



123 MADISON STREET, OAK PARK, ILLINOIS 60302

## HISTORIC LANDMARK NOMINATION REPORT



**Vernon W. Skiff House**  
**633 N. East Avenue**

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Preliminary Determination of Eligibility approved by the  
Oak Park Historic Preservation Commission on September 9, 2010

Designated by Village Ordinance on January 3, 2011

# Vernon W. Skiff House

633 N. East Avenue

**Built:** 1909  
**Architect:** Nimmons & Fellows  
**Builder:** C. H. Nielsen

The Vernon W Skiff House was built in 1909 for Mary Frances Coffin Skiff and Vernon William Skiff. The home was designed by “Chicago’s premier designers of industrial buildings,” Nimmons & Fellows.<sup>1</sup> The firm had recently designed the new headquarters building at 426 West Washington Street in Chicago for the Jewel Tea Company, owned by their son and son-in-law. Although these architects were not known for residential designs, the Skiffs may have chosen them because of the work they had done for the Skiff’s son and son-in-law. Other residential works by Nimmons & Fellows include the 1899 Katharine Rush double house in Hyde Park, the 1903 Julius Rosenwald House and the 1904 Platt P. Gibbs House, both in Kenwood.

The Vernon W. Skiff House is built in the “estate” section of Oak Park, so-called because of zoning which requires lots of not less than 10,000 square feet of land, the largest lot size requirement in the Village. On the west side of East Avenue, with a 30-foot setback from the street, the home enjoys primarily eastern, southern and western exposures. On the summit of the Continental Divide as it cuts through Oak Park, it is the tallest building in the neighborhood.



The bid for construction of the 2-story \$15,000 residence was advertised in the June 5, 1909 *American Contractor*. The owner is listed as V.W. Skiff. Notice that the \$15,000 contract was awarded for the 2-story 24 x 48 residence is listed in the June 26, 1909 issue of the same publication, this time with the owner listed as F.B. Skiff. The architect is listed as Nimmons & Fellows, 204 Dearborn Street, on both of these. ii

The house is constructed of red/brown brick with limestone detailing and accents. Steel beam supports are seen in the basement. A wrought iron fence surrounds the property. The porte-cochere on the north (since removed) would have brought the house closer to the north end of the lot, which measures 100 feet X 172.625 feet. There is a south yard, off the sun porch, where the family could have taken advantage of the therapeutic value of the sun. The second-floor southwest master bathroom addition is carefully wood sided to match the patterning of the brick. An in-ground swimming pool has been added to the rear yard. The grounds are professionally landscaped.



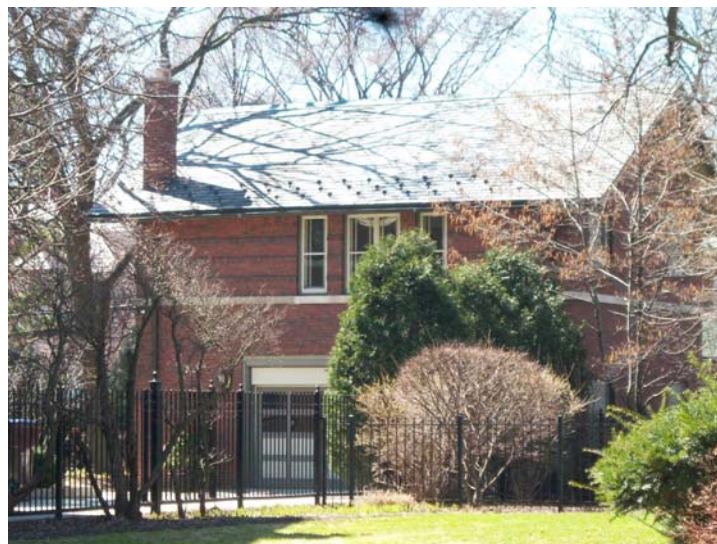
The house is nearly square, which gives it a clean, solid, dignified, foursquare appearance. The front porch piers, and the corners of the house, banded near their summits, are similar to Nimmons & Fellows' industrial and office buildings. The sloping peaked slate roof and front dormer, the belt course around the bottom of the second floor windows, and the symmetrical massing result in a restrained elegance which may suggest the Prairie School; the arched entry porch, the decorative lookouts beneath the roof and dormer overhangs, and the dormer Palladian windows do not. The design is eclectic. A small repetitive decorative square detail appears at the corners of the east facade windows and at the ends of the lookouts supporting the north and south roof overhangs.

