



123 MADISON STREET, OAK PARK, ILLINOIS 60302

## HISTORIC LANDMARK NOMINATION REPORT



**Charles W. Eils House  
625 S. Oak Park Avenue**

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**Preliminary Determination of Eligibility approved by the  
Oak Park Historic Preservation Commission on August 10, 2006**

**Designated by Village Ordinance on November 6, 2006**

# Charles W. Eils House 625 S. Oak Park Avenue

**Built:** 1910  
**Architect:** Eben E. Roberts  
**Builder:** T. A. Holm

The house at 625 S. Oak Park Avenue was built in 1910 and designed by noted architect E.E. Roberts. It is situated on a lot fifty feet wide by one-hundred-twenty-five feet deep, located on the west side of the street between Jackson Boulevard and Adams Street. Set back several yards from the sidewalk, the clapboard house is essentially rectangular in plan and rises two-and-a-half stories. The house has a raised basement and a concrete foundation. A raised porch runs the full width of the first story. The hipped roofs of the principle house, the dormer, and the porch feature deep eaves, and are now roofed with asphalt shingles. The windows are wood-sash and double-hung, except where noted, and are original. New storm windows cover most of the windows on the exterior.

This house is an example of an American Foursquare with Prairie Style elements. Popular from 1900 to 1920, this early modern type does not draw on historical movements for inspiration. It is distinctly American, and specifically Illinoisan. The house exhibits several features inspired by the Prairie Style, a movement that originated in Oak Park. Frank Lloyd Wright is considered the master of the type, and most of the finest high-style examples are located in Oak Park and River Forest.



 **Landmark Nomination**  
**625 S. OAK PARK AVENUE**

Village of Oak Park, IL  
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Three simple, sturdy piers support the porch, and the railing, which is composed of narrow slats, extends to the ground. A short flight of wooden stairs, located just north of the porch's central pier, leads to the glazed, off-center front door. A bay is located to the south of the front door. A single window lies to the north of the door. The second story consists of two pairs of windows, arranged symmetrically, and the axially-placed dormer features three casement windows.

A ribbon of simple wooden trim runs at the sill line of the second story windows, wrapping around the entire house. A rectangular bay on the north façade projects from the middle of the first story to the roofline. Three narrow art-glass casement windows, illuminating the stairway on the interior, lie below the trim on this bay. These are not covered by storm windows. One window on each story is located on either side of the bay. A two-story bay is located on the west end of the south façade, having three windows on each floor. Two windows, one on each floor, lie to the east of this bay. Below a window to the bay's west is a door leading to the basement. Small square windows dot the length of the raised basement, which is clad in red brick.

The rear façade features a two-story porch, accessible from the kitchen and an upstairs bedroom. The railings match those of the front porch, one window to the north of the porch on each floor. A rear dormer includes two casement windows. There is a recent-vintage vinyl-sided garage with a hipped roof on the northwest edge of the yard, facing the alley to the west of the house. The original garage was located in the southwest corner of the yard.

The house is notable for its remarkable integrity. Having been owned by only three families in its history, the house boasts its original clapboard siding, trim, windows, and doors. On the interior, the home retains original oak built-ins, trim, stairway, hardware, and light fixtures. A sensitive remodeling of the kitchen, conducted by the current occupants, is the only substantial change to the layout. Though it did not alter the home's footprint, the remodel necessitated the removal of a powder room and a small anteroom.



(Photo source: Village of Oak Park)



(Photo source: Village of Oak Park)



Front and north facades showing side rails of porch and art glass casement windows in bay



South façade looking Northeast

(Photo source for above two photos: Katharine Keleman, 2006)



Detail of casement windows in bay on North façade  
(Photo source: Katharine Keleman, 2006)

## History of the Charles W. Eils House

The house located at 625 S. Oak Park Avenue, known historically as the Eils House, is a remarkably intact example of the work of E.E. Roberts,<sup>1</sup> a prominent Oak Park architect. It is a clear expression of the architectural mode known as American Foursquare, a type indigenous to the Chicago area, particularly Oak Park, and exhibits Prairie Style elements. The Eils House is significant for its architectural importance, both as the work of a noted local architect, and as a fine, practically untouched example of a Prairie-influenced American Foursquare, a unique type in early modern architecture. Additionally, the house is indicative of building trends in southern Oak Park, which developed as a middle-class neighborhood in the early decades of the twentieth century.

