



123 MADISON STREET, OAK PARK, ILLINOIS 60302

HISTORIC LANDMARK NOMINATION REPORT



Charles Schwerin House
639 Fair Oaks Avenue

Preliminary Determination of Eligibility approved by the
Oak Park Historic Preservation Commission on January 14, 2010

Designated by Village Ordinance on March 15, 2010

In 1908, Eben Ezra Roberts, renowned Oak Park Prairie School architect, was commissioned to design homes for the Schwerin and Lorenzen families. The Charles Schwerin House at 639 Fair Oaks, together with the Lorenzen House to the south at 635 Fair Oaks, were built by W.A. Pillinger in 1908. These “sister houses” originally shared a common coach house that now serves as a 2-car garage for each home. Originally, a carriage drive between the house and the sister house ran from the street to the garage. The garage remains today as one structure with a party wall separating the individual spaces.

The 2.5 story home with stone foundation has an exaggerated breadth and horizontality adorned with geometric Prairie School details from the front porch to the chimney, hipped roof, art glass, and 3rd floor dormer. The house is of rectilinear design and contains a broad monumental full-width porch, whose roof is supported only at the ends by stout piers, grouped casement windows, decorative details, broad stucco masses, and symmetrical front. Most notable are the 3rd floor rounded dormer windows, complete with original grouped casement windows and art glass.

The home and garage/coach house are stucco with ornamental wood trim. Most noticeable as you look to the front of the house is the split front walk that separates around a stucco front wall, thus creating the illusion of a double entrance. Inside, the house has most of the original oak and birch woodwork, lighting, ceramic tiles, fireplaces, vestibule mosaic, stucco, and over 50 original art glass doors and windows. Between 1995 and 2000, major renovations included an addition to the back of the house expanding the kitchen, adding a cedar-roofed back porch, and moving the powder room. In addition, staircase and railings to the 3rd floor were custom replicated to lower railings. The front porch, originally screened, was enclosed in 2005 with casement windows and prairie-style art glass. New storm windows cover most of the original art glass casement windows on the first floor. The landscaping was completed in 2009 and includes stone walks, a custom trellis matching the design of the art glass windows, and home and path lighting.

The Schwerin House at 639 Fair Oaks is fully intact and still closely resembles the original 1908 home. Renovations have been in keeping with the style of the home and neighborhood.



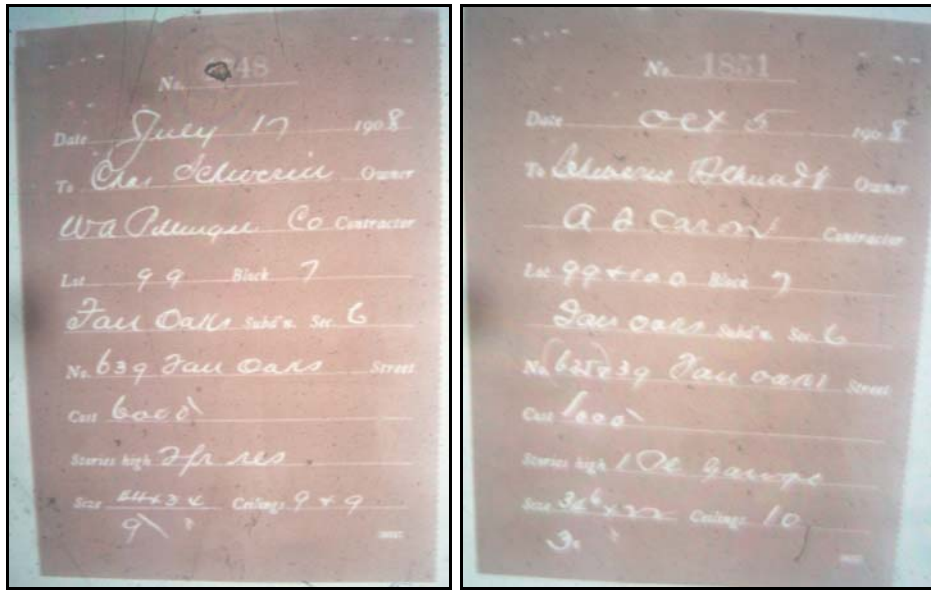


History of the Charles Schwerin House

The Charles Schwerin House is an outstanding example of a residential design by architect E.E. Roberts, heavily influenced by the Prairie style popularized by the Prairie School architects of the early 20th century. The home has an exaggerated breadth and horizontality adorned with geometric Prairie School details, from the front porch to the chimney, hipped roof, art glass, and 3rd floor dormer. The house is considered a model of E.E. Roberts' mature Prairie style in its monumental full-width porch, whose roof is supported only at the ends by stout piers, and in its grouped casement windows, decorative details, broad stucco masses, and symmetrical front. Roberts frequently inflated the third floor dormers on hip-roofed houses to give them maximum flair. The dormer at 639 Fair Oaks is said to owe a debt to George Maher, particularly to his nearby house for Charles R. Erwin.