The interior of the Vernon W. Skiff House is an extremely functional design, two main floors comprised of central halls, surrounded by large rooms opening directly into the halls: a living room, library, dining room, kitchen, conservatory and family room/sun porch (and powder room) on the first floor, and four spacious bedrooms and three full baths on the second floor. The large bedrooms are unusual for 1909, when bedrooms tended to be smaller, single-purpose sleeping rooms. There are both front and back stairways between the first and second floors, the gracious front stair off to the north and not readily visible upon entry from the east. The third floor, accessible from the back stair, is a ballroom/family room with half bath.

Art glass windows above the main entry door, in the north (driveway) entry door and the north stair hall contain a simple, small art nouveau flower design. Light fixtures in the front hall and stair hall are decorative wrought iron and may be original. A dramatically veined and intricately carved fireplace is the focal point of the living room. Plaster moldings decorate the walls in the living room, library, dining room, and the three larger bedrooms. Elaborate plaster cornice work and ceiling moldings decorate the library. It is thought that the original interior was an arts and crafts design, because of markings on the original plaster; however, no photos or plans of the original interior have been found.



In 1916 a garage was added to the property, with three rooms and a bath on the second floor, and the stairway to the apartment enclosed for a private entrance. There is a water heater in the garage proper. In 1927, a permit was taken out by the second owner of the home to finish the third floor with a room for a maid, and to add a bathroom there. In 1993, the third floor was again remodeled to its current open appearance, removing the smaller rooms.



The south family room/sun porch was most likely open or screened in at first, balanced on the north by a porte cochere. The sun room was glassed in and a sun terrace added to the roof above, accessible from the expanded master bath. The porte cochere was removed when autos became too large to pass through. In old photographs, the porte cochere can be seen with a large, cantilevered flat roof over the driveway and north entry, supported by two piers approximately two feet away from the house.) Sidelights beside the front door have been bricked in.

The fourth owners of the house made quite a few alterations. They added: the shelves clanking the fireplace in the living room, the black and cream tile in the entry hall, the powder room under the front staircase, and the cedar closet in the second-floor hall. They expanded the master bathroom and the bath in the small bedroom. They removed the glazed doors from the library shelving, and the black carpeting that covered the soft wood flooring on the first and second floors (originally overlaid with Oriental carpets). They remodeled the three-room kitchen (kitchen, pantry, and breakfast nook) with a St. Charles kitchen (mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, high end cabinetry considered to be a high-tech wonder), closing off French doors from the main entry hall into the breakfast nook/kitchen eating area.

The fifth owners of the house owned a very popular home furnishings shop on Chicago Avenue, Daffy Down Dilly. They hired the Chicago architectural firm of Lisec and Biederman to remodel the kitchen. They combined the three rooms into one, shortening the windows on the west wall to accommodate a long line of cabinets, and installed a snack bar and restaurant-grade appliances, with a custom-designed stainless steel hood over the stove, and expansive crisp white Formica cabinets. The cost of this 1984 kitchen remodeling, \$15,000, was the cost to build the house in 1909.

