

# THE GRIFFIN NEWSLETTER

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Walter Burley Griffin  
Society of America  
1152 Center Drive  
St. Louis, MO 63117  
314.644.4546

Website: [www.WBGriffinSociety.org](http://www.WBGriffinSociety.org)  
Email: [info@WBGriffinSociety.org](mailto:info@WBGriffinSociety.org)

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**Editor:** Paul Kruty  
[pkrutu@illinois.edu](mailto:pkrutu@illinois.edu)

**Designer:** George Shutack  
[shutack@prairiem.com](mailto:shutack@prairiem.com)

Please email news items to  
the editor or designer.

## TWELFTH ANNUAL MEETING SET FOR 25 JUNE 2011 IN OAK PARK/RIVER FOREST, ILLINOIS

The twelfth annual meeting of the Walter Burley Griffin Society of America will be held in the Chicago suburbs of Oak Park and River Forest on Saturday, 25 June. This year the meeting will be centered around the work of Griffin's mentors and associates among the architects of the Prairie School, including Robert Spencer, William Drummond, Tallmadge & Watson, and George Maher. The morning meeting and lectures will be held at Pleasant Home, 217 Home Ave., Oak Park, the restored George Maher mansion that is also the headquarters of the Oak Park Historical Society, while the afternoon walking tours will visit houses by the architects listed above. Morning speakers include Julia Bachrach on the Prairie School in Chicago's Parks, Paul Kruty on Robert Spencer in Oak Park and River Forest, and Dan Spillane on Restoring a Spencer House. There is an optional tour the next day, held in association with the Pleasant Home Foundation (see next article).

NOTE: there is limited seating at Pleasant Home, so it is very important to register early. Only 100 registrations will be accepted.

## SUNDAY IN THE PARK A LINCOLN PARK FIELD TRIP 26 JUNE 2011

The Pleasant Home Foundation is sponsoring a field trip on 26 June, the day after the Griffin meeting. The tour of Chicago Park District will include the Lincoln Park Conservatory (1890-5, J. L. Silsbee); the formal gardens; the Alfred Caldwell Lily Pool (1936-8); the restored South Pond, new Boardwalk and Pavilion (Lincoln Park Zoo and Studio Gang); the Carlson Cottage/Comfort Station (1888, J. L. Silsbee); and Café Brauer (1908, Perkins & Hamilton). The tour follows the successful lecture series, "Pleasant Places: Architecture in the Parks," held in February and March, but is open to all. Griffin Society members are encouraged to attend what promises to be an exciting event.

The tour will gather Sunday, 26 June, at 10:00 am at the Conservatory and end around 1:00 pm at Café Brauer for lunch on your own. During the walk, Christopher Payne will discuss the Lincoln Park Conservatory; Paul A. Steinbrecher, AIA, Interactive Design/Eight Architects, will describe the Comfort Station/Carlson Cottage restoration project; Harry Soenksen, AIA, Studio Gang, will interpret the South Pond project; and Lincoln Park Conservancy docents will guide the tour of the Lily Pool.

Walking tour will be held rain or shine (no refunds). Wear comfortable shoes.

Cost is \$25 per person. Space is limited and advance reservations are required by calling Pleasant Home at (708) 383-2654.

## HAROLD ALLEN BROOKS: A PERSONAL MEMORIAL

By Paul Sprague

*This past August, the great architectural historian, H. Allen Brooks, passed away at the age of 84. As all of our readers know, in the 1950s Brooks was among the first major scholars to study the followers of Louis Sullivan as a group. Brooks also provided the incentive to change the name by which these architects were known from the traditional one, the Chicago School (still so employed in 1964 by Mark Peisch in his book on the group), to the one in current use—the Prairie School, as he titled his ground-breaking book published in 1972. But Allen put the subject firmly on the map of scholarly pursuits. And he continued to investigate the subject throughout the 1970s and early '80s. After that his interests shifted, and his later research resulted in the important study of Le Corbusier's early work, *Le Corbusier: The Formative Years*, that appeared in 1997. He also served as general editor of the 32-volume complete works of Le Corbusier. Although after this Allen no longer actively pursued Prairie School studies, he continued to attend conferences on the subject and to lecture, particularly on Wright's planning. We are pleased to offer the following reminiscences by our own Paul Sprague, Sullivan/Wright/Griffin scholar and Griffin Board Member.*

