

By Mark Hertzberg for *At the Lake* magazine, Autumn, 2014.
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Five Chicago-area residents commissioned Frank Lloyd Wright to design summer cottages on the South Shore of Delavan Lake between 1900 and 1905. Their choice of architect meant these “cottages” - four of them the size of full-size homes - have an architectural legacy deeper than any other homes on the lake. Wright (1867-1959) was an architect from Oak Park whose career and reputation were rising. He was designing lake homes and cottages in several states and in Ontario at the turn of the century, at the same time he was designing his better-known city and suburban homes.

Wright’s architectural vocabulary was evolving when he designed these cottages. Unlike most of the residences he designed, they were commissioned as only seasonal homes. They are less than a mile apart, but each looked different than the others, designed for different clients and different sites. They all have a commanding view of the lake. They were all “organic” in Wright’s vernacular. Wright used native fieldstone boulders in the foundations of two of the cottages, and several adjacent outbuildings. Regrettably there is no surviving correspondence between Wright and these clients to illuminate how the designs evolved.

Many people associate Wright with many of his suburban stucco homes, which were generally light in color, and later came to be called Prairie-style. While some of the lake homes have some Prairie-style design elements, including broad overhanging eaves, they looked quite different because they were designed for a rustic, rather than urban, setting. They were originally sided in wood, some with stucco on the second floor. The board and batten siding - stained dark green on most of the cottages - was appropriate for their country setting. Built long before home air conditioning, all but Wallis-GoodSmith had open verandas facing the lake. There was no central heating, so the cottages have fireplaces made of Wright’s signature Roman brick. Some of the original gas lighting fixtures still exist. Most, if not all of the cottages, were built by Tunis Moore, a local contractor.

Wright eschewed Victorian homes with “boxes” of rooms. The lake cottages, like many of his homes, have open floor plans in their public spaces. The hallway from the stairs to the second floor bedrooms in the Jones house is a balcony that looks over the billiard room, on one side, and the living room, with its view of the lake, on the other.

The cottages were designed for Henry H. Wallis (3407 South Shore Drive, 1900); Fred B. Jones (3335 South Shore Drive, 1900, named “Penwern”); Charles and Mary Ross (3211 South Shore Drive, 1902); the Ross’ daughter and son-in-law Carrie and George Spencer (3209 South Shore Drive, 1902); and Arthur P. Johnson (3455 South Shore Drive, 1905). Wallis, who also had a residence at 3301 South Shore Drive, never lived in his Wright house, selling it to brothers Drs. Heber and William GoodSmith. Hence it is known as the Wallis-GoodSmith

House.¹ It has been written that Wallis did not live in the house because of the death of his only child. In fact, she was born in 1903 and died in 1927.

While the homes were often referred to as “cottages,” only the Spencer house was small enough to be considered a cottage today. The cottages have all been altered. None of the alterations were designed by Wright. Built long before home air conditioning, all but Wallis-Good-Smith had open verandas facing the lake (Wallis-GoodSmith’s veranda was apparently enclosed very soon after the GoodSmiths bought it).

Perhaps these clients wanted the prestige of owning a second home. They were certainly seeking relief from the discomforts of urban summers. Chicago was particularly unbearable in the summers of 1900 and 1901. There were numerous heat-related deaths. Newspaper stories listed the names of those killed or “prostrated” by the heat.

At least five resort hotels beckoned Chicagoans to Delavan Lake by 1895. The south shore was served by Milwaukee Road and North Western trains from Chicago to Walworth and Williams Bay. Horse-drawn buses transported vacationers from the train station before automobiles and motorized buses.²

A 1901 Sunday Chicago *Tribune* story with news and social notes from summer resorts was headlined *Summer Resorts Profit by Warmer Weather*. Delavan Lake was the first resort listed. Readers learned that Wright’s client “Fred B. Jones of Chicago is building a \$15,000 summer residence on the south shore. When completed it will be the finest on the lake.”³

The weekly Delavan *Enterprise* and *Republican* regularly carried social notes about the summer crowd between Memorial Day and Labor Day. Titled “Delavan Lake Notes,” and “Around Delavan Lake,” they were often printed on the front page.

Brief notices told when lake residents were in town. Sometimes the news was that someone was *not* in residence such as in the *Enterprise* on June 6, 1907, “Fred B. Jones has left Chicago for a two months’ European trip, accompanied by his friend, A. Anderson. His south shore home, Penwern, is now occupied by his housekeeper, but the owner will not be here until the middle of the summer.”