The current owners have also remodeled the kitchen, bringing the design into harmony with the rest of the formal Chicago architecture. They hired Oak Construction to create custom cabinetry, install ornate wooden detailing, beamed ceiling, restaurant professional grade appliances, marble, granite finishes and covered the hood with plaster and tile. They also constructed an English built conservatory in 2005, replacing the old back porch with a mahogany and glass structure that is heated and cooled for year round use. The English design/build company of Town & Country Conservatories created the entire structure in Britain. It was then dismantled, the pieces were numbered, and it was rebuilt on the foundation prepared at the home at 633 N. East Avenue.

The conservatory was custom designed to gracefully enhance the existing architecture of the home, with Chicago style art glass reminiscent of the other art glass found in the original first floor of the house. The orientation of the conservatory was designed with access to the back yard and in-ground pool, creating a room with an “outdoors/indoors” quality enjoyed throughout the year. Furnished with cabinetry from the kitchen, a large wrought iron based dining table, and seating area, the conservatory is at once elegant and casual, and extremely functional, in keeping with the overarching principle of the Nimmons & Fellows design for the original house.

The current owners also installed the in-ground pool in 1992, replaced the slate roof with new slate, and installed an irrigation system. The small wood fence section on the south,

separating the front yard from the back, was built in 2003 by Mike Dutka, an award-winning woodworker of the area known for the beauty of his restoration and replication of ornate wood furniture and other detailing pieces.



## History of the Vernon W. Skiff House

The Vernon W. Skiff House is an excellent example of the Prairie School. It was constructed in 1909 for Vernon W. Skiff and his wife Mary Frances Skiff, then 68 and 67 years old respectively. They presumably built the house to be close to their son, Frank Vernon Skiff, and his wife, Ida Catherine Rose, and children, and their daughter, Blanche, and her husband, Frank Pierce Ross. The son and son-in-law were the founders and owners of the Jewel Tea Company, and both were having houses constructed on the block south next door to each other, numbered 525 and 531 North East Avenue now. Both houses were designed by architect Howard Van Doren Shaw. A third child, a daughter, Stella, was married to Chicago musician, conductor, and composer Signor Alfredo Antonio Jannotta and lived nearby at 170 N. Ridgeland Avenue.

Vernon William Skiff was born in Hume, Allegheny County, New York, on January 23, 1841. He and his family moved to Newton, Iowa when Vernon was twelve. He served in the Civil War, was mustered out in 1865, and returned to Newton, where he engaged in the “*mercantile business.*” Two years later, on his 26<sup>th</sup> birthday, January 23, 1867, he married Mary Frances Coffin, a woman one year his junior from Nantucket, Rhode Island, whose family had also moved to Newton, Iowa, where they met.



VERNON WILLIAM SKIFF  
Oak Leaves, May 8, 1926

Little is known about Skiff's life before he and Mrs. Skiff, in 1909, upon their retirement, commissioned their home at 633 N. East Avenue, just up the block from their son Frank, daughter Blanche, their spouses and children. We do know that, “*In his later years, Mr. Skiff established himself in the wholesale tea business in Chicago.*”

The Skiffs celebrated their golden wedding anniversary in 1917, in Oak Park. Their granddaughter Verna Ross Orndorff (named after her grandfather) was a prominent

philanthropist and member of the Oak Park/River Forest community until her death on May 31, 1990.

Mrs. Skiff died in 1918. Mr. Skiff erected the Mary Frances Skiff memorial Hospital in Newton, Iowa in her memory. At that time it was “*one of the best equipped hospitals in that part of the state.*” Mr. Skiff’s obituary states “*for the last 32 years Mr. Skiff used to spend the winter months at Palm Beach and other places in Florida.*” On May 5, 1926, Vernon William Skiff, “*Civil War veteran, rationalist, philanthropist and distinguished citizen,*” passed away at this residence, 633 N. East Avenue. Funeral services were held in Newton, Iowa, where interment also took place.