I can't remember when I first heard of Allen Brooks. But surely it was by 1963 when Wilbert Hasbrouck arrived at my residence in Lake Forest, Illinois, where I was teaching, to inform me that he and his wife would be publishing a journal devoted to the work of what I call Early Modern Architecture in the American Midwest. I was immediately troubled by the name Wilbert proposed. Originally called the Chicago School, a term later usurped by the architects of Chicago's tall buildings, he was now calling the group the Prairie School, and titling his journal, *The Prairie School Review*. His excuse: this was the name used by Allen Brooks, so it must be correct. Indeed, despite the record of occasional uses much earlier, Allen Brooks (who never went by his given name, Harold) claimed to be the first person to use the term in his Ph.D. thesis, "The Prairie School: The American Spirit in Midwest Residential Architecture, 1893-1916," awarded by Northwestern University in 1957. (Personally, I still wish neither he nor Wilbert had chosen the term "Prairie School" to denote this group of early modern architects working in the Chicago area, as the term is visually descriptive of the long low buildings introduced by Frank Lloyd Wright and

thus excludes the founder of the modern movement in Chicago, Louis Sullivan, whose tall buildings had nothing at all to do visually with the midwestern prairie but everything to do with a universal modernism.)

Allen's interest in the Prairie School did not stop with his Ph.D. thesis, for he went on to write a book about the group. I must have met him at meetings during these years, but I don't remember discussing the work of the Chicago architects with him. Perhaps he thought I was secretly intending to contest his research by writing my own book on the subject. That he was studiously working on the book was certain from an amusing report from Wilbert, who told me that Brooks had sent him a note pleading with him to stop publishing so many articles about various members of the school as he was being set back in the work on his book by having to deal with all the new material. Perhaps said in jest, it had a believable quality as well.

My first memory of actually meeting Allen was in 1972 after my review of his newly published book appeared in the fourth quarter 1971 issue of *The Prairie School Review*. Soon Brooks would be in town to give lectures at both the University of Chicago and in Oak Park. I picked him up at O'Hare and we drove in the evening rush hour traffic slowly down Pulaski Avenue toward Oak Park. It was then that I became aware that he was miffed, and more, about my review. I had devoted several pages to saying how excellent the book was, then raised a number of questions that still seemed to await more detailed research and discussion. I hadn't said it was perfect.

Eventually I managed to get him simmered down when we found ourselves having been fellow travelers during our graduate work, both having encountered similar problems in graduate school. I told him that when my department needed an outside reader, they sent it to a department graduate and got back a "does not approve." Not to worry, I was told, as the problem was not with my thesis but with the reviewer. Like previous graduates of the department, the reviewer had graduated with the M.A., then considered the equivalent of the Ph.D. elsewhere. Now that person wanted to submit a rather slim volume published as part of an architectural series as the dissertation, and to be granted a Ph.D. The proposal was refused and I was told that my dissertation was being used as a way to get back

at the department. (And you thought that academia was a placid place where professors worked in ivory towers?) Eventually my dissertation: “Louis Sullivan’s Architectural Ornament” was approved by a second reader and finally I was awarded the Ph.D.

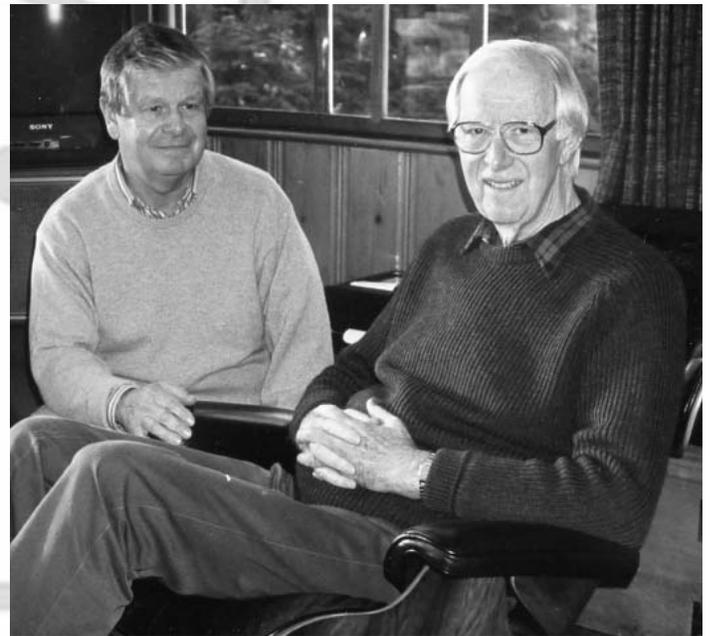
Allen told me about his own experience as a graduate student at another Ivy League university. He had been asked to leave, apparently because one of the professors did not find his subject—the Prairie School!—to be of sufficient caliber. This rejection apparently spurred Allen on to a life in which he devoted himself entirely to his research and writing. He would show them. He applied and was admitted to Northwestern University where, as noted, he produced his thesis on that very subject, which would become an acclaimed and extremely popular book.

