

## THE PATH OF FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT'S



# PENWERN

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Current owners embrace role  
as stewards of architect's work

In the late 1800s, wealthy Chicagoans looking for an escape from the heat and polluted air of the city in summer began to build cottages along the shores of the beautiful lakes in the southern Wisconsin area. Geneva Lake and Delavan Lake were two of the preferred sites for building their summer retreats.

These cottages were often designed by well-known architects, creating beautiful homes that could accommodate the family and their household staff from their city homes. They were often large homes so that they could entertain friends and business associates.

One such architect who designed five homes that were built along the south shore of Delavan Lake was Frank Lloyd Wright.

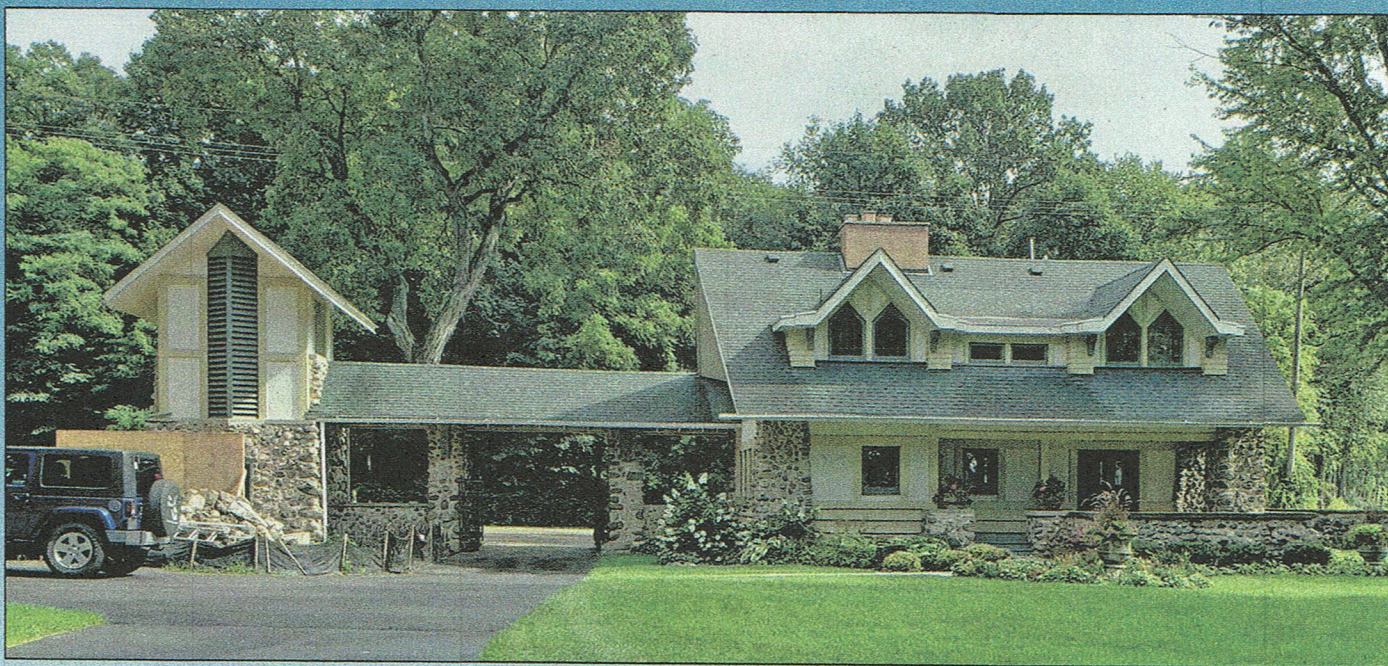
Wright was a Wisconsin native, born in Richland Center in 1867. He attended the University of Wisconsin-Madison for a time but left to pursue an internship in architecture. In Chicago he found that apprenticeship with well-known architects Adler and Sullivan receiving a five-year contract, which forbade independent work.



UPPER PHOTO: The beauty of Penwern can be seen when driving into the property. The unique style of the house with the lake in the background makes an impressive sight; ABOVE: John and Sue Major purchased Penwern as a summer home where they could relax with their children in 1994. They have spent the last 26 years restoring it to Frank Lloyd Wright's original vision.

SANDRA LANDEN MACHAJ *Spirit of Geneva Lakes*





During his time working at the firm, Wright worked primarily with Louis Sullivan.

The ban against independent work was something Wright ignored and began to work on projects on his own to supplement his income. Wright was not known for handling his finances well and often overspent for his own home and enjoyment. When Sullivan discovered these side jobs, Wright was forced to leave the firm. It is not known for certain if he was fired or resigned voluntarily.

## DEVELOPING HIS STYLE

From his home studio in Oak Park, Illinois, Wright continued to design projects for clients independently and began to develop his own style. He incorporated the natural materials of the earth especially stones and wood in his buildings and situated his projects based on the lay of the land.

Wright was an acquaintance of Henry H. Wallis, a real estate developer who, seeing the popularity of lake cottages on Delavan Lake in the late 1800s, made a business decision to purchase land along the south shore of the lake. He would divide this land into lots and sell them for the purpose of building lake homes. It is said that he would also recommend Wright as an architect to design the homes.

Five Frank Lloyd Wright Homes were built along South Shore drive. Using a cover of trees, each of these homes was hidden from the street, giving the residents privacy, but with an unobstructed view of the lake. Each of the homes was based on the lifestyle and needs of the owner.

One of the homes designed by Wright was for Fred B. Jones, a Chicago businessman who enjoyed getting away from the city to take in the beauty of the lakefront. His home

was named Penwern – a name it still retains today.