The first written reference to the next owner is not until 1928. Albert A. Arnold owned the property from 1928 until 1947. He moved there from the Frank D. Skiff House at 525 N. East Avenue, Vernon Skiff’s son’s Howard Van Doren Shaw-designed house. Albert Arnold Cory, who had grown up there with his mother and grandparents, next owned the house. He owned it for eight years, from 1947 until 1955. John A. and Grace Sizer occupied the home for seven years, from 1955 to 1963.

The next owners, Frank and Jackie Ball, owned Daffy Down Dilly, a unique retail store in Oak Park, and lived in the house until 1987 when the current owners, William and Cheryl Niro, purchased the property.

## **Nimmons & Fellows, Architects**

Nimmons & Fellows’ architecture is an early modern style, which includes the Prairie School. It belongs to an earlier, more encompassing period, usually seen in the muscular, utilitarian, empirical commercial and industrial buildings that put Chicago on the architectural map: the Chicago School.

The partnership of George C (Croll or Crowell) Nimmons and William Kinne Fellows was established in 1898 and lasted until 1920, when the latter left and founded a new practice with Dwight H. Perkins and John L. Hamilton (Perkins, Fellows & Hamilton). George C. Nimmons, 1865-1947 had obtained his early training with Burnham & Root, assuming responsibility for much of Root’s work following his early and untimely death. William K. Fellows, 1870-1948, studied architecture at Columbia University, and then became an instructor in design at the new Chicago School of Architecture at the Art Institute of Chicago.<sup>iii</sup> “The work of Nimmons and Fellows belongs mainly to the original and for long the dominant tradition of the Chicago school which was highly empirical in its concern with utilitarian and structural ends.<sup>iv</sup>

Their most important commission came halfway through their existence, when, in 1904, they were awarded what might have been the single largest architectural commission in Chicago to that date: the Sears, Roebuck and Company headquarters complex on Arthington Street, just west of Kedzie Boulevard at Homan Avenue, in the Douglas Park area of Chicago.



Sears, Roebuck & Co tower (Chicago), Nimmons & Fellows

The complex of buildings contained merchandise, administration and machinery buildings, a printing plant, and a power and steam generating plant, said to be the largest mercantile establishment in the world. It was built in less than one year, from January 24, 1905 to January 22, 1906. The largest building, the Merchandise Building, was a *“straightforward utilitarian work with undeniable power in its combination of great size and simple rectangular geometry. . . .the heavy rhythm of the unbroken piers adds a measure of richness and dignity to a severely functional design.”* <sup>v</sup> The same can be said for the Vernon W. Skiff house, with the exception of the *“great size.”*

A commission in 1907-08 may have been the reason Vernon Skiff selected Nimmons & Fellows to design his new residence the next year. The Jewel Tea Company, founded by Skiff’s son, Frank Vernon Skiff, and his son-in-law, Frank Pierce Ross, engaged Nimmons & Fellows to design their new headquarters, which they were listed as operating out of in 1908, at 426 (or 428-30) West Washington Boulevard, a building which no longer exists.<sup>vi</sup>

**Residence: 2 sty. \$16,000 Oak Park, Ill. Architects Nimmons & Fellows, 204 Dearborn st. Owner F. B. Skiff, Oak Park. Architects taking bids. Brick, hardwood finish & floors, designed fireplaces, electric fixtures, inventories, water closets, bath tubs.**

The American Contractor, June 5, 1909

Other buildings by Nimmons & Fellows (and successor firms) are too many to list. However, three other residential commissions, the 1903 *Julius Rosenwald House* at 4901 South Ellis Avenue and the 1904 *Platt P. Gibbs House* at 4823 South Kenwood Avenue, in the Kenwood area of Chicago, and the 1899 *Katharine Rush Houses* (a double house or duplex) at 5757-59 South Blackstone Avenue in the Hyde Park area of Chicago bear looking at because they are residential designs by a firm much better known for its industrial, office and commercial buildings.