I somehow thought from our initial very personal encounter in 1972 that we would become close professional colleagues and even relatively close personal friends. But I am sorry to say this never happened. One reason certainly was Allen’s extreme dedication to his research. Nonetheless, I tried. Once I really thought seriously of visiting him at his summer place on a island in Lake Huron north of Toronto, the Canadian city where he was teaching. As I enjoy seeing exotic places surrounded by water far from the bustle of large cities, I called him when it seemed that I could find the time for a short visit. Although we had discussed my going there previously, he now began giving me reasons why this was not a good idea. I would have to hire a good-sized skiff with captain to go and return, about \$100 each way. He had a phone but no electricity—and so on. I finally agreed with him that it was not a good idea to visit him at Honey Harbor.

I did manage eventually to pay him a personal visit after he retired to a house he purchased overlooking the Connecticut River near Dartmouth, from which university I believe he had his undergraduate degree. Interestingly, his place was around the corner from the house where Hugh Morrison lived while teaching at Dartmouth—and I vaguely remember that Allen had told me that Morrison inspired him to research the Chicago architects. Actually, I had once visited Morrison in his house, while he was still teaching. Donald Egbert, who had been a colleague of Morrison at Princeton, arranged for me to visit Morrison and look at the research material he had collected for his 1935 book on Louis Sullivan. I drove up to Dartmouth on a snowy winter day, plagued not only by

the snow but also by the windshield wipers on my VW bug that were acting up. I got to his house after dark and walked in on a party the faculty was throwing as part of a job interview for one of my colleagues at Princeton. It got a little dicey but also amusing when the faculty began to think that I was the person being interviewed.

My visit to Brooks’ home occurred while visiting my sister and her husband, who had built a house in a hillside just north of Brownsville, VT. From their house is a spectacular view of Mt. Ascutney, a 3000-foot monadnock arising next to the Connecticut River on which they skied in winter. A college friend of mine, Ralph Riehle, was also visiting at that time and I suggested that we look up Allen Brooks. We drove up to Dartmouth and somehow found his house. It must have been autumn for, as I was parking, Ralph got out and went around to the rear of the house and there found Allen raking leaves. Allen was very gracious, showed us his house, and entertained us. At one point he took us to a large window looking south and west across the Connecticut river, pointed, and said, “Do you see that mountain in the distance?” “Yes, its Mount Ascutney,” I answered smartly. “That is where I ski,” he replied. I gave Ralph my camera and he took what I really believe was one of the best pictures of Allen or me in our dotage, arranged together in his living room.



Paul Sprague (left) and Allen Brooks (right)

While there I was reminded of our first real encounter described above. Allen told me that he was now miffed that he had not been invited to an upcoming meeting about the Griffins at the University of Illinois, Urbana/Champaign. Although I had actually been advising the group planning the conference, I told him correctly that it was being organized by Professor Paul Kruty, who had chosen the speakers, and that I would certainly mention to him that Allen would like to be included; eventually an invitation with subsidy was arranged. This conference led to the formation of the Griffin Society of America, as well as the PBS documentary on the Griffins, which, of course, includes Allen. I vividly remember Allen standing up toward the end of the conference and exclaiming with great irritation that Barry Byrne told him that Marion's maiden name was pronounced: "muhHOHnee." We tried to set him straight as kindly as possible, for by now in our work on the Griffins, we had plenty of proof that she and her Irish family adhered to the Irish or Celtic pronunciation: "MAHnee," although apparently "MAYnee" was also acceptable to the family. He remained dubious. I think that was the last time I saw Allen Brooks. It was sad to learn of his death last autumn. These and other recollections of our encounters over many years are likely to lodge fondly in my memory until my own end.