The home is a contributing resource in the *Frank Lloyd Wright–Prairie School of Architecture Historic District* and is listed in the Hasbrouck/Sprague Survey of Historic Architecture in Oak Park, the American Institute of Architects Guide to Chicago, the Frank Lloyd Wright Preservation Trust Oak Park & River Forest Architectural Guide Map, and the Guide to Frank Lloyd Wright & Prairie School Architecture in Oak Park.

The Schwerin House has a variety of mature Prairie Style elements, such as the contrast of stucco walls with strips of horizontal wood banding, the use of leaded casement windows arranged in horizontal strips, low-pitched hip roof and arched dormers, deep overhanging eaves and the use of geometric ornament.



Original building permits for the house and garage (Village of Oak Park)

Eben Ezra Roberts, Architect

Eben Ezra Roberts (1866-1943) made an indelible mark on the landscape of Oak Park during his long, productive career, designing numerous homes, schools, churches, apartment blocks and cultural buildings throughout the Village of Oak Park. He was an American architect known for his work in the early modern Prairie style, pioneered by Frank Lloyd Wright, as well as other traditional residential styles. Roberts was born in Boston and attended architectural school in New Hampshire. After moving to Chicago he eventually established a practice in the suburb of Oak Park, Illinois. In Oak Park alone, Roberts designed approximately 200 buildings.



Eben E. Roberts, undated

(Source: Historical Society of Oak Park & River Forest)

Early life

Eben Ezra Roberts was born in Boston, Massachusetts on April 24, 1866, one of four children of George Smith Roberts and Hattie Whitman Sanborn. His father, a woodcarver by trade, instructed young Eben in the art of mechanical drawing.[1] His family moved to Meredith, New Hampshire where Roberts' education continued in public schools there. After completing his studies at the Tilton School in Tilton, New Hampshire, he followed his older brother, Dr. Thomas Elmer Roberts, to Chicago, Illinois. In 1889 he went to work for the architect Solomon Spencer Beman at the company town of the Pullman Palace Car Company as a site superintendent. On October 22, 1892 back in Meredith, New Hampshire he married Rossie M. Willey. Together they had a daughter and son, the latter who would eventually go into practice with him.

Career

In 1888 Roberts moved to Chicago where he worked as a site superintendent for Solon S. Beman at Pullman, on the south side of the city. Roberts remained at that job until 1893. Roberts moved to the Chicago suburb of Oak Park in 1893 and established his own practice, which eventually grew to become the largest architecture firm in the Village of Oak Park, rivaling even architecture giant Frank Lloyd Wright's practice.[2] In Oak Park he designed over 200 buildings which span a multitude of architectural styles.[2] Wright and Roberts were not, themselves, professionally associated, other than the fact that they were competing architects.[3]

Once in Oak Park, Roberts focused on residential work until he moved his office to Chicago in 1912 where he focused on larger, commercial projects. Roberts' practice in Oak Park grew quickly and he soon employed several draftsmen.[4] Despite eventually working in Chicago, Roberts remained an Oak Park resident until he died in 1943. Roberts and his wife Rossie Roberts (née Willey) lived in the Eben Ezra Roberts House on Superior Street in Oak Park for most of the time they were in the Village. At that home, now a contributing property to the U.S. federally registered Frank Lloyd Wright--Prairie School of Architecture Historic District, Roberts and his wife raised their two children, Margaret and Elmer C. Roberts.[4]

Roberts' Oak Park firm maintained two offices: one was at Marion Street and North Blvd in the Dunlop Brothers Bank Building, the other was along Superior Street. Roberts employed several draftsmen, including William Gray Purcell in 1902 and John Van Bergen in 1908-09. Roy Hotchkiss was his head draftsman for many years, and later opened his own practice in the Village. His most well-known work is the Art Deco Medial Arts Building at 715 Lake Street.[7] After the office moved to 82 West Washington Street in Chicago in 1912, Roberts' son, Elmer began to work in the practice as a draftsman until he left for architectural school in 1913. When the younger Roberts graduated he became a staff member, and in 1924 he became a full partner. E.E. Roberts became ill in 1926 and went into retirement, though he worked as an adviser to the firm for some time after leaving.[5]