### Architect Eben Ezra Roberts and Builder Thor Alexander Holm

Born in Boston, Massachusetts, in 1866, E.E. Roberts was the second child of George Smith Roberts, a woodcarver, and Hattie Whitman Sanborn. He attended public school in Boston and Meredith, New Hampshire before entering Tilton Seminary in New Hampshire, where he studied drafting and architecture. George Smith Roberts was skilled in mechanical drawing and art, and is often credited with instructing the young E.E. Roberts in drafting.

E.E. Roberts' older brother, Thomas Elmer, moved to Chicago to study at Rush Medical Center in 1888. The rest of the Roberts family followed, settling in Oak Park. In 1889, E.E. Roberts found employment with Chicago architect Solon S. Beman, first as a timekeeper

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<sup>1</sup> Frances Steiner, who, under the direction of Paul Sprague, wrote her 1970 thesis on E.E. Roberts, attributes the Eils House to the architect. She cites as her source the June 1910 and October 1910 issues of the Chicago journal *Construction News*. None of the four libraries that have the journal in their holdings possess the 1910 issues.

and later as a supervisor of construction. Roberts worked on such projects as a five-story building on Michigan Avenue and George Pullman's residence, conservatory and stable.<sup>2</sup> Roberts soon opened his own architectural practice in Oak Park, emphasizing residential architecture. He moved his office to Chicago in 1912 to focus on commercial architecture, but always remained a resident of Oak Park. Roberts lived with his wife, Rossie (Willey) Roberts in a house of his design at 1019 Superior Street until his death in 1943. They had two children, Margaret Willey (b. 1895) and Elmer Clifford (b. 1896). Elmer joined his father's practice in 1922, four years before poor health prompted Roberts to partially retire.



(Source: Reporter-Argus, 1904)



Eben E. Roberts House, 1019 Superior Street

Roberts enjoyed a prolific career, and he was fluent in many architectural styles. His early homes were simple, clapboard two-story structures with steep roofs, sometimes with Victorian or Classical detailing. Roberts also designed Queen Anne Style homes, such as the Hoover house of 1896, located at 521 N. Euclid Avenue, which features an octagonal tower, several bays, and a gabled roof. The Sampson Rogers House at 537 N. Euclid Avenue, built in 1895, is constructed in the Shingle Style and has an overhanging attic, off-center entrance, and octagonal bays. The 1908 Elliott House, located at 539 N. Oak Park Avenue, employs half-timbering in its Tudor Revival design, a nationally popular style in the 1910s. Roberts also designed such public buildings as the 1908 Prairie Style Scoville Building on Lake Street and Oak Park Avenue and the original Village Hall, at 635 Lake Street, a Neoclassical structure built in 1903 (demolished). A number of Oak Park churches and schools also were designed by Roberts. The Village of Oak Park has declared several of his buildings, including the Park Grove and Park Manor apartments, the Roberts Building, and the Maze Branch Library, local landmarks.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Unpublished biographical essay on E.E. Roberts written by his grandson, Howard Roberts Drew, dated December 1993.

<sup>3</sup> These three buildings were constructed in the later part of Roberts' career. The Park Grove and Park Manor apartments were built in 1922 and 1926-27; the Roberts Building in 1926; and the Maze Branch Library in 1936. Although E.E. Roberts was still a partner and advisor in the firm, his son, Elmer, drove the designs for their commissions following 1926.



521 N. Euclid Avenue, 1896



537 N. Euclid Avenue, 1895



539 N. Oak Park Avenue, 1908



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

Around the turn-of-the-century, Roberts turned away from traditional and revival styles, and he embraced a more modern mode of architecture. He began to design homes with flattened wall planes, strong woodwork, and wide eaves, which lent his houses a rectilinear appearance. According to Frances Steiner, who wrote her 1970 thesis on E.E. Roberts, the A.J. Redmond House, located at 422 Forest Avenue, marks a transformation in Roberts' designs. Built in 1900, the house features broad eaves, heavy porch piers, and greater horizontal emphasis. Succeeding the Redmond House, Roberts designed the Magill House (1903) at 164 Euclid Avenue, in the rectilinear style. It is composed of heavy interlocking blocks, a wide roof with dormers and deep eaves, and a porch with substantial piers and a low, hipped roof.



