti) and they are present in a 1985 photograph.

NORTH FAÇADE



The massive and over scaled chimney typical of the Tudor Revival and minimal traditional styles is a prominent feature on the north facade of the building. Clad in stone the chimney is positioned central and exterior to the gable wall. This chimney serves the large fireplace at the north end of the gathering room. A half gable (or shed) roof line is over the north auxiliary entrance to the building; this structure is original to the building and has always lead into a vestibule area providing access to the women's toilets as well as to the main gathering room. A similar wooden structure surrounding the doorway is shown on the 1935 plans (a series of cross struts between the side posts are not seen today and it is unknown if these were ever present on the finished 1937 building). A flared eyebrow shaped vent can also be seen in the roofline of this north side of the building. This vent is not present in an early photograph of the building (date of photograph unknown).



WEST FAÇADE

A second chimney can be seen on the west facade. The stone clad chimney is positioned central to the cross gable on this wing of the building; it provides an exhaust for the furnace. This chimney is shown on the 1935 plans as fully exterior to the building marking the end of the west elevation of the building. It is unknown when the gabled addition, partially wrapping the chimney, was added. It is shown in the 1990 plans as housing the mechanical room.

SOUTH FAÇADE

An auxiliary entrance on the south side of the building matches that on the north side. This entrance structure is original and has always lead into a vestibule. On this south side of the building this vestibule provides access to the men's toilets and also to the main gathering room.

The wooden structure surrounding the door way matches the north side entrance detailing. A flared eyebrow shaped vent also matches that on the north side. A ribbon of windows (a grouping of 3 double hung windows) can be seen providing views to the west from the gathering room.



The 1959 addition to the building extends the footprint of the building to the south. The change in roofline clearly delineates where the original 1937 building ends and the 1959 additions starts. The 1959 plans show an overhead door on the south side of the addition, extending almost the full width of this part of the building.



Interior

The 1935 architect's plans shows the original building consisted of a large recreation room with a large fireplace on the north wall. A pass-through counter provided access from the recreation room to the kitchen. A wooden counter top door to close off the pass through to the kitchen is shown on the architect's plans. Details for skaters' lockers and benches are also included in Walker's plans. A sectional flooring system was also devised (including a method of laying the floor sections) by Walker. On the architect's plans this flooring system is "for the protection of recreation room floor during skating season".

As today, vestibules existed off the main east entrance and north and south auxiliary entrances. The vestibules on the north and south side have always provided access to the women's and men's toilets. The boiler room was situation at the extreme west of the building where a chimney provided an exhaust system for the boiler.

Alterations

In 1959, Architect Francis W. Allegetti (office address on the plans is given as 443 Duane Street, Glen Ellyn) designed the 20' x 24' kitchen addition (located on the south side of the building) and upgraded the toilet rooms, utilizing the space from the original kitchen for direct access to the mechanical space and for expanded storage. The design of the addition kept in context with the original design.



In 1990, Architects Williams/Pollock Associates (office address on the plans is given as 210 North Hale, Wheaton) designed upgrades for the facility such as electrical and mechanical⁵. It appears that some roofing and siding work was also included in the upgrades.



The Original Architect

The original architect for the 1937 Recreation House was Frederick G. Walker. Walker was born on December 29, 1879 and died October 14, 1957⁶. Walker grew up in Mansfield, IL and moved to West Chicago and then to Glen Ellyn by 1925. He lived at 733 Highland and then on Forest. The address on the 1935 Recreation House plans was given as 717 Forest Avenue. Walker was married to Clara T (who was from Illinois and born in 1887)

Walker was an architectural Engineer. He graduated from Nebraska University and in the 1930s served as Chairman of the GE Zoning Board of Appeals.

Around 1926, Walker worked with a partner Austin Angell and the firm was called Walker & Angell and was located in the DuPage Bank & Trust Building in Glen Ellyn (the office had previously been located in Aurora)⁷.

Frederick G. Walker is known for building in the Tudor Revival style. He is responsible for several Tudor revival buildings around Glen Ellyn:

- Glen Ellyn American Legion Post, No. 3 club house on Buena Vista Drive.
- The Tudor Revival-style garage (Gearhead) on Forest (just north of Crescent).
- Tudor Revival house at the southwest corner of Hill and Park (1929).
- Tudor Revival building at 481-483 North Main (Flour Barrel & Renaissance Studio).
- Tudor Revival building at 550 Crescent.

History of the WPA

The \$32,242 cost of the project was shared by the WPA (Work Progress Administration) and the Glen Ellyn Park District. The WPA furnished the labor at \$11,752 and The Park District provided the materials at \$18,317 and the equipment at \$2,173.

