

Eye on Evanston: Thoughts on Design | Coming of age in the 20s

Part one of four on the proposed Northwest Evanston Historic District
by [Jack Weiss, Design Evanston](#) October 12th, 2022

In December 1988 the State of Illinois Historic Preservation Office asked the City of Evanston to suggest additional preservation districts. The Evanston Lakeshore Historic District had been created in September 1980 and the Ridge Historic District in March 1983. Gwen Sommers Yant, then Evanston's Preservation Coordinator, suggested two possible districts: northeast Evanston and northwest Evanston.

Anne Earle, one of Evanston's highly respected architectural historians, jumped on the opportunity to recommend northwest Evanston. Before writing her 12-page proposal she had to "1. Walk all the streets in the proposed area to determine the boundaries and to get a sense of the buildings that could be included as contributing structures; 2. Examine the building permits of possible contributing buildings in the proposed area; and 3. Study the history of the area to understand how the area developed," her colleague, Mary McWilliams, wrote in an email.

Because it was a proposal, not a full-blown historic district nomination, no structures were photographed. Earle's proposal title also defines a time frame that begins in the late 1890s and ends in the early 1930s. The National Park Service has ruled that all buildings listed in the National Register of Historic Places have to be at least 50 years old. The cutoff date then would have been 1938.

As we read the document today, readers must keep in mind that much has changed in northwest Evanston since Earle's proposal was written. Also, many homes we admire today, although present at the time of the proposal, were newer than the 1938 "cutoff" and were therefore not included.

Although the State Preservation Office endorsed the proposal, the City of Evanston, for unknown reasons, never considered it, and a nomination for a Northwest Evanston Historic District was never created. Earle's proposal has rarely been seen since it was written.

When Design Evanston published Evanston: 150 Years 150 Places in 2013, the richness of northwest Evanston's architecture did not escape our attention. Seven landmark homes shown on Earle's map are included in the book. A subsequent 2015 survey documented 59 landmarks in her proposed historic district. I've included photographs of some of those to add visual interest to this story.

Over the next several weeks, this column will reprint the entire proposal as originally written. Due to its length, it will be split into four parts. Part one, below, covers Earle's introduction to the study and information about the historic context of the proposed Northwest Evanston Historic District.

Coming of Age in the Twenties: The Development of Northwest Evanston in the First Third of the Twentieth Century

By Anne O. Earle

Theme, Time Period, Geographic Limits

The proposed Northwest Evanston Historic District is an area of owner-occupied single-family houses built during the first third of the twentieth century. Eighty per cent of approximately 680 houses within the proposed district were constructed during the building boom between World War I and the early years of the Great Depression. The establishment of the new residential community at the edge of a nineteenth century suburb began in 1895, when a complementary trio of houses was built on an undeveloped block at the edge of North Evanston. Prairie Style houses, the most architecturally significant within the proposed district, and derivative foursquares followed. The large Prairie Style houses on large Lincoln Street lots set the tone for future development of the district. But it is the twenties houses that give the proposed district its dominant character. Various revival style houses and bungalows, houses designed by local architects, contractor houses, and a few mail order houses illustrate the variety of houses built for people with a wide range of incomes.