The *Rosenwald House* (Julius Rosenwald was the president of Sears, Roebuck and Company) is a massive “Hyde Park house.” Nimmons & Fellows may have had difficulty scaling down to residential size from massive projects like the one they had done for the Sears headquarters. However, the house has strong horizontal lines and is constructed of narrow Roman brick. The AIA Guide to Chicago explains, “*apart from such Prairie School elements as the hipped roof and the Roman brick, it’s otherwise a grand styleless galoot.*”<sup>vii</sup> It bears no resemblance to the Vernon W. Skiff House.



Julius Rosenwald House (Chicago), Nimmons & Fellows, 1903

An explanation for Vernon Skiff commissioning Nimmons & Fellows to design his new Oak Park home may be found in a comment about the Rosenwald House. Jean F. Block, in her 1978 book, *Hyde Park Houses*, states, “*Nimmons & Fellows, like Holabird and Roche, were industrial architects. Rosenwald thought it was practical to have the same architects for both plant and house.*”<sup>viii</sup> So while both Skiff’s son and son-in-law turned to prolific, and traditional residential architect Howard Van Doren Shaw for their houses, next door to each other and down the street from Vernon’s, Vernon turned to the architect who had designed the sons’ company headquarters.

The 5757-59 South Blackstone houses (listed as the *Katharine Rush Houses* by one source, the *William T. Beatty/Weller Van Hook Houses* by another) are historical in style. The AIA Guide states that they are a “*handsome Chicago interpretation of the Louis XIII style, with a flattened front and slightly bowed bays.*”<sup>ix</sup> And again, they bear no resemblance to the Skiff House.



Katharine Rush Houses (Chicago), Nimmons & Fellows, 1899

The Platt P. Gibbs House is a restrained, flat-sided house flanked by two shingle-style houses. Its verticality is in contrast to the strong, horizontals of the porch balustrade, flat porch roofline, belt course, eave, and flat-roofed dormer. The porch balustrade and decorative brackets and key molding under the eave line are the only surface decoration.

These three extant house designs, done years before the Skiff House do not even show the empirical, utilitarian qualities associated with Nimmons & Fellows' industrial or commercial designs, nor the glimpses of the Prairie School influences seen in the Vernon W. Skiff House. There is little consistency in these various designs.

## Criteria for Designation

According to Section 7-9-6(B) of the Oak Park Historic Preservation Ordinance, the Historic Preservation Commission must make a preliminary determination of eligibility after receiving a nomination. A determination of preliminary eligibility must be based upon a finding that there is a likelihood that a nominated historic landmark will meet one or more of the "Criteria for Designation" set forth in Section [7-9-5](#) of this Article.

The Vernon W. Skiff House was nominated under the following criteria:

- (1) Significance as an example of the architectural development or heritage of the Village of Oak Park;
- (3) Identification with a person or persons who significantly contributed to the architectural, cultural, economic, historic or social heritage of the Village of Oak Park, the State, or the United States;
- (5) Embodiment of those distinguishing characteristics of a significant architectural style;

(6) Identification as the work of an architect whose individual work is significant in the development of the Village of Oak Park, the State of Illinois and the United States;

In addition, the property is at least 50 years old and has sufficient integrity of location, design, materials and workmanship to make it worthy of preservation or restoration.

## **Bibliographical References**

### **Primary and unpublished sources**

Village of Oak Park building permit no. 2133, dated 20 June 1909 for 633 N. East Avenue.  
Owner: V. W. Skiff, Contractor: C. H. C. Nielsen. Two bedroom residence valued at \$15,000.

Village of Oak Park building permit no. 6691, dated 15 March 1916 for 633 N. East Avenue.  
Owner: V. W. Skiff, Contractor: Guy & McClintock. Garage valued at \$3,000.

Village of Oak Park building permit no. 18165, dated 27 July 1927 for 633 N. East Avenue.  
Owner: Arnold, Contractor: Chas. L. Sturtevant. Finishing attic for room for maid valued at \$300.