¹ Kenneth GoodSmith, great nephew of the GoodSmith brothers who bought the house from Wallis, explains that the correct spelling is GoodSmith, not Goodsmith as is commonly written in an email to the author, June 16, 2014. William Good Smith combined his middle and last names during the California Gold Rush because he had trouble getting his mail with such a common last name.

² Email to the author from John Notz, October 12, 2013; Yadon, Gordon: *History of Delavan*, Delavan: Self-published, 1976, p. 7.

³ Chicago Tribune, Sunday June 16, 1901. On June 27, the weekly Delavan *Republican* ran an identical description of the house, but gave the cost as \$10,000. \$15,000 was equivalent to about \$418,000 in 2012; \$10,000 was equivalent to about \$279,000 in 2012: www.measuringworth.com

The July 12, 1906 *Republican* had a three-part headline noting the lake's popularity, above the front page social notes:

At Beautiful Delavan Lake

Many city people here for rest and recreation

Hotels and Summer Homes Occupied by Prominent Families and Resorters. New Buildings and General Improvement Indicate Permanence and Contentment

The headline was followed by two bits of news about Jones:

-E.A. Anderson came out from Chicago in his fast running auto and for several days was a guest of his friend, Mr. F.B. Jones.

-The fireworks display at the home of F.B. Jones were the finest ever shown on Delavan Lake.

There were such strong ties between Chicago and the south shore of the lake that news items in the Delavan newspapers often referred to Chicago simply as "the city."⁴ The 1908 annual meeting of the Delavan Lake Yacht Club auxiliary, of which Jones was president, was held in Chicago.⁵

WRIGHT AND WALLIS

The history of Wright and Delavan Lake begins with Henry H. Wallis. There is no evidence of how they met, but both lived in Oak Park. Wallis owned a hardware company. He was married to Minnie Schulz, a native of Delavan, and sold lake property. Wright had designed 18 homes in Oak Park and neighboring River Forest through 1900, so it is possible that Wright patronized Wallis' business.

In 1895 Wallis published a small sales brochure for "Wallisia," largely undeveloped land on the south shore of the lake. The bottom of many pages read, "H. H. Wallis SELLS Delavan Lake Property."⁶

The brochure is illustrated with maps and idyllic photographs. One photo, of a canoe docked along the tree lined shore, is captioned, "A Quiet Retreat." Another shows a sailboat race, "A Weekly Event - Delavan Lake Yacht Club." The back page of the ribbon-bound volume

⁴ For example, Delavan *Enterprise*, August 8, 1907, p. 1: "Fred B. Jones comes out from the city this week..."

⁵ Delavan *Enterprise*, April 23, 1908, news items about Jones' re-election, and report about financial health of the organization.

⁶ The brochure was viewed through the courtesy of Franklin Stoneburner of Delavan.

points out that the lake is “about five miles long,” has “six good Hotels, Three Public Steamers, Two Railway Lines, and Bus Lines to each, from each Hotel.” It promises:

“Warden-Keeping Fishing always good.

“Improvement Association-everything kept in good order.

“All provisions daily at your door by Delavan merchants.

“Two-and-one-half hours from Chicago to Delavan.”

Wallis had sold 65 properties and 11 lots in the first six months of 1899 when the *Republican* noted that “H.H. Wallis...has been what might be justly termed a hustler for that side of the lake.”⁷ On May 3, 1900 the newspaper wrote, “H.H. Wallis, who is ever hustling for Delavan Lake, entertained a party Tuesday, who were looking for cottages to rent for the summer.” On July 31, 1902 the *Enterprise* reported his 99th sale of lake property.

Marion Johnson (Livingston), whose cousin, Arthur Johnson was the grandson of A.P. Johnson, Wright’s final lake client, corresponded in 1946 with Wright about a possible commission for the architect. Wright wrote her, “I would like to build on the site of the Wallis Cottage for you — let us know more of what you have in mind. He penned “I loved Henry (Wallis)” next to his signature.⁸ (The “Wallis Cottage” likely was the home Wallis built at 3301 South Shore Drive, before he worked with Wright).

Marion Johnson grew up in the small Wallis Gatehouse at 3301. Wright was very possibly the architect when the gatehouse was remodeled in 1897. The Wallis boathouse, which Wright designed the same year, was demolished before 1939.

