

Hyde Park History

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photo/Nancy Hays

SURF AT THE POINT IN WINTER

In 1987, to mark the 50th anniversary of Promontory Point, the Hyde Park Historical Society and Friends of the Parks produced a brief history of that landmark landscape. Today, when interest in the Point is so high, we think it timely to reproduce that document for your information...

Promontory Point 1937-1987

By John McDermott, Jr.
Edited by Victoria Post Ranney

Promontory Point, at 55th Street and Lake Michigan, is an historic landscape and the focal point of Chicago's Burnham Park. Conceived as part of Daniel Burnham's Plan of Chicago, in 1909, "the Point" was created by landfill in the 1920s and landscaped in 1937 by Alfred Caldwell in the Prairie School tradition. To Caldwell, the Promontory represented the meeting place of the vast prairie and the Great Lakes, and thus symbolized all that was unique about the landscape of Chicago. Today, Caldwell's design can still be recognized, and its spirit

makes Promontory Point a favorite retreat for Chicagoans from all walks of life.

An early Chicagoan walking east on 55th Street would have met the lake just east of Everett Avenue. Burnham called for a promontory to be built in the lake near 52nd Street, along with a series of islands and lagoons stretching from 12th Street to Jackson Park. In 1919, the City Council approved a plan to fill in the south lakeshore according to Burnham's plan.

The Commissioners of the South Park District hired the Construction Materials Corporation to construct a breakwater and fill the area inside it with sand. The filling operation, which began at 12th Street and progressed toward the south, reached 55th Street by 1924. There, and not at 52nd Street, it created a promontory.

By 1926, the 55th Street Promontory, as it came to be called, had been largely filled with sand and garbage. The latter component upset the Hyde Park Herald which complained not only that the rubbish was unsightly, but also that the wind blew sand and foul odors into the new apartment buildings nearby.

In 1917, there had been only one such building near 55th and the lake, the ten-story apartment house at 5490 South Shore Drive. But in the mid-1920's, the residential area to the west developed rapidly. The ▶❷

◀❶ huge Shoreland Hotel was completed in 1926, and the Flamingo opened in 1927. These buildings began a wave of hotel growth that eventually provided 20,000 rooms in East Hyde Park.

By 1929, grass was planted on the Promontory. Leif Erickson Drive (now Lake Shore Drive) was opened to traffic and trees were planted on the portion of landfill west of the Drive. But construction did not proceed until the consolidated Chicago Park District was formed in 1934. At about that time, Fifth Ward Alderman James Cusak began to receive complaints that the Promontory was being used as a makeshift parking lot by the nearby Shoreland Hotel. In an interview shortly before his death in 1986, Cusak said that he had used his influence with the Park District's new general superintendent, George T. Donoghue, to have the parking lot removed and the Promontory developed.

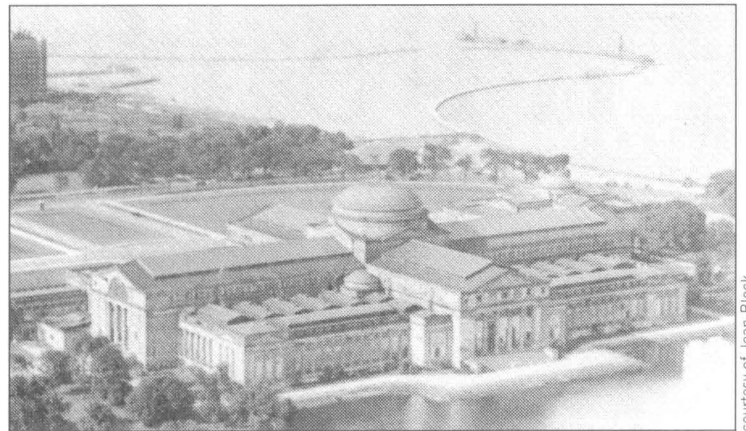
Whether or not Cusak's influence played a role, the Promontory, in 1935, was designated to receive funds and workers from the Works Progress Administration. It was one of 67 Illinois parks which the WPA assisted during the Depression. Thanks to the WPA, the Point was developed as we know it today.

The planning was assigned to Alfred Caldwell, an architect and landscape architect on the Park District staff. From 1926 to 1931, Caldwell had assisted Jens Jensen, the great landscape architect of Chicago's West Park system and the pre-eminent figure in the Prairie School movement in his field. Caldwell shared Jensen's devotion to the midwestern landscape and his practice of using only native plants in his parks.

Caldwell began by adding soil, raising the meadow to its present height and creating a hill where a shelter would be built. By the summer of 1936, water and sewer pipes had been laid, and the underpass below the Drive was completed.

Caldwell's planting plan, dated September 1, 1936, relied on indigenous plants. It included 241 American elms, 50 American lindens, and 637 prairie crabapples, as well as sugar maples, hop hornbeams, and two varieties of hawthorn, the tree which had been one of Jensen's trademarks.