422 Forest, A. J. Redmond House, 1900



164 N. Euclid Avenue, Magill House, 1903

Following the Redmond and Magill houses, Roberts designed dozens of solid, two-story, symmetrical homes in the modern, rectilinear style, often varying only the dormers. Hipped roofs, full-width porches, and broad eaves are recurrent. Houses such as the geometric Helder House (1906) at 635 Fair Oak Avenue, with its heavy porch posts, and the Henderson House (1904) at 715 N. Oak Park Avenue, with its low roof and complex arrangement of block-like parts, reflect the influence of the Prairie School on Roberts' architecture. Though not as heavy and horizontal as the aforementioned houses, the Eils House shares many of their characteristics. Its simple, non-historical, rectilinear forms, full-width porch with solid piers, broad hipped roof and deep eaves mark its kinship with early modern homes.



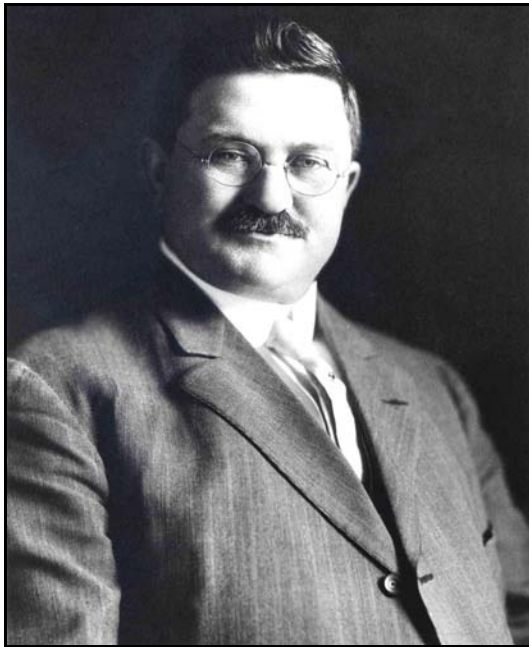
635 Fair Oaks, Lorenzen House, 1908



715 N. Oak Park, Henderson House, 1904

Roberts' homes of this period, including the Eils House, reflect his association with the Prairie School. As an Oak Park architect in the early twentieth century, it was impossible to escape the influence of Frank Lloyd Wright, who was pioneering a revolutionary movement in the architectural landscape. Roberts was a friend and colleague of the circle of progressive Prairie School architects that included Wright, George Maher, George Elmslie, William Purcell, Dwight Perkins, and Robert Spencer, among others. Though not all of these architects worked out of Oak Park, Wright's influence centered the movement in that town. Roberts' worth lies in the fact that he bridged the radicalism of the Prairie School with the more conservative popular taste. In their *Survey of Historical Architecture of the Village of Oak Park*, Hasbrouck and Sprague claim that it is "possible that Roberts was the person responsible for evolving out of the Queen Anne and from suggestions by Wright and Maher,

the kind of non-historical rectilinear style that was so common in Oak Park, from about 1900 to 1915.”<sup>4</sup> Indeed, Roberts’ early adaptations of the style represent the shape Prairie School architecture would take as it disseminated from Oak Park.



Eben E. Roberts, undated

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



(Oak Leaves, September 3, 1904)

The builder of the Eils House was Thor Alexander Holm,<sup>5</sup> an Oak Park realtor and builder. He owned a company called T.A. Holm & Company, billed in their ads as “Oak Park’s Largest Real Estate Operators and Builders.”<sup>6</sup> His business was located at 947 Garfield Street before relocating to 905 South Oak Park Avenue, a building of his own construction.<sup>7</sup> Built in 1926, the three-story, terra cotta-clad building still stands, and reads “T.A. Holm Building” across its façade. His obituary noted that Holm “built many of the homes located in the southeast section of the village,”<sup>8</sup> including the Eils House.


<sup>4</sup> Wilbert R. Hasbrouk and Paul E. Sprague, *Survey of Historical Architecture of the Village of Oak Park, Illinois* (Oak Park: Landmarks Commission of Oak Park, 1974), 21.

<sup>5</sup> Permit No. 2658 dated September 14, 1910 issued to Charles W. Eils, owner. Source: Village of Oak Park.

<sup>6</sup> Ken Trainor, “Who the Heck Is T.A. Holm?” *Oak Leaves*, 22 January 1997

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> “Thor A. Holm, Former Realtor, Dies in Chicago,” *Oak Leaves*, 17 March 1960.



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References: "Satisfied Customers"

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(Source: Oak Leaves, July 2, 1910)



T. A. Holm Building, 905 S. Oak Park Avenue

### The American Foursquare

The Eils House is an excellent example of the influence of the Prairie Style on a modest architectural type called the American Foursquare. Characteristically, the Foursquare is a symmetrical two-story box with a hipped roof and, usually, a front dormer. Steps lead to the front entrance, which can be centered or off-center. A full-width porch is typical.<sup>9</sup> Four rooms of roughly equal size and a side staircase make up the interior of the archetypal Foursquare.

