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Part I: A Short History Of Estate Development In Lake Forest

With the coming of the railroad, it became possible for the residents of growing urban centers like Chicago to live in the country while

working in the city. Daily commuting to the close-in suburban communities of Hyde Park, Oak Park and Evanston seems to have

begun almost as soon as rail service was established. In the case of Lake Forest, however, its relatively greater distance from

Chicago inhibited its growth as a commuter suburb until well into the twentieth century. Instead, it evolved as a place of refuge for

Chicago residents during the summer time, and also to some extent on weekends. At the same time, Lake Forest became a suburban

town of permanent residents.

When the first train reached the vicinity of Lake Forest in January 1855, the town did not exist. In fact, the city was not officially

incorporated until 1861. The idea of laying out and plating the city was only conceived in 1850 by a group of men from Chicago whose

primary aim was to found an education institution affiliated with the Presbyterian Church. In that year they formed the Lake Forest

Association which, when sufficient subscriptions were in hand, proceeded to purchase land, hire a landscape gardener named Jed

Hotchkiss to layout the street pattern and a surveyor to plat the blocks. With proceeds from the sale of lots, the Association was then

able to found the university and also make provision for male and female academies.

The first sale of land took place in July 1857. When the list of persons making purchases is

compared with the names of those persons

who built in early Lake Forest, and with the names of those who voted on early questions, it is clear that there were three types of

persons purchasing Association lands. Some merely were interested in assisting the Association in its educational aims, or perhaps

only in speculating. Whatever the case, this group never seriously intended to build in Lake Forest. Another group apparently bought

with the objective of building homes for use primarily as summer residences while continuing to live permanently in Chicago. The last

group bought with the aim of settling permanently in Lake Forest. A few of these permanent residents may actually have commuted

daily or weekly to Chicago from the beginning, though this was certainly the exception until after the Chicago fire, and was hardly

commonplace until the turn of the century.

In 1859 the first properties were developed within a block or two of the railroad station. Construction of houses and associated

buildings continued east along Deerpath up to Lake Avenue and south from Deerpath along University (now Sheridan road). During

the early years no one built more than one-third of a mile from the railroad station and, as living on the lake bluff was not thought

desirable, only two families settled there up to the time of the Chicago fire. These were the William Mays and the T. J. Kirks who

erected homes on adjoining parcels near the north end of the town in about 1870.

From the beginning these early suburban estates, whether owned by permanent or summer residents, took on a special character.

They generally consisted of the house proper located perhaps a hundred feet or so from the street on lots normally of two or more

acres that also contained one or more other buildings, usually a carriage house and perhaps a greenhouse or servants' cottage.

Because Lake Forest with its curving, sinuous streets had been conceived as a picturesque

suburban village, the spacious grounds--

rarely less than two acres-- were left open as lawns and gardens without fences or walls. There were trees, of course, but these were

widely spaced.

During the two decades following the Chicago fire the new residents continued to build in a fan-shaped area beginning a block east of

the railroad station and expanding outward to the cemetery on the north and the female academy on the south. By the 1880s the virtues

of building on the Lake Michigan bluffs were recognized and soon there were estates overlooking the lake from the cemetery to the

female academy.

In 1890, well before the blocks of the original plat east of the railroad were filled in with estates, Henry Ives Cobb, the Chicago architect

opened up a whole new area for estate development. In that year he built on a large rectangular parcel fronting on Green Bay Road

and running west down the gentle slope toward the Skokie River. Soon he was joined by William Smith and David Jones in 1894 and

1895 respectively who built estates from Cobb's designs on parcels adjoining him to the north. In 1892 William Hubbard founded an

estate on the east side of Green Bay Road far north of Cobb, Jones and Smith at what is now the north edge of the city.

By the mid-1890's Lake Forest had become the most desirable suburb near Chicago for wealthy individuals in search of sites for

second homes. Thus it was that during the two decades from 1895 to 1917, the notably wealthy of Chicago began to build sizeable

estates in Lake Forest. It was then that such names as McCormick, Swift, Armour, Ryerson, Cudahay and Dick began to be heard in

the city.