She shed further light on the lake ties between Wallis and Wright in a letter to Thomas Eyerman of Chicago in 1992, “I talked with my cousin, Arthur Johnson the other day & he told us that a number of years ago he contemplated building ‘spec’ houses at Delavan & went to see Wright about it...Wright was most cordial...

“We both agreed that Wright had probably drawn the other things I gave you himself, as he and Henry Wallis were such close friends (like brothers as Mrs. Wallis said) & whenever he

⁷ Delavan *Republican*, Jun 29, 1899.

⁸ Letter to Marion Johnson from Frank Lloyd Wright, postmarked Spring Green, Wisconsin, October 17, 1946, from the collection of the Department of Architecture and Design, The Art Institute of Chicago, Gift of Mrs. Richard Q. Livingston, Receipt of Object Number 39211. The letters of Frank Lloyd Wright or/and the office of Frank Lloyd Wright are Copyright ©The Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation 2014

sold a lot, Mr. Wright would dash off little mementos for him as they were next door neighbors in Oak Park.”⁹

The Wallis-GoodSmith cottage was the second design suggested by Wright for Wallis, his friend from Oak Park. Wright’s first suggested design for Wallis featured an arched porte-cochere, like the one he later built for Jones. The veranda and the rear entry hall are recent additions.

Wallis-GoodSmith is the only one of the five cottages stained in what is thought to be the original color. The board and batten had been covered by asphalt siding when John O’Shea bought it in 1988.¹⁰ The fireplace brickwork was covered up and there were dropped ceilings. The house was in such poor condition that the eaves were propped up by 2x4s. O’Shea, who owned the house for a year before buying the Jones estate, hired architect Brian Spencer to restore the house.

WRIGHT AND JONES

Penwern, Jones’ estate, was Wright’s most ambitious undertaking on Delavan Lake. The house, the largest of the five cottages, is 6552 sq. ft. inside, with decks and porches totaling 2132 sq. ft. Wright also built a boathouse (1900), stable (1903), and gatehouse (1903) at Penwern.

Fieldstone boulders are incorporated in the foundations of the four buildings and the porch columns of the house. Arches are a signature feature of the estate: there is an arched porte-cochere at the entrance to the house, a dramatic arch spanning the central porch facing the lake, and an arch on the front of the boathouse. The central porch is semi-circular, as were the two side porches when originally built.

There is an attached tower across a walkway above the porte-cochere. Jones, a bachelor, is thought to have hosted card games for his business associates and friends in the tower. A tin urinal was built into the wall of the game room.

Jones commissioned two additions to the house, probably in 1909. The one on the west side of the house covered some of the living room and dining room windows. The third owner of the Gate Lodge (which borders South Shore Drive) replaced Wright’s attached greenhouse with a carport, built another greenhouse, and put an addition on the north side of the structure. Sue and John Major, who bought Penwern, except for the Gate Lodge, in 1994, and acquired the Gate Lodge in 2001, removed all of these additions. The Majors also rebuilt the front of the stable to

⁹ Letter to Thomas Eyerman from Marion Johnson Livingston postmarked Chicago, December, 22, 1992, from the collection of the Department of Architecture and Design, The Art Institute of Chicago, Gift of Mrs. Richard Q. Livingston. Quoted with permission of Thomas Eyerman.

¹⁰ Email to the author from John O’Shea, May 21, 2014.

Wright's plans. Perhaps most significantly, in 2002 they commissioned Brian Spencer to use Wright's plans to rebuild the boathouse which lay in ruins since an arson fire in 1978. The Majors are proud of their stewardship of Penwern. They are establishing a website to help people learn about the estate: www.penwern.com

There has been confusion about the name "Penwern" which is Welsh or Cornish. Wright's ancestors were Welsh. There are several places in Wales known as Penwern or Pen-y-Wern. One of Wright's ancestors lived in a home known as Penwern.¹¹ A possible Welsh meaning is "at the head of the alder tree." Alder trees were native to Lake Delavan. It has been erroneously written that Penwern means "Great House" and is Gaelic.

WRIGHT AND ROSS

The cottage which Wright designed for Charles S. and Carrie Ross has had nine owners. It was greatly altered by one of its early owners. Open porches which were distinctive features of the house were enclosed when additional rooms were built on the second floor in the front and rear of the house. The new front room was built under what had been a dramatic porch roof. While a lovely house, it bears little outward resemblance to Wright's rustic design.