<sup>9</sup> Virginia and Lee McAlster, *A Field Guide to American Houses* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984), 440.

This type of home was very common in the early twentieth century, and was generally constructed in middle-class subdivisions. Seward Gunderson and Thomas Hulbert were two of Oak Park's most prolific builders. They bought large tracts of land on the undeveloped south side and constructed hundreds of homes, mostly Foursquares. Gunderson built wood clapboard or shingled homes with hipped or gabled roofs.<sup>10</sup> He offered forty-two models and fifteen floor plans, each with stained glass windows, an oak built-in sideboard, and bay windows for \$4,000 to \$12,000.<sup>11</sup> Hulbert offered clapboard homes with hipped roofs, painted in two or three colors. Customers could also choose built-ins and decorative windows. These developments allowed the middle class to purchase well-built, partially customized homes at affordable prices.



A Gunderson house (525 S. Elmwood)



A Hulbert house (725 Clinton)

The Foursquare borrowed from other architectural styles for its secondary elements. Mission or Italian Renaissance details, such as tiled roofs and brackets, are common.<sup>12</sup> Several examples in the Gunderson District exhibit a Colonial Revival influence in their Doric or Ionic columns and gabled dormers.<sup>13</sup> Prairie Style elements appear frequently, taking the form of low-pitched roofs with deep eaves and square porch posts, all of which are evident in the Eils House.

The Eils House is somewhat unusual because it is individually built, rather than being part of a subdivision. In her thesis, Steiner speculates that Roberts may have designed homes for land developers, as many of his homes built around 1910 resembled theirs closely.<sup>14</sup> In fact, the Roberts house that most resembles the Eils House was built as part of a development. Located at 305 N. Grove, it was built in 1903 as a speculative home for Horton & Sharpe. The stucco-clad house is two stories with a hipped roof and front and side dormers. Side stairs lead to the full porch, which features heavy columns. Although both designed by Roberts, the Eils House is superior in its refined proportions, gracious detailing,

<sup>10</sup> Village of Oak Park, *Gunderson Historic District Nomination*, (Oak Park: Village of Oak Park, 2003), 3.

<sup>11</sup> Jean Guarino, *Yesterday: A Historical View of Oak Park* vol. 1, *Prairie Days to World War I* (Oak Park: Oak Ridge Press, 2000), 54.

<sup>12</sup> Virginia and Lee McAlister, *A Field Guide to American Houses* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984), 440.

<sup>13</sup> Village of Oak Park, *Gunderson Historic District Nomination*, (Oak Park: Village of Oak Park, 2003), 15.

<sup>14</sup> Frances Steiner, "E.E. Roberts: Popularizing the Prairie School," *Prairie School Review*, 24 May 1973, 12.

and elegant arrangement of forms. These qualities elevate the Eils House to a greater stature than the typical Foursquare.



305 N. Grove Avenue

### The Development of South Oak Park

In the later decades of the nineteenth century, Oak Park grew from a sleepy town to a lively suburb. Civil War veterans and Chicagoans fleeing the fire-ravaged city following the Great Fire of 1871 boosted the population, carrying it from 500 in 1870 to over 1,000 the following year, and reaching over 4,500 by 1890.<sup>15</sup> The early commercial district lay along Lake Street, later shifting to Oak Park Avenue, and the population was centered near Marion Street in central Oak Park. However, the land known as the “South Prairie,” stretching south of Madison Street, remained undeveloped long after northern Oak Park was established and vibrant.

The South Prairie remained sparsely built until greater transportation came to the area, allowing residents to commute easily to Chicago. In the 1890s, electric streetcars began to run along Chicago Avenue, Lake Street, Madison Street, and Roosevelt Road. The Lake Street Elevated opened in 1901, running as far as Harlem Avenue, and the Metropolitan West Side Elevated ran to Harrison Street by 1905. The Wisconsin Central Railroad, which ran along Harrison Street, also opened in this decade. The accessibility to transportation contributed enormously to the growth of the South Prairie, which was essentially open prairie at the turn-of-the-century. A 1908 fire insurance map of the region confirms the steady development of southern Oak Park, with homes marking blocks divided into lots.<sup>16</sup> The South Prairie also became an attractive area to builders such as the previously mentioned Thomas Hulbert and Seward Gunderson, who subdivided tracts of land to construct middle-class homes. Gunderson was the most prolific of these builders,

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<sup>15</sup> Jean Guarino, *Yesterday: A Historical View of Oak Park* vol. 1, *Prairie Days to World War I* (Oak Park: Oak Ridge Press, 2000), 34.