In east Lake Forest, where the McCormick's built, development continued first on the bluffs south of the female academy until about

1900 when all sites were taken. Then the remaining interior blocks east of Sheridan Road and south of Elm; and east of Washington

and north of Rosemary were built up, first the ones to the north and then after 1910, the ones to the south. It was during this period that

many of the developmental patterns of twentieth-century Lake Forest were established. One of these was the purchase of existing

estates in desirable areas, such as on the lake bluffs, then the demolition and rebuilding of the estate. Of course, some rebuilding was

necessary during all periods of Lake Forest's history because of fires. Then there was the transfer of estate owners from one part of

Lake Forest to another: William Smith sold his estate on Lake Avenue when in 1894 he built next to Cobb on Green Bay Road and in

1915 Edward Ryerson gave up his estate north of Deerpath in order to build a much larger place at the south end of the city, to

mention but two examples. Finally there was the tendency to build new estates on property subdivided from earlier estates. While

much of this kind of subdivision was carried out merely to make room for a son, daughter or other close relative, some estates were

reduced in size either for profit or to provide space for new families as desirable land for estate building gradually became scarce.

This was also the period when estates were built west of the railroad station, often on substantial acreage. As opposed to east Lake

Forest, where all or most of the land had been acquired before 1860 by the Lake Forest Association with the aim of resale and

development, the land west of the railroad was by the 1890s part of working farms. Because the latter often were simply not for sale,

estate development had necessarily to work around existing farms with the result that the estates tended to be more scattered in the

west. This is the reason why the first estates on Green Bay Road after those of Cobb , Smith and Jones were built far to the north as

that was the only place proximate to the railroad station where land was available. In 1897-98 three estates were laid out there by

Howard Van Doren Shaw, one for his father and two others for Drs. William Cassellberry and Nathan Davis. About 1906 the Atteridge

farm south of Shaw was offered for sale and between 1907 and 1910 its lands were subdivided into long strips running west from

Green Bay Road to the Skokie River and on them estate buildings were erected. No estates were built along Green Bay Road from

Walter Brewster's place on the north to Green Bay Road on the south until 1924 when the farm there was sold and subdivided. A large

rectangle of land south of Deerpath between Green Bay Road and Western Avenue was acquired about 1897 and divided into four

large estates which were developed between 1898 and 1903. East of these estates were the lands of the Onwentsia Club founded in

1896 and laid out on the Cobbs estate which the club purchased from the architect.

On average, the Green Bay Road estates were about three times larger in acreage than those in east Lake Forest. This meant that

along Green Bay Road there was room for woods, meadows, horses and possibly some livestock in addition to the usual estate

house, outbuildings, lawns and gardens. East of the railroad some livestock had been kept on the larger estates up to the 1890s.

An important visual alteration in the character of Lake Forest began to appear in the east side estates during the 1800s. The open

character of the landscape and streetscape with widely spaced trees, lawns and gardens was now gradually changed to one of

enclosure walls with formal gateways and dense plantings were introduced to screen the estates from the street as a new interest in

privacy began to manifest itself. To this end the new estate houses were also set well back from the street wherever possible. From

1898 on the estates along Green Bay Road were laid out in the same manner.

At the same time, a new kind of estate made its appearance. Louis F. Swift, who built in 1898 on the west side of Green Bay Road

south of the Onwentsia Club, introduced the type. It consisted of an estate of the older type located deep within extensive agricultural

lands. Thus there came to Lake Forest the concept of the gentleman farmer. Other farm estates were laid out as land became

available in the area between the first and second Skokie Rivers. Among the more prominent owners of farm estates were A. B. Dick,

Arthur Meeker and Charles King. The largest and most splendid of the farm estates was "Melody Farm" begun by J. Ogden Armour in

1908, most of which, however, still lies outside the present city limits of Lake Forest [ed.: now annexed].

After World War I most estate development east of the railroad took place on land subdivided from earlier estates, or else on existing

estates which were rebuilt. To be sure, a few new estates were created on land that had not previously been developed as estates.