The Work Progress Administration (WPA) was an economic program under Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal.⁸ It was during the Great Depression and work camps were developed to provide work for the young unemployed men. West Chicago and Elmhurst camps housed the workers that worked on the Glen Ellyn Recreation House.⁹

The WPA program included the CCC (Civilian Conservation Corps) which focused on park development.¹⁰ More than 800 parks were developed and 63,256 buildings were constructed.¹¹

About the Era

On January 14, 1930, the Village of Glen Ellyn adopted an ordinance which put in place an agreement with the Park District that Lake Ellyn would become an integral part of Glen Ellyn's storm water management plan.¹² The original landscape included a number of springs (tributary) that flowed to Lake Ellyn. The storm water was now to be underground.

The year the Recreation House was built Frank Lloyd Wright designed Taliesin West in Scottsdale, Arizona. Social Security was created the same year.

In 1937, a washing machine cost \$33.50, a table lamp cost \$1.00, a doctor earned \$61 per week and a manufacturing worker made \$16 per week.

1937 Chicago History

Around the Region - 1937 Chicago History.¹³

For many Chicagoans at least 65 percent of the city's electorate who had cast their ballots for Franklin Roosevelt's reelection — 1937 started on a note of cautious optimism. Although the Great Depression continued to exact a heavy toll, FDR's second term offered the possibility of expanded New Deal reforms that might help the region and its residents move toward better times.

Works Progress Administration (WPA) funds already paid artists to practice their crafts and researchers to survey the city. Public Works Administration (PWA) projects provided jobs and new housing. PWA¹⁴ funding and employees contributed to the Metropolitan Sanitary District's effort to upgrade the region's sewage system. Federal funds were also helping to improve the city's transportation network, from Lake Shore Drive to the expansion of Municipal Airport to accommodate larger passenger planes. Perceived governmental support helped to revitalize the labor movement, as workers, sometimes crossing racial boundaries, organized for better wages and working conditions. Early in the year, strikes among electrical workers and taxi drivers left the city dark and still. Groups as diverse as the Chicago Tunnel Transport workers, the employees of Fan-Steel and the Chicago Mail Order Company, and the waitresses at de Met's Tea Rooms staged sit-down strikes to achieve their goals. On Memorial Day, the entire nation was shocked when police injured 90 strikers and killed four at a march targeted at Republic Steel. Unionization efforts spread and some unions, like the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, succeeded in gaining recognition and concessions from their employers.

FDR's decision to cut federal spending in response to improved economic conditions early in the year plunged Chicago and the nation into recession as the year waned. Unemployment climbed as federal jobs disappeared and businesses faltered, returning Chicago families to the frightening levels of need experienced in 1929 - 1930. Relief requests increased so sharply that payments had to be reduced to well below what the state had determined was necessary for a minimum standard of living. The impact on already suffering communities such as the African American neighborhoods where unemployment had previously reached as high as 50 percent was devastating.

By October, when Roosevelt came to Chicago to celebrate the completion of Lake Shore Drive and, belatedly, the centenary of the city's incorporation, politicians and voters were acutely aware of the need for solutions to end the depression. Few, however, fully appreciated the relevance of the president's topic that day: the threat to world peace posed by certain nations. The war he talked about avoiding would eventually break the depression and move Chicago, the region, the country, and the world in new directions.
Janice L. Reiff

End Notes

1. Frederick G. Walker Architect plans for the Recreation House Nov 30th 1935.
2. Village of Glen Ellyn Department of Buildings Application for Building Permit January 13th 1937
3. "A Field Guide to American Houses" by Virginia & Lee McAlester, published by Alfred A. Knoff Inc. 1984. ISBN 0-394-73969-8 (pbk)
4. Francis W. Allegretti Architect blue prints for addition. Sept. 1959.
5. Williams/Pollock Associates Architect plans for system updates. Oct. 21 1990.
6. The Glen Ellyn News, October 17, 1957 with Frederick G. Walker Obituary
7. Glen Ellyn City Directory listing Walker & Angell.
8. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Works_Progress_Administration
9. http://www.ccclegacy.org/camps_illinois.htm
10. <http://newdeal.feri.org/forests/af733.htm> and <http://www.ccclegacy.org/> and http://www.nps.gov/history/history/online_books/ccc/ccc/chap10.htm
11. <http://www.illinoistimes.com/Springfield/article-1366-the-nation%E2%80%99s-treasure.html>
12. Village of Glen Ellyn Ordinance No. 812 and Ordinance No. 2516
13. <http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/500007.html>
14. <http://history.wiki.elanco.net/Public+Works>

Black and White Photographs Courtesy of Glen Ellyn Historical Society.

Acknowledgements

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Exhibits

The following exhibits follow:

Frederick G. Walker 1935 Architect plans for the Recreation House
Francis W. Allegretti 1959 Architect plans for the 1959 kitchen addition (blueprints)
Williams/Pollock Associates 1990 Architect plans for the 1990 system upgrades
Village of Glen Ellyn Department of Buildings Application for Building Permit
Chicago Daily Tribune May 31, 1925. A.C.Hoy Realtor Office
Chicago Daily Tribune Oct 10, 1926. GE Garage (now Gearhead)
Chicago Daily Tribune Sep 1, 1929. Jennings House
Chicago Daily Tribune Aug 16, 1931. Walker Heads GE Zoning Board