<sup>16</sup> *Sanborn Fire Insurance Map: Oak Park* (New York: Sanborn Fire Insurance Company, 1908).

constructing 600 homes between 1906 and 1920.<sup>17</sup> These homes, constructed between Harrison Street, Madison Street, Gunderson Avenue and Ridgeland Avenue, now constitute the Gunderson Historic District.



Gunderson Historic District

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(Oak Leaves)

The population of Oak Park continued to climb in the first decades of the twentieth century, growing from about 10,000 in 1900 to 40,000 in 1920.<sup>18</sup> A building boom accompanied this increase, with over 300 building permits issued annually from 1906 to 1917.<sup>19</sup> Southern Oak Park accounted for the majority of the city's growth. About one third of Oak Park's population lived south of Madison Street by 1915, a remarkable expansion in a very short period of time. The Eils House was built at the peak of development of the South Prairie. Like the Gunderson homes, it is solidly and simply built for a middle-class family, and superbly reflects Oak Park's evolution during this period.

### History of the Eils House

As the land in south Oak Park was subdivided into lots, the property at 625 South Oak Park Avenue, then known as Lot 7 of Block 2 of the Oak Park Avenue Subdivision, changed hands several times. Martha Kippox purchased the property from William Wood in 1899; she owned the lot until Francis McKinnie purchased it in 1905. McKinnie sold the land to Charles William Eils on November 9, 1908.<sup>20</sup> Eils was issued a building permit in 1910<sup>21</sup> for a two-story frame residence, a house that would remain in his family for the next eighty years.

Charles Eils was born in New York in 1856 to German parents, and was employed as a credit man with Rand McNally.<sup>22</sup> His wife, Lina, was born in Illinois in 1860 to European parents.<sup>23</sup> Charles died in 1930,<sup>24</sup> and Lina died in 1957.<sup>25</sup> They had three children:

<sup>17</sup> Jean Guarino, *Yesterday: A Historical View of Oak Park* vol. 1, *Prairie Days to World War I* (Oak Park: Oak Ridge Press, 2000), 54.

<sup>18</sup> Jean Guarino, *Oak Park: A Pictorial History* (St. Louis: G. Bradley Publishing, 1988), 68.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Cook County Recorder of Deed's Office, Tract Book 151-A, 44.

<sup>21</sup> Permit No. 2658 dated September 14, 1910 issued to Charles W. Eils, owner. Source: Village of Oak Park.

<sup>22</sup> *Fourteenth Census of the United States: 1920-Population*, Enumeration District 164, Oak Park, Cook County, IL.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> "Mortuary Record," *Oak Leaves*, 4 July 1930.

Charles William, Jr. (b. 1882), Robert (b. 1883), and Laura (b. 1892). Charles Jr. worked as a manager for an insurance company and remained living with his parents well into adulthood. He later married a woman called Myrtle and became stepfather to her son, William Schoen. He operated an insurance brokerage firm from his home before he died in 1965.<sup>26</sup> Myrtle died in Wilmette in 1984.<sup>27</sup> Robert, a credit manager with Rand McNally, was married to Alma Buttron, and they lived in River Forest with their son, Robert, Jr. Robert Sr. died in Elmhurst in 1981 at age 98.<sup>28</sup>

Laura Eils, who appears to have never married, remained in the house at 625 South Oak Park Avenue until her death in 1989. Robert, Jr., her great-nephew, inherited the house and sold it immediately to Jeffrey Greuer. The real estate literature from that sale promoted the home's original built-ins, plate rail, and light fixtures, features that Greuer apparently appreciated. He owned the house until selling it to the current occupants in 2004.<sup>29</sup> In nearly one hundred years, the Eils House has held only three families, all of whom have been careful stewards.

## 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 W. Eils House was nominated under the following criteria:

- (1) Significance as an example of the architectural development or heritage of the Village of Oak Park;
- (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.

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<sup>25</sup> Obit-No Title, *Chicago Tribune*, 1 April 1957.

<sup>26</sup> Obit-No Title, *Chicago Tribune*, 22 September 1965.

<sup>27</sup> Obit-No Title, *Chicago Tribune*, 28 July 1984.

<sup>28</sup> "Obituaries," *Oak Leaves*, 25 March 1981.

<sup>29</sup> Cook County Recorder of Deed's Office, Tract Book 151-A, 44.

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