The same was true for the area along Green Bay Road, however, because of the sale of the farm at Deerpath and Green Bay Road, it

was possible for Noble Judah, Owen Jones and William Clow to build new, relatively large estates in the mid-1920s. West of the

Skokie River a number of farm estates were also established on former farmlands. The largest of them, and probably the largest

estate ever built within the present city limits of Lake Forest, was begun by Albert Lasker in 1926 in the southwest corner of the city.

Estate development came gradually to a halt during the 1930s while, at the same time, some of the estates began to be redeveloped

as middle-class subdivisions with houses built on lots of an acre or less in size. This trend was greatly accelerated after World War II

so that today most of the historic estates have been subdivided. In the case of the older estates east of the railroad, the result has

been to ring the former estates with one and two story suburban homes opening directly onto

the streets as in most suburban

communities. Where the original estates were relatively large, either new streets following picturesque principles akin to those of the

original plan have been introduced into the interior of the blocks, or else the estates have been divided into relatively large lots of over

an acre in size with private drives giving access to interior lots. In most cases, the estate house has been sold separately on a parcel

of generous but not estate size. In other cases, however, it has been demolished.

As the long narrow estates along Green Bay Road did not lend themselves to the introduction of new streets, many of them were

subdivided into very large lots reached by long private driveways. Farther west, the farm estates were usually large enough to permit

their subdivision into relatively small lots of one acre or less served by a new curvilinear street system. But some of them have been

broken up into large parcels on which have been built what can only be described as small estates.

Part II: The Historical Significance Of The Lake Forest Estates

Lake Forest's claim to historic distinction rests on many factors both physical and social. It is a suburban town begun primarily to

support the establishment of a church-related educational institution. Few suburban towns have been founded for such a purpose.

A part of the present city is distinctive physically not only because of its picturesque street plan but as well because of the early date

when it was laid out. Of the suburban communities in America that were planned in the nineteenth century according to the picturesque

principles worked out for English gardens and American rural cemeteries and parks, Lake Forest is one of the very earliest coming

only five years after the first such town in America, Llewellyn Park, NJ., founded in 1852. The Lake Forest plan is also notable

because its architect, the landscape gardener Jed Hotchkiss, went on to create such other

important picturesque places in the

Midwest as Bellefontaine cemetery in St. Louis. The general concept reflected in the Hotchkiss plan is of the city in a park, its streets

laid out in an organic manner that takes into account such natural features as the ravines and lake bluffs instead of forcing the street

plan into the formal straightjacket of the gridiron.

Lake Forest is equally famous for the many notable persons who chose to make their permanent or summer homes there. By World

War I the list of property owners in Lake Forest read like a Who's Who of the famous and wealthy in Chicago. It was these same

persons who built up large portions of Lake Forest with estates, first following the picturesque ideal of naturalistic park-like planning,

then the more aristocratic concept of the estate as a private and secluded refuge from the world and, finally, the estate as part of a

scientifically operated farm.

In addition, Lake Forest is also noted for the quality and character of its architecture whether erected for residential, religious,

educational or public purposes. Although the names of the earliest architects working for Lake Forest clients are still largely unknown,

it is probable they were among the foremost of their profession practicing in Chicago. Probably the earliest architect who we now

know to have worked in Lake Forest was Henry Ives Cobb who built his estate there in 1890. (Note: We are speaking here only of

residential buildings. Architects of such early buildings as the Academy are known to us.) Other noted Lake Forest architects were

Charles Frost and Howard Van Doren Shaw, both of whom also maintained estates there. Even such well-known eastern architects as

James Gamble Rogers and Charles Platt were called upon to design for Lake Forest clients. In short, the quality of the architecture in

Lake Forest was very high indeed, and the quality of its construction equally so, if only

because the clients could afford the best.

It is these same factors that give Lake Forest its historical significance, that also make the estate areas of residential Lake Forest

historically and visually distinctive. In addition, it was the concentration in Lake Forest, probably more so than in any other community

west of the Hudson River, of a vast assemblage of impressive estates laid out by important architects for some of most influential

families of Chicago that makes both Lake Forest and its estates especially significant. Couple with that the unusual situation of Lake

Forest high on the bluffs overlooking an inland sea and its equally rare early picturesque plan, and the result is a unique place of

special historical and physical distinction.