### **Secondary and published sources**

The American Contractor, June 5, 1908, p. 56

The American Contractor, June 26, 1909, p. 38

Oak Park Directory, 1920-11, p. 219

The Chicago School of Architecture, article, Carl W. Condit

The Prairie School, article and photos, H. Allen Brooks

The Brickbuilder, Vol. XXV, September, 1916, No. 9, article by George C. Nimmons

Skiff & Ross, The Jewel Tea Company, C.L. Miller, [www.inter-services.com/HallChina/jhistory.html](http://www.inter-services.com/HallChina/jhistory.html)

The History of Jewel Companies, Inc.

“Oak Parkers start a grocery,” Oak Leaves, Montage section

“Obituary for Vernon William Skiff,” Oak Leaves, Saturday, May 8, 1926.

“Obituary for Frank Vernon Skiff,” Oak Leaves, June 8, 1933.

“Obituary for Signor Alfredo Jannotta,” Oak Leaves, April 19, 1912.

“Obituary for Albert A. Arnold,” Oak Parker, November 20, 1936.

“Obituary for Cora M. Arnold,” Oak Leaves, March 29, 1945.

“Obituary for Frank P. Ross,” March 6, 1947,

“Obituary for Grace I. Sizer,” Oak Leaves, September 10, 1953.

“Obituary for Mrs. Franklin P. Ross (Blanche Skiff)”, Oak Leaves, November 26, 1969.

“Obituary for Verna Ross Orndorff,” Oak Leaves, June 6, 1990.

DeVallet, Amy, Paul Greenberg and Frank Pond. *Vernon W. Skiff House, Nimmons & Fellows, 1909*. Prepared for the Wright Plus house walk, 2004.

McAlester, Virginia and Lee McAlester. A Field Guide to American Houses. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000.

Massey, James C. and Shirley Maxwell. House Styles in America: The Old House Journal Guide to the Architecture of American Houses. New York: The Penguin Group, 1996.

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Rifkind, Carole. A Field Guide to American Architecture. New York: Penguin Books USA, 1980.

Wickes, Molly: Managing Editor. A Guide to Oak Park’s Frank Lloyd Wright and Prairie School Architecture Historic District. Oak Park: Oak Park Historic Preservation Commission, 1999.

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>i</sup> Sinkevitch, Alice, editor, *AIA Guide to Chicago* (Orlando Florida: Harcourt Brace, 1993), p. 359.

<sup>ii</sup> *American Contractor*, June 5, 1909, p.56 (advertisement); June 26, 1909, p.38 (contract award).

<sup>iii</sup> Block, Jean, *Hyde Park Houses* (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 100.

<sup>iv</sup> Brooks, H. Allen, *The Prairie School* (New York, W.W. Norton & Company, 1972), p.55.

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Condit, Carl W., *The Chicago School of Architecture* (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1964), p.179.

v Ibid., pp.179, 180.

vi Miller, C.L., *Skiff & Ross, the Jewel Tea Company* ([www.interservices.com/HallChina/jhistory/html](http://www.interservices.com/HallChina/jhistory/html), 1998) pp.2-3.

vii *AIA Guide to Chicago*, p. 406.

viii *Hyde Park Houses*, p. 79.

ix *AIA Guide to Chicago*, p. 441.

#### **INSTITUTIONS PROVIDING RESEARCH ASSISTANCE**

Burnham Library of the Art Institute of Chicago (Nimmons & Fellows, Skiff House)

Historical Society of Oak Park and River Forest, Frank Lipo, Director (Skiff House, Verna Orndorff, Alfredo Jannotta information)

Village of Oak Park Village Planner, Craig Failor

Village of Oak Park Urban Planner/Historic Preservation, Douglas Kaarre

Chicago Historical Society (Nimmons & Fellows, Skiff House)

Oak Park Public Library (Oak Leaves archives)

Village of Oak Park Building and Property Standards Department (Skiff House)

#### **OAK PARK HISTORIC PRESERVATION COMMISSION**

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