## GRIFFIN EXHIBITION IN GRINNELL, IOWA

Grinnell College will host an exhibition entitled "Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahony Griffin in Iowa," scheduled to open on 23 September. This exhibition of renderings, models, and photographs of Griffin houses in Iowa will put Grinnell College's restored treasure, the 1911 Benjamin and Mabel Ricker house in regional context on the 100th anniversary of its construction. Curated by Daniel Strong, Associate Director and Curator of Exhibitions at the Falconer Gallery, Grinnell College, the exhibition will be accompanied by a full-color catalogue, including an essay on "The Griffins in Grinnell" by Paul Kruty, Professor of Architectural History, University of Illinois. For more information, contact Daniel Strong, STRONGDJ@Grinnell.edu

## THE GRIFFINS IN INDIA: NEW FINDINGS

By Christopher Vernon

*The following images and commentary provide a particular treat for readers of the Griffin Newsletter. Christopher Vernon, Associate Professor in the Faculty of Architecture, Landscape and Visual Arts at the University of Western Australia, has supplied us with four images and accompanying text from his ongoing research on the Griffins' work in India. While James Weirick led the way in researching the Griffins in India, and he and Donald Leslie Johnson provided the first major published discussions nearly forty years ago, and Jeffrey Turnbull conducted further research in the late 1990s, the only monograph on the subject remains Paul Kruty and Paul Sprague's *Two American Architects in India*, published in 1997. Professor Vernon has made some ten trips to India in recent years attempting to reconstruct the Griffins' trail and has managed to tease out bits of new information each time. He has now graciously offered to share some of his findings. We look forward to his completed study.*



Walter Burley Griffin Memorial in Lucknow

Shortly after Walter Burley Griffin's death in February 1937, *Indian Wildlife* published what amounted to a brief obituary, which concluded by announcing the launching of an enterprise to perpetuate Griffin's "memory in India in a suitable form." "The form," it explained, "will entirely depend upon the amount of contributions received, and the desire of the majority of donors." I had overlooked this passage when

Spring 2011

first reading the obituary, but in 2006, taking the announcement as an emphatic cue, I made inquiries with colleagues at Lucknow's College of Architecture. "Of course," a senior professor matter-of-factly responded, "there is a Walter Burley Griffin memorial in Lucknow!" He even generously offered to take me to it. Much to my surprise we soon found ourselves standing in front of the University's Tagore Library, the very building that Griffin had come to India from Australia to build. Just as I was beginning to think the professor had misunderstood my question, he turned and pointed to a small temple-like structure a stone's throw away from where we were standing. Tellingly embellished with a cross, the "Indo-deco" concrete structure certainly appears to have been constructed, like the library, in the 1930s. Speaking as we walked across to the memorial, my host elaborated that a metal plaque attached to its base recorded Griffin's name and birth and death dates. Sadly, upon closer inspection, we found not a plaque, but only bolt holes: someone had stolen it –rendering it very difficult, if not impossible, to state with certainty that this was the outcome of Indian Wildlife's initiative.



Griffin's final Lucknow residence

By following the trail of clues Marion Mahony Griffin left in "The Magic of America," I was able to visit her and Walter's final Lucknow residence in 2009. Writing to her sister on 1 November 1936, Marion conveyed news of the couple's move. Reporting that they were now living "in a heavenly spot," the architect distinguished their new home as a "palatial house with a stately formal garden" and "big trees." Sharing the house with another couple, the Griffins lived upstairs and maintained their professional office in a downstairs wing. When my partner Annette and I called at the place more than 70 years later, we discovered, much to our surprise, the house and its expansive garden surrounds remained intact. Indeed, the only departure from Marion's lengthy descriptions was that lawn had erased the formal plantings. The house, however, was ominously vacant. Sadly, workers on-site informed us that it was to be demolished

to make way for high-rise flats. This also appears to be the inevitable fate awaiting Griffin's Bhatia house elsewhere in Lucknow. I was unable to return to the site when I visited Lucknow in 2010; I plan to return later this year in the hope that the house still stands.