Roberts designed buildings in a many styles, but after he began accepting mostly commercial commissions he favored Prairie style and its emphasis on horizontal lines. It is his work in this early modern style and the architectural transformation that took place in

the early 20th century for which he is remembered.[2] Roberts 1890s designs were aimed at popular tastes at the time. He designed homes across the gamut of architectural styles – Queen Anne, Shingle style and Tudor Revival are but some of the examples of the styles his homes conformed to.[4]



537 N. Euclid Avenue, 1895



539 N. Oak Park Avenue, 1908

In 1900 Roberts work underwent a distinct shift with the design of the *A.J. Redmond House* in Oak Park. His residential work began to adapt a more horizontal emphasis, featuring broad windows, hip roofs, wide eaves and large pier-supported porches dominating the front facade. Many of Roberts' early 20th century residential works are of this type, commonly following the stock American Foursquare plan with wood-trimmed stucco exteriors and full-width porches with massive corner piers. The homes varied in decorative details such as dormers and other exterior features. The horizontal emphasis, broad, overhanging eaves and hip roofs are all common elements of Prairie style, a school many houses of the foursquare tradition adhere to. Other examples of Roberts' Prairie style residential work are found in Oak Park houses such as the *Henry P. Magill House*, the *Frank W. Hall House* and the *Louis Brink House*.[4]



422 Forest Avenue, A. J. Redmond House, 1900



164 N. Euclid Avenue, Henry Magill House, 1903



412 Clinton Avenue, Frank Hall House, 1904



533 N. Grove Avenue, Louis Brink House, 1909

One example of Roberts' commercial work in Oak Park, the Prairie style Scoville Square, is listed on the U.S. National Register of Historic Places.[6]



129-151 N. Oak Park, Scoville Building, 1908

E. E. Roberts designed buildings in many different styles, including Classic Revival, Medieval Revival, Shingle, Queen Anne, and Early Modern. As his style progressed, the curves, shapes, and decorative features of the Queen Anne began to straighten. His buildings took on a more rectilinear character. Certain Roberts structures embody characteristics of the Prairie School buildings designed at the time. Roberts did not directly copy what these other architects were doing. He evolved his own style, while still paying attention to local and international changes in architecture. The rectilinear character of these structures, which relate them to the Prairie School, began to evolve in the work of E. E. Roberts from 1895 to 1912.

In 1912 Roberts moved his practice to Chicago to specialize in commercial architecture. Some of his commercial commissions included a municipal building, the Second Scoville Block, addition to the high school in Oak Park and a portion of the Julia C. Lathrop Homes in Chicago. In 1923 his son Elmer became his partner, and they practiced together for three

years until Eben became ill and retired. He died in Muskegon, Michigan on August 4, 1943, just three months after the death of his wife.

William A. Pillinger, Mason

William Alfred Pillinger was born in Bristol, England on November 1, 1857 to Aaron and Ester Pillinger. He learned the mason's and bricklayer's trade in England and came to Chicago in 1870 at the age of 13, presumably with family.[8] He had an uncle in New York and his mother and at least one brother came to Chicago in 1876. William married Edith Maria Webb in 1883. Edith was born in Chicago on January 20, 1860. The couple had three children – Ralph Alfred (b. 1886), Milton Webb (b. 1891), and Ruth E. (b. 1893).[9] They were long-standing residents of the Austin neighborhood, residing at 239 N. Waller Avenue for many years. William had four brothers – Henry, Stephen, George and Harry.

William started his own masonry contracting business in 1876, known as the W. A. Pillinger Company, with offices at 11 S. LaSalle and later 118 N. LaSalle in Chicago. By 1917 William was president of the company, as well as the Mos Oleum Floor Manufacturing Company, and a director of the Austin Avenue Trust & Savings Bank.[8] This bank was organized by his younger brother Henry Pillinger, and was later reorganized into the First National Bank of Oak Park (now Park National Bank, recently acquired by U.S. Bank).[10]

PILLINGER, William A., mason contractor; b. Bristol, Eng., Nov. 15, 1857; s. A. A. and Edith Pillinger; ed. in old country; m. Edith M. Webb, of Chicago, 1881; children: Ralph A., Milton W., Mrs. F. C. Krekel. Learned mason's and bricklayer's trade in England; came to Chicago, 1870; has engaged in business on own account since 1876; pres. W. A. Pillinger Co. and Mos Oleum Floor Mfg. Co.; dir. Austin Av. Trust & Savings Bank. Mem. Chicago Mason's Assn. Mem. Austin Lodge A.F. and A.M.; Cicero Chapter R.A.M.; Siloam Commandery K.T.; Medinah Temple A.A.O.N.M.S. Republican. Presbyterian. Home: 239 N. Waller Av. Office: 11 S. LaSalle St.