The thick groves of trees and shrubs formed a ring around a large central meadow which sloped downward gradually toward the path. The ring was interrupted at the north, allowing a spectacular view of the downtown skyline, and at the south, where the vast manufacturing districts of South Chicago and Indiana were visible on the horizon. The Point includes two distinct experiences: the lofty meadow, from which the rocks along the water cannot be seen, and the rocks themselves, from which the meadow cannot be seen. Plantings on the outer edge of the



courtesy of Jean Block

The outline of Promontory Point is clearly visible in the shape of the breakwater under construction in the lake, captured in this rare aerial photograph from the early 1920's. Within a few years, the area inside the seawall was filled with sand and rubbish, and eventually became part of Burnham Park. The lone high-rise apartment building near the lake is 5490 South Shore Drive, built in 1917.



Chicago Park District

An aerial view from September, 1936, showing construction of the Promontory well underway. The paths are in place, the underpass has been built, and tons of new soil have been added.



Chicago Park District



View from the roof of the Flamingo Hotel, May 1938.
The Shelter is finished, the ground has been graded and levelled
and some trees have been planted.

photo/Nancy Hays



A concert at the fieldhouse, 1980's.

peninsula once reinforced this distinction.

Caldwell said in a 1986 interview that he had conceived of the Promontory as “a place you go to and you are thrilled—a beautiful experience, a joy, a delight.” He sought to convey “a sense of space and a sense of the power of nature and the power of the sea.”

A member of the Park District’s architectural staff, E. V. Buchsbaum, designed the shelter (now known as the fieldhouse). Construction began in 1936 and was finished the next year. The walls were made of Lannon stone, quarried in Wisconsin. Caldwell, an architectural modernist, tolerated the building though he felt it was too heavy for the site and of little architectural value. Buchsbaum felt he was creating a “picturesque, distinctive building” and that its playful allusion to a castle or a lighthouse were appropriate for the setting.

After 1937, the area received various small improvements. Benches were erected in 1938. Boulders called for in Caldwell’s plan were set in place in March, 1939. Also in that year, the David Wallach Memorial, a bronze sculpture of a resting fawn set on a marble fountain, was dedicated. Little is known about David Wallach who, at his death in 1894 left a bequest for a fountain in a park for “man and beast.” True to his wish, the monument has a drinking fountain at ground level which has been enjoyed by generations of local beasts.

In the late 1930’s and 40’s, the Shelter became a busy center for square dances, scout meetings and other activities. In 1953, the U.S. Army leased land from the Park District for a Nike missile base on a Jackson Park meadow. Soon afterward, it took part of the Point for a radar site. The towers stood south of the fieldhouse on a large tract surrounded by a barbed wire fence. One of the towers reached 150 feet in height, and all of them dwarfed the turret of the fieldhouse.

Many neighborhood residents resented the radar towers, but protests became vocal only in the Vietnam era. After the towers finally came down in 1971, there was a victory rally with the slogan, “We’ve won our Point!”

For its 50th anniversary in 1987, a group of landscape architects carefully surveyed the Point, comparing the original features executed under Caldwell with the landscape of today. Though few of the original shrubs and trees remain, and lake damage has badly eroded the perimeter, the basic features and open spirit of the design can be seen. Park District officials and the public, recognizing the place of Promontory Point in Chicago’s past and its value in the present, should work to restore, for future generations, this historic prairie landscape on the lake. **HP**



PHOTOGRAPHS AND FILMS SOUGHT

Beach Street Educational Films is making a movie about World War II servicemen who were refugees from Germany and Austria during the 30s and 40s. Because Hyde Park received many of these refugees, the film makers have asked the Society for help. Julia Rath, producer of the film, would like to have pictures from that time of any such refugees who served in the armed forces during the war. You can reach her at 847-677-6018, or email at JWRath@netzero.net, if you have questions.

PAUL CORNELL AWARDS

Congratulations Winners—2001

At the Society's annual dinner meeting in February, Bert Benade, chairman of the Paul Cornell Awards Committee, presented awards to:

REBECCA JANOWITZ
for initiating and very successfully mentoring the Annual 57th Street Children's Book Fair

INTERNATIONAL HOUSE
for continuously promoting the Rockefeller concern for world understanding in this community where in 1932 he built this historic presence.

FARR ASSOCIATES—ARCHITECTS
HENRY AND SONS—CONTRACTORS
BEN AND LAURA KING—OWNERS
for bringing back to its original glory the King's 1873 home at 4812 South Woodlawn Avenue

(Other members of the Awards committee were HPHS Board members Stephen Treffman and Devereaux Bowley.)



Greetings from Chicago.

Jackson Park Beach on a Sunday afternoon.