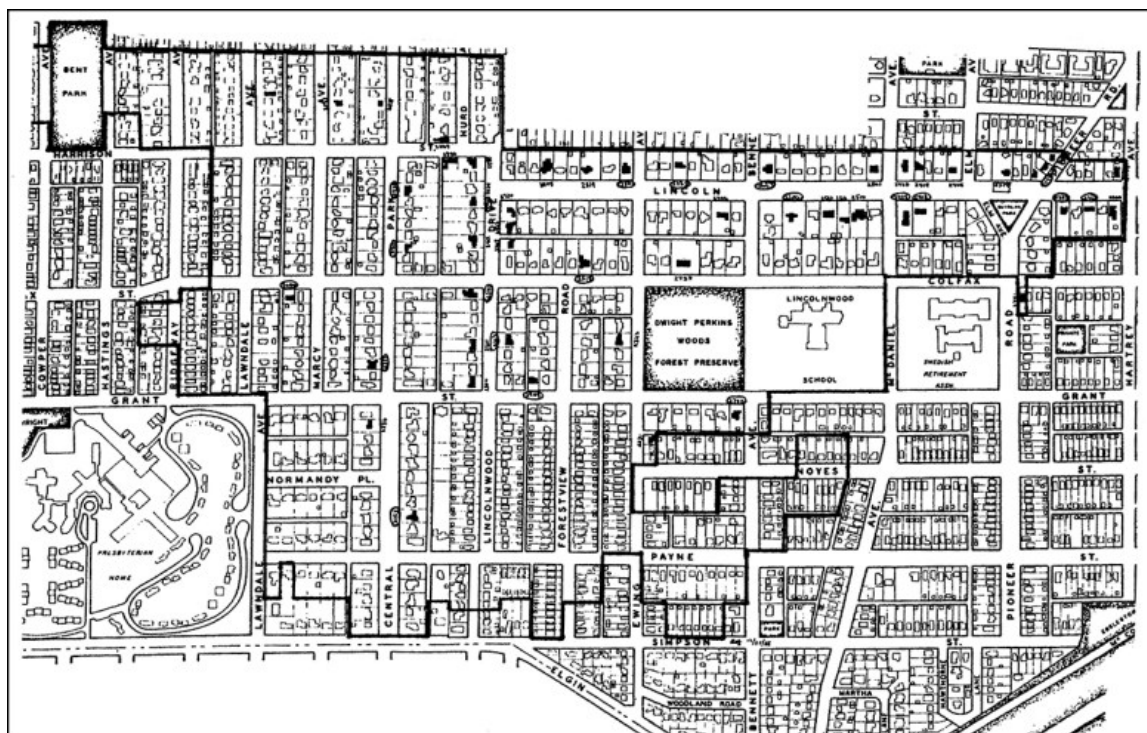


2444-2450 Pioneer Road, local landmark. Architect: Robert C. Spencer. 1895. Credit: Jack Weiss

The proposed Northwest Evanston Historic District extends more than a half mile from north to south and about a mile from east to west and encompasses an area about three-eighths of a square mile. Age, integrity and uniformity of setbacks distinguish the proposed district from the surrounding area. Most houses north and south of the proposed district were built about 1940 or after World War II. Many houses east and west of the proposed district have poor integrity and lack uniform setbacks. Volume and concentration of period resources distinguish the proposed district from other areas of Evanston. Within the district, nearly all the houses on many blocks were built within three to six years of each other. In contrast, in the Evanston Lakeshore Historic District and in the Evanston Ridge Historic District, Prairie Style houses were built next to Queen Anne and Italianate houses, and twenties houses were built as infill or to replace older houses. Groups of twenties houses in other areas of Evanston are found in smaller numbers and less variety than within the proposed district.

Historic Context

The proposed Northwest Evanston Historic District lies southwest of and adjacent to the original village of North Evanston. North Evanston was platted in 1868 around the North Western Railway tracks at Central Street. A mile to the southeast was the Town of Evanston, which had been platted in 1854 and incorporated in 1863. In 1872 Evanston annexed the lakefront area to the east of North Evanston, and in 1873 Evanston began construction of waterworks on its northern lakeshore. In 1874 North Evanston and the eastern part of the proposed Northwest Evanston Historic District were annexed to Evanston in order to get pure water.



Evanston Landmarks and Illinois Historic Structures Survey Houses Within the Proposed Northwest Evanston Historic District. Landmarked homes shown in black. Credit: Anne O. Earle

The eastern part of the proposed Northwest Evanston Historic District east of McDaniel Avenue had been subdivided in 1873. The area east of Ewing Avenue and south of Colfax was platted in 1874 and 1875. But despite subdivision and platting, the areas remained undeveloped for another two decades, and the southeastern portion of the proposed district had few houses until the late twenties. Construction of houses in the northeastern arm, however, began in 1894 and was quite active in the first decade of this century. Lincolnwood Subdivision, which includes both sides of Lincoln and the north side of Colfax between McDaniel and Ewing Avenues, was platted in 1909. The first house in the subdivision was built the following year, and others soon followed.



Rapp House, 2733 Colfax St., local landmark. Architect: Robert Seyfarth. 1916. Credit: The Lakota Group

The block of Lincoln west of Ewing Avenue was subdivided in 1914. The following year a ten-block area in the western part of the proposed district was subdivided. In 1916 all the land west of present-day Lincolnwood Drive and Forestview Road was annexed to Evanston. By the end of 1917 most of the proposed district west of Ewing Avenue and north of Grant had been subdivided, but only eight houses had been built on scattered lots. Between 1921 and 1927 most of the proposed district west of Ewing Avenue and south of Grant was subdivided. Development followed subdivision, generally extending from north to south. By the onset of the Depression in 1929, most of the houses and the only church (Northminster Presbyterian) within the proposed district had been built. The majority of houses had been constructed between 1925 and 1929, and the area was nearly fully built up.

Most of the houses east of Ewing Avenue face north or south, reflecting the pattern of streets laid out in the 1870s as an extension of the village of North Evanston. Most of the houses west of Ewing Avenue face east or west, a consequence of twentieth century platting that reflects nineteenth century land ownership patterns of the once wooded area.

Numerous oaks, especially on Marcy Avenue and in Quinlan Park, are reminders that oak trees abounded in the area before it was developed. Elm trees planted on the parkways at the time of development still arch gracefully over a number of streets within the district. The unusually large number of surviving elms add another dimension to the district's high level of integrity.

After the conclusion of this four-part series, in December I'll be providing a follow-up story on the benefits of historic districts. If this and the next three essays pique your interest, here are two useful sources:

For information on local landmark districts go to: <https://savingplaces.org/stories/10-on-tuesday-10-benefits-of-establishing-a-local-historic-district>

For information on the National Register of Historic Places go to:

<https://savingplaces.org/stories/10-tips-to-build-your-national-register-knowledge>

Design Evanston's "Eye on Evanston" series focuses on Evanston's design history and advocates for good design. Visit designevanston.org to learn more about the organization.

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