Raza House

Griffin's unexpected death left many commissions to be completed and, presumably modified, by others. One of these was a dwelling for Begam Mohammad Raza. Griffin scholar Donald Leslie Johnson first located the Raza house during a 1970s research trip to Lucknow. Following a different trail I arrived at the same address some thirty years later.



University of Lucknow Faculty House

Walter Burley Griffin reported to Marion that a number of University of Lucknow faculty members had commissioned him to design or remodel houses for them. Upon learning that university professors then tended to live on or nearby the campus, I first decided to survey the campus and its environs via Google Earth. After locating prospective candidate dwellings, I investigated them on foot. This remarkable dwelling might possibly have been a Griffin house; dated '1938' above the balcony, the dwelling, if it was designed by Griffin, was likely modified by others in construction. To my eye, the house is stylistically resonant with the Griffin scheme for "Raja Tagore" at Kolkata (Calcutta).

## GRIFFIN'S JENKS HOUSE IN PERIL

Another Griffin building is in extreme jeopardy. The frame cottage Griffin designed in 1907 for the Evanston family of Chancellor Livingston Jenks and built as a summer home on Lauderdale Lakes in southern Wisconsin is in grave danger of being lost to development. Early last summer we were contacted by several family members concerned about the building and what could be done to preserve it. They explained that the house is owned by a large consortium of family members, some of whom wished to build a new house on the site. We considered holding this year's annual meeting nearby and using the house as the meeting's theme. However, our various preservation suggestions to the family, as well as our proposal to include the house on our tour, went unanswered. We feared the worst. This past February, Griffin Society member Tom Hagensick drove to the site and reported that the house still stood, although he found it "in an overall state of great disrepair." The property next door had recently been torn down and a new foundation poured. Tom contacted the local zoning department and found that no permits had been applied for the former Jenks property. There the situation rests.

## SOCIETY'S TWO PUBLICATIONS AVAILABLE

Everyone who is interested in the Griffins and in the Prairie School will want to own the Society's two original publications, available through the website and by ordering directly from the Society's headquarters in St. Louis.

*Marion Mahony and Millikin Place* presents for the first time the whole exciting story of the development of Millikin Place in Decatur, Illinois. As Paul Kruty explains, "The history of Millikin Place is the personal story of Marion Mahony and Walter Griffin. The chain of events set in motion in September 1909, when Mahony agreed to complete Wright's buildings while he was abroad for a year, not only brought Walter and Marion together in Decatur, but it soon led to their marriage, and later to the extraordinary Rock Crest/Rock Glen commission in Mason City, Iowa, and finally to Australia."

*Walter Burley Griffin and the Stinson Memorial Library* reveals the international significance of the Griffins' major public building in the United States, a work that H. Allen Brooks called "a brilliant design and a fitting climax to Griffin's American career." Drawing on the priceless collection of letters and documents surviving at the library, Paul Kruty recounts the story of the commission, design, construction, and reception of the building, as well as its contexts in Griffin's career, the public library in America, and the architect's intention to create a Modern representational public architecture.

*Marion Mahony and Millikin Place* sells for \$29.95, while *Walter Burley Griffin and the Stinson Memorial Library* sells for \$25, plus s & h. Griffin Society members receive a 20% discount on both publications.

## MEMBERSHIP

The Walter Burley Griffin Society Of America is a not-for-profit, tax-exempt corporation under IRS Code 501 (c)(3). We invite you to become a "Friend" of the Society. For annual dues of \$25.00, you will receive a periodic newsletter keeping you abreast of the Society's activities, such as lectures, tours, exhibitions, and other events related to the Griffins' work. (\$20.00 for seniors 65 and older.)

The Society seeks comments, advice, suggestions, and news from you, its friends. The Society needs your financial support. All donations are tax-deductible.

If you wish to join the Society or renew your membership in the Society, please fill out the following form and mail it to us at the address below - or email us that you are attending the Annual Meeting (cost \$10) and you can pay for both membership and meeting at that time.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

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### Mail to:

**Walter Burley Griffin Society Of America**

1152 Center Drive

St. Louis, MO 63117

Phone: 314-644-4546

Email: [info@WBGriffinSociety.org](mailto:info@WBGriffinSociety.org)

Website: [www.WBGriffinSociety.org](http://www.WBGriffinSociety.org)