(c.1908, Publisher: Koelling & Klappenbach, Chicago)

JACKSON PARK BEACH ON A SUNDAY AFTERNOON

Looking north from about 56th Street one can see narrow breakwaters that once stood where Promontory Point would be built out into the lake.



CALDWELL WITH HIS STUDENTS—IIT CATALYST, SUMMER 1998

ABOUT ALFRED CALDWELL

By Stephen A. Treffman

Alfred Caldwell, the landscape designer of Promontory Point, was a poet, landscape architect, civil engineer, city planner, philosopher and distinguished professor. He was born in St. Louis, Missouri in 1903. In 1909 his family moved to Chicago. He attended Ravenswood Elementary School and Lake View High School, where he became fascinated by the study of botany and Latin. After a brief but unhappy stint in the landscape architecture program at the University of Illinois, Caldwell managed to land a job in 1924 as an assistant to Jens Jensen, the highly respected Chicago landscape architect. Jensen would ultimately characterize Caldwell as a "genius." In 1927, Caldwell befriended and was profoundly influenced by Frank Lloyd Wright.

The onset of the Depression broke up Jensen's firm and from 1931 to 1934, Caldwell was in private practice as a landscape architect. From 1934 to 1936 he served Dubuque, Iowa as its Superintendent of Parks and created the renowned Eagle Point Park there. He returned to Chicago in 1936 to join the Chicago Park District as a landscape designer. It was during this period that he worked out the design for Promontory Point and planned the Lily Pool and Rookery in Lincoln Park. In the course of this work he

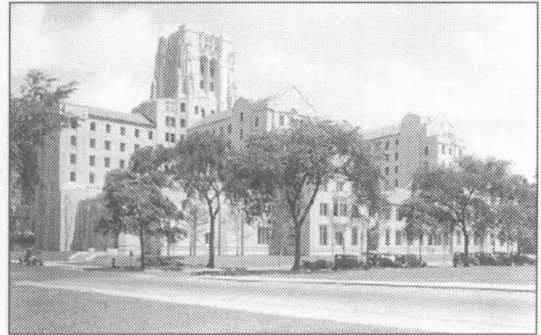
met Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, who later played a major role in the evolution of Caldwell's career. Caldwell left the Park District to join the U.S. War Department in 1940 and worked as a civil engineer on the design and construction of several military training posts. At the end of the war, Mies called upon Caldwell to join the architecture faculty at the Illinois Institute of Technology. In 1945 IIT awarded Caldwell a Bachelor of Science degree in Architecture and, in 1948, a Master of Science degree in City Planning. His major collaborative work with Mies was as the landscape designer for the IIT campus. He abruptly resigned from IIT in 1960 in protest of Mies' ouster as official architect of the school.

From 1960 to 1964 Caldwell was employed by the Chicago Planning Commission. He returned to higher education as a Visiting Professor at the Virginia Polytechnic Institute in 1965 and later that year was appointed Professor of Architecture at the University of Southern California, retiring in 1973. He maintained a private practice until 1981 when he rejoined IIT as the Ludwig Mies van der Rohe Professor of Architecture. Proclaimed the last of the Prairie School landscape architects, he died at his home in Bristol, Wisconsin in 1998.

Caldwell's plans for the landscaping of Promontory Point were very precise. Each tree and shrub was carefully located and designated by its proper Latin ▶ 6

◀⑤ name. Not usually recognized is that his plans included not only the area popularly considered the Point, that is, the land east of the South Outer (Leif Ericson) Drive at 55th Street, but also the park areas on the west side of the Drive from about 5450 to 5555 South Shore Drive. Parenthetically, it is at 5530-32 South Shore Drive that the Mies designed, and aptly named, Promontory Apartments now stands. Although many changes in the landscaping in this area have occurred since Caldwell's day, a few trees surviving from his original planting some 65 years ago can still be found, the largest number of them probably along South Shore Drive. The lake has undermined the base of the limestone revetment around the Point to the extent that, at some spots, gaps large enough to swallow a small child have emerged between some of the seawall's stone blocks. **HP**

Sources on Caldwell: The standard source, including an extensive bibliography, is Dennis E. Domer, ed., Alfred Caldwell: The Life and Work of a Prairie School Landscape Architect (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997). Domer's obituary for Caldwell may be found in the IIT Catalyst (Summer, 1998). See also Werner Blaser, Architecture and Nature: The Work of Alfred Caldwell (Basil and Boston: Birkhauser Verlag, 1984). The Art Institute of Chicago library has a transcript of a lengthy interview conducted with Caldwell.



An Historical Exhibit of INTERNATIONAL HOUSE OF CHICAGO

at the
Hyde Park Historical Society
5529 S. Lake Park
Saturdays and Sundays through the summer
2pm-4pm

Photos, documents and objects from the
beginnings of the International House
movement to the present.



photo/Nancy Hays



Looking Back A Bit...