According to Mark Herzberg, author of “Frank Lloyd Wright’s Penwern, published in 2019” by the Wisconsin Historical Society Press, Pen-y-wern was the name of the cottage where Frank Lloyd Wright’s maternal grandmother – also named Jones but not believed to be related to Fred Jones – lived in Wales prior to immigrating to the United States. Wright included the name Penwern on the original drawings for the home.

## ELEMENTS HIS STYLE

Jones was described as a single man interested in sports, travel, and known as a serious card player. In designing the home for Jones, Wright had to keep in mind that Jones enjoyed hosting large parties and weekend guests. Everything had to be grand to accommodate his style.

While the estate would consist of four buildings, the first two designed were the main house and the boathouse in 1900. The main house was built in 1901 and the boathouse completed in 1902.

There were two additional buildings designed by Wright for the estate, the gatehouse and the barn, where the horses were kept, the carriage, and later automobiles. It also had a space for ice that would be harvested out of Delavan Lake in the winter.

The home was built using elements of design that would eventually be known as Wright’s Prairie Style. For Penwern he used natural building materials including rocks and wood. The rocks were used in the foundation while the wood siding provided horizontal lines. The buildings were two stories. The main house was built just for summer use as it, like most lake cottages of the time, did not

have any heat. Later a coal furnace was added by Jones to extend the seasonal use of the home.

The gatehouse, located at the entrance to the property was the home of the estate’s caretaker it was heated because the caretaker and his family lived there year round. When Jones came to visit in the winter he would stay in the gatehouse taking over one of the bedrooms.

A unique feature was the covered walkway over the porte-cochere, which led from the main house to the tower where the card room was waiting for the gentlemen to gather and enjoy their game of cards and their cigars. The tower, which is 2-½ stories high, was also used for water storage.

## NEW OWNERS

Fred B. Jones continued to own Penwern until his death in 1933. After his death, Jones’ estate was challenged by some of his cousins, leaving the home empty until it was purchased in 1938.

Owners of significantly historical homes often do not think of themselves as merely owners of the property but as stewards of the property, caring for it and preserving it for future generations. Burr and Peg Robbins who purchased the home in 1938 became the second stewards of Penwern. The Robbins family was the longest stewards of Penwern to date. Burr and Peg Robbins owned the property from its purchase in 1938 until 1983. They were followed by their children who maintained ownership until 1989.

Penwern, during the stewardship of the Robbins family, was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1974. In 1989 it was added to the State Register of Historic Places.

Located at the entrance to Penwern, the gatehouse guides visitors onto the property. The gatehouse is currently under renovation.

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During their time of stewardship the Robbins family changed the name of Penwern to Robbinswood but it quickly reverted to Penwern with the next owner. While the family sold the main house, they retained the gatehouse.

When the Robbins family was ready to divest Penwern, it was a neighbor, John O'Shea, who purchased the property. O'Shea was living in a neighboring Frank Lloyd Wright home four lots away.

O'Shea put the Penwern estate up for sale in 1992. It remained on the market until 1994 when Sue and John Major purchased the property.

"We were looking for a summer home where our kids could enjoy swimming and other activities in the summer," said John Major. "Sue fell in love with the property."

## NEEDING SOME TLC

They lived in Barrington Hills at the time and found this home to be a convenient distance from home. The home was not in the best of shape showing signs of neglect, including broken windows. They realized that the home would require some work to make it an inviting retreat for the family.

"We weren't afraid of the work as we had renovated our home in Barrington Hills," said John Major.

According to Sue Major, they purchased the home because they loved it, the land, and its location. They didn't purchase it because it was a Frank Lloyd Wright-designed home.

Their initial plan was to correct the structural problems to make the home safe and livable for the family. At that point they were not enamored with Frank Lloyd Wright but it was not long before they became interested in the famous architect.

"We received 18 Xeroxed copies of Wright's original drawings from the previous owner. We became interested in the history of the home and it was not long before a decision was made to restore it," said John Major.

Deciding to restore the home to Wright's original plans required removing previous owners additions and continuing to research all the unique features of the original design.

Because the house was built of wood, "There was a safe room built behind a cabinet in the billiards room to protect against fire," said John Major. It was here that it is believed important papers, jewelry and other valuables were stored to assure they would not be destroyed in case of fire.

## A 25-YEAR PROCESS

When the Majors hired contractor Bill Orkild to complete some of the repairs needed, he did not realize that he had taken on a job that has continued for over 25 years. His current project, according to the Majors, has been to renovate the gatehouse. While the gatehouse was not included in the Majors original purchase of Penwern in 1994, they were able to purchase it from Terry Robbins

Canty in 2001.

The boathouse, one of the original buildings, was destroyed in a fire in 1978. The fire was the work of an arsonist. After the fire only the original stone foundation still stood, although not in perfect condition. The Robbins family placed decking across the top but chose not to rebuild the boathouse.

When the Majors attempted to reconstruct the boathouse using Wright's plans they unfortunately ran into difficulty with the zoning board. Their request was originally denied by the zoning board. But this did not deter the Majors' team. With a copy of the original drawings and support from a variety of Wright scholars and architectural historians they continued to press until the boathouse could be rebuilt in the original Wright style.

While Susan and John Major have relocated from the Barrington area to California for their primary home, their children, Barbara and John, have become adults. They all still love Penwern and realize the importance of being a steward of such a beautiful and historical property.

"We spend about three months a year at Penwern," said John Major. "Penwern is Sue's house. It was her vision for the property that brought us here."

Many people appreciate the work that the Major family did in restoring the home to Wright's original vision as stewards of the property. They have assured it will be here for future generations.

Penwern as viewed from the lake. A boathouse (not visible) was set on fire by an arsonist in 1978. The owners at the time rebuilt the boathouse just as it appeared on Wright's drawings.

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