WRIGHT AND SPENCER

Wright built a small cottage on a narrow lot next door for the Spencers. Just three families have owned the cottage, including the Spencers who owned it for 61 years. It has a prow-shaped veranda, appropriate for a lake home. The house had no indoor plumbing. A half bath was added in the 1920s. Later, a guesthouse, not by Wright, was built with a bathroom. After the guesthouse burned down in an electrical fire in 1982, the current owners, who had purchased the cottage just four months earlier, built an addition on the rear of the house with family room on the first floor and a master bedroom and master bath upstairs. The addition is prow-shaped, mirroring the design of the veranda. An anecdote asserts that Wright denied authorship of the cottage when he saw vertical, rather than horizontal, board and batten on the second floor of the home. However, Wright's plans show vertical siding.

WRIGHT AND JOHNSON

Designed in 1905, after Wright was designing "Prairie-style" homes, the symmetrical A.P. Johnson cottage resembled that style more than the others, though sided in board and batten, rather than stucco. The house was in the Johnson family for 59 years. It has been altered more than any of the cottages, and is now a year-round residence. The open verandas at the ends of the

¹¹ There is no documentation about who named the house and estate "Penwern." The Cornish and Welsh translations are in emails to the author, October and November, 2013, from the National Library of Wales and from the cornwallinfoocus.co.uk website. Brian Spencer documented the connection to Wright's family in an email to the author, January 12, 2014. Wright historian and architect Thomas Heinz verified the Welsh connection in text and photos in an email to the author June 12, 2014.

house have been enclosed. The east porch is now the dining room. The west porch now has stairs to the full basement, built under the house ten years ago. The basement family room faces the lake. Small balconies were built outside the upstairs bedrooms. The home's exterior is now light-colored synthetic stucco, further enhancing its appearance as a "Prairie-style" home.

OTHER WRIGHT PROJECTS

There is a newly-discovered possible Wright connection to yet another lake home. The two weekly Delavan newspapers reported on October 23, 1902 that Christian (or Chris) Wolf of Chicago had purchased "the Lowell south shore place known as Tacky Teazie" and hired Wright to remodel the house.¹² No plans or other documentation have been found. In 1907 Wright designed a "Cottage for Lake Delavan." It is not known who the client was or why the project was not executed.¹³

Boating was an important social event for summer lake residents. In 1902 Wright proposed a long stucco Prairie style club house for the lake. The yacht clubhouse which Wright designed in 1906 was much smaller. It was board and batten, like the cottages. Wallis and Jones staked out the land for the structure on the site of today's DelMar Park. The fireplace closely resembled the one in the living room at Penwern. The clubhouse was demolished after the Delavan Lake Golf Club and Delavan Lake Yacht Club merged in 1916 and commissioned a larger new clubhouse by another architect. There is speculation that a small apartment building at Terrace and Walworth avenues in downtown Delavan was built with lumber from the yacht club.¹⁴

Lake Geneva, the nearby summer retreat of the Wrigleys and other Chicago notables, was considered more prestigious than Delavan Lake, but Wright had only one commission there, a motor hotel designed in 1912. Motor hotels were unique at the time, but the Lake Geneva Hotel's shared bathrooms quickly dated its design. The hotel was demolished in 1970.

Many homes have been built, torn down, or replaced on Delavan Lake during the last century. Frank Lloyd Wright's five cottages have been altered to varying extents, but they live on as a testament to the work of their legendary architect and his relationship with Henry H. Wallis, his friend and client. An evening summer party on the veranda of any of these homes is no less a special occasion today than it was when Wright's lake clients entertained their first guests.

The homes that Frank Lloyd Wright designed on Delavan Lake are private residences. Except for the Jones and Wallis gatehouses, the homes are not visible from the road. The privacy of the owners and their property should be respected. Some of the homes

¹² The author found these references May 19, 2014 in microfilms at Delavan's Aram Public Library, based on an email from Brian Spencer.

¹³ The author would appreciate information about these projects, in care of *At the Lake*.

¹⁴ Interview with Allen Buzzell, June 2, 2014.

are occasionally open during tours by Frank Lloyd Wright Wisconsin and the Frank Lloyd Wright Building Conservancy, among others.

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