May, 1888

HARPER'S NEW MONTHLY MAGAZINE

"Studies of the Great West - Chicago"

by Charles Dudley Warner,

Washington Park, with a slightly rolling surface and beautiful landscape gardening, has not only fine driveways, but a splendid road set apart for horsemen. This is a dirt road, always well sprinkled, and the equestrian has a chance besides of galloping over springy turf. Water is now so abundantly provided that the park is kept green in the driest season. From anywhere on the south side one may mount his horse or enter his carriage for a turn of fifteen or twenty miles on what is equivalent to a country road, that is to say, an English country road.

On the lake side of the park are the grounds of the Washington Park Racing club, with a splendid track and stables and other facilities which, I am told, exceed anything in the country of the kind. The clubhouse itself is very handsome and commodious, is open to members and their families summer and winter, and makes a favorite rendezvous for that part of society which shares its privileges. Besides its large dining and dancing halls, it has elegant apartments set apart for ladies. In winter its hospitable rooms and big wood fires are very attractive after a zero drive.

The city is rich in a few specimens of private houses by Mr. Richardson...so simple so noble, so full of comfort, sentiment, unique, having what may be called a charming personality. As to interiors, there has been plenty of money spent in Chicago in mere show, but, after all, I know of no other city that has more character and individuality in its interiors, more evidences of personal refinement and taste....due, I imagine mainly to the taste of the women, for while there are plenty of men who have taste, there are very few who have the leisure to indulge it.

Along the Michigan Avenue water front and down the lake shore to Hyde Park, on the Illinois Central and the Michigan Central and their connections, the foreign and local trains pass incessantly (I believe over sixty a day)...and further down, the tracks run between Jackson Park and Washington Park, crossing at grade the 500 foot wide boulevard, which connects these great parks and makes them one.

These tracks and trains...are a serious evil and danger, and the annoyance is increased by the multiplicity of street railways and the swiftly running cable cars, which are a constant threat to the timid....In time the railroads must come in on elevated viaducts...

September 24, 1942

HYDE PARK HERALD

At last, it has happened! The Chicago Beach Hotel, probably the most famous of Chicago's many hostelries, has been commandeered by the U.S. Government for use as a base hospital. Federal Judge Michael Igoe signed a court order which was served upon the hotel corporation yesterday authorizing the U.S. Army to take possession. Meantime Stephen Clark, manager of the hotel, is organizing an information bureau for the benefit of guests who must seek new housing. The 300 families will have about 30 days in which to find accommodations. Many have been living in the hotel since it was opened in 1920 and others were occupants of the original Chicago Beach Hotel, built in 1893 and razed after the present building was completed.

October 14, 1887

HYDE PARK HERALD

Weather permitting, the Nickle Plate baseball nine plays with the Pullman's Plate nine tomorrow afternoon on the latter's grounds. The Herald wishes to inform the Nickle Plate nine, that if they want to be fortunate again in having ladies as spectators at any of their future games, that they should cease their profane and disgraceful language while in the field, as they used while playing the Prairie Kings last Saturday, at which occasion a number of ladies were present. If you desire the interest of the people you must act like gentlemen.

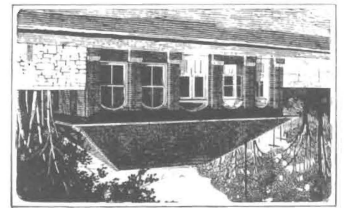
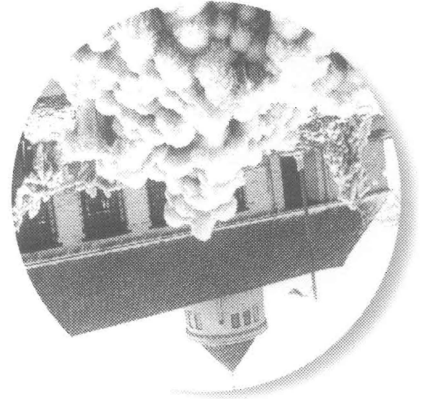
Coming...in our Fall issue

**HYDE PARK AT THE BEGINNING
OF WORLD WAR II:
CAMPUS REMINISCENCES**

by Yaffa Draznin



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photo/Nancy Hays

A frisbee player enjoys the Point despite the radar towers which the U.S. Army maintained there from 1953-1971.

This Newsletter is published by the Hyde Park Historical Society, a not-for-profit organization founded in 1975 to record, preserve, and promote public interest in the history of Hyde Park. Its headquarters, located in an 1893 restored cable car station at 5529 South Lake Park Avenue, houses local exhibits. It is open to the public on Saturdays and Sundays from 2 until 4pm.

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HPHS On-Line!

If you have access to the internet, our society's newly created website can be found at www.hydeparkhistory.org.