(Source: Book of Chicagoans, 1917, p. 541)

William's eldest son Ralph graduated from Austin High School and joined his father in the family business following graduation in 1908 from the University of Illinois with a B.S. in Architectural Engineering.[11] William's second son Milton married Helen Ingwersen (b. 1894) of Chicago in 1916, and the couple had a daughter, Barbara.[12] Milton also worked as a mason contractor in the family business. Both sons lived at the family home on N. Waller for many years.

According to current Village of Oak Park building permit archives, William Pillinger is credited with building at least 70 homes, apartment buildings and commercial buildings in Oak Park between 1902 and 1921. Some of these buildings include the *First National Bank of Oak Park* building at 412 N. Austin, the *First Church of Christ Scientist* at 200 N. Oak Park, and Frank Lloyd Wright's *William Fricke House* at 540 Fair Oaks. In addition to the Wallace House, Pillinger constructed nine other homes in collaboration with architect E. E. Roberts,

including the neighboring Lorenzen and Schwerin homes at 635 and 639 Fair Oaks. Other architects that Pillinger worked with in Oak Park include Wright, Lawrence Buck, Vernon Watson, William Pagels and William C. Miller.

W. A. Pillinger Company worked with well-known architects on many high-end homes in the Village for prominent citizens, and their skilled masonry work allowed them to expertly construct homes in the new modern style of the Prairie School. William Pillinger's legacy as a mason lives on today in the many buildings in Oak Park that retain their quality and integrity, contributing to the historic character of the Village.

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 Charles Schwerin 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. 1708, dated 17 July 1908 for 639 Fair Oaks Avenue. Owner: Charles Schwerin, Contractor: W. A. Pillinger Company. Two-story frame residence valued at \$6,000.

Village of Oak Park building permit no. 1851, dated 5 October 1908 for 639 Fair Oaks Avenue. Owner: Charles Schwerin, Contractor: A. S. Caron. Garage valued at \$1,000.

Village of Oak Park building permit no. 29880, dated 29 May 1961 for 639 Fair Oaks Avenue. Owner: Mrs. H. O'Laughlin, Contractor: Edberg & Anderson. Close door opening on west and open new door on north (garage).

Secondary and published sources

1. Hackl, Marty. "Eben E. Roberts," Oak Park Tourist/Historical Society of Oak Park and River Forest, 2003. Retrieved 15 June 2007.
2. Sacchi, Lonnie. "From castles to Canavares," Riverside/Brookfield Landmark, 10 April 2007. Retrieved 15 June 2007.
3. Bigolin, Steve. "The Landmarks of Barb City - Part 33," Daily Chronicle, 15 November 2004. Retrieved 16 June 2007.
4. Guarino, Jean L. "Park Grove Manor," Village of Oak Park Landmark Nomination Form, 26 March 2004.
5. Heitzman, Frank. "Maze Branch Library," Village of Oak Park Landmark Nomination Form, 22 July 2005.
6. Masonic Temple Building, Property Information Report, HAARGIS Database, Illinois Historic Preservation Agency, accessed August 29, 2008.
7. Gunning, Don. "Dwelling for Charles P. Lorenzen, E.E. Roberts, Architect – 1908, 635 Fair Oaks Avenue, Oak Park, Illinois." Wright Plus 2004 Research Report.
8. Marquis, Albert Nelson, Editor. A Biographical Dictionary of Leading Living Men of The City of Chicago, 1917, p. 541.
9. United States Census – 1900, 1910, 1920.
10. "Henry Pillinger, Austin Pioneer Merchant Dead." Oak Leaves, January 8, 1932, p. 53.
11. James Herbert Kelley, Editor. The Alumni Record of the University of Illinois, 1913, p. 464.
12. "News of Chicago Society." Chicago Daily Tribune, October 8, 1916, p. F2.

OAK PARK HISTORIC PRESERVATION COMMISSION

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