

# THE GRIFFIN NEWSLETTER

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Please email news items to the  
editor.

## TWENTY-FIRST ANNUAL MEETING

SATURDAY/SUNDAY, 13-14 JUNE 2020

JOIN US IN ELMHURST and CRYSTAL LAKE, ILLINOIS

## CANCELLED! DUE TO CORONAVIRUS

**MEETING:** The board members of the Griffin Society are saddened to announce the cancellation of the twenty-first annual meeting of the Walter Burley Griffin Society of America, scheduled for Saturday, 13 June in Elmhurst, Illinois, and Sunday, 14 June in Crystal Lake, Illinois, with plans to visit the historic site of the American Terra Cotta Company and the house of William Gates, the company's owner. We hope that Elmhurst will be the setting for the next annual meeting, whenever it may be safe to hold it. We will post any new information on our website and send it as a summer newsletter to you, our faithful members.

The morning session as planned, was to be held at Elmhurst College, with talks on Griffin's planning by Prof. James Weirick, the American Terra Cotta Company by Teco expert Sharon Darling, and the lives of the Griffin clan in Elmhurst by Prof. Paul Kruty. The afternoon tour would include, among a variety of buildings, houses by Griffin and Wright. Other highlights included the McCormick house by Mies van der Rohe at the Elmhurst Museum of Art and the nationally known collection of artworks by the Chicago Imagists at the Buehler Library of Elmhurst College. As the long-time home town of the Griffin family, Elmhurst has much to offer to the Griffin aficionado. The Sunday morning visit to the former headquarters and factory of the American Terra Cotta company in Crystal Lake, Illinois, includes a new museum display of the company where decoration for thousands of buildings was produced as well as the famed Teco pottery.

### MEETING DEVELOPMENTS:

Tim Pearson died in his sleep on April 4th. Tim had generously and enthusiastically agreed to host the Griffin Society to his spectacular estate, the home of William D. Gates, president of the American Terra Cotta Company, as part of our Sunday morning excursion to Crystal Lake. Before his move to Crystal Lake, Tim had restored and refurbished Wright's 1911 Balch house in Oak Park, and was always generous to open his treasure to student groups. We send our condolences to his family.

Wright's Henderson house in Elmhurst was sold in early April, after being on the market for many years. It was owned for decades by the Fahey family, who generously allowed us to tour the house in 2000 at the first annual meeting of the Griffin Society. Patrick Fahey had agreed to host our visit again this year if the house hadn't sold. Published reports claim that the new owners bought the house because of their love of FLW, and we sincerely hope this is true. We look forward to the possibility of keeping this wonderful building, with its strong connections to WBG, on a rescheduled Griffin meeting in Elmhurst.

## GRIFFIN'S SOLID ROCK HOUSE THREATENED

The fate of Griffin's ground-breaking house for William F. Tempel, "Solid Rock," hangs precariously in the balance. It is currently for sale for the price of the lot on which it stands, in a locality, Winnetka, with virtually no local landmark protection. Its becoming victim of a "teardown" would be a catastrophe. As one of Griffin's most important buildings, it deserves to be recognized, preserved, and restored. With its additions—by Prairie School architect Barry Byrne and executed for the original client—it remains an outstanding example of early modern American architecture. But more than that, it is a seminal work in Griffin's development. Of poured-in-place, reinforced concrete, it is Griffin's first building to use his patented window hardware. Its binary plan, with public and private spaces separated by a circulation corridor, became the prototype for much of Griffin's subsequent architecture. Griffin's terrace atop Solid Rock's flat roof preceded the similar work of Le Corbusier and the architects of the International Style by a decade.

The demolition more than a dozen years ago of the Marsh house, built the year before Solid Rock around the corner on Winnetka Road, was a tragic loss to the Griffin canon and to Chicagoland's architecture. But Solid Rock is so much more important in the history of American architecture. We welcome your thoughts and suggestions.



Solid Rock in 1911

## MEMBERSHIP RENEWAL

If you haven't done so, please renew your annual membership at this time. The majority of members renew when registering for the annual meeting, which has been cancelled. A membership form is enclosed for your convenience.



Solid Rock today

## THE GRIFFIN SOCIETY AND THE C. L. JENKS HOUSE

The process of nominating the Jenks summer house (1907) on Lauderdale Lakes in southern Wisconsin is proceeding nicely. With our successful funding of preservationist John Waters to place the Sloane house on the National Register, the Society moved to try to bring a similar outcome to the threatened Jenks house. Following a resolution passed at last June's board meeting to fund such an operation, the Society called for proposals and selected Traci E. Schnell, Historical Consulting, LLC, Brown Deer, WI, for her nomination proposal of 12 October 2019. Since then, Traci has met with the owner and completed the elaborate National Register questionnaire required by the State of Wisconsin before the actual document can be written. We are happy to report that "The Chancellor L. Jr. and Janet Jenks Summer Cottage" was approved as "potentially eligible" for the National Register of Historic Places on 12 March 2020.



Jenks house as photographed by Mati Maldre

## UPDATE: COOLEY HOUSE

The news that a massive tornado (EF-3) had ripped through Monroe, Louisiana, on Monday, 13 April, destroying some 300 houses, sent us scurrying to find out the fate of Griffin's Gilbert Cooley house, designed in 1908 and built as redesigned in 1926. Sharon Jones, a Cooley House Foundation board member and past visitor to our meetings, reported that the house came through the ordeal mostly unscathed. It sits on the main thoroughfare running south from Monroe's town center, across the street from the Ouachita river. The destructive path of the tornado began a short distance to the south. As Sharon wrote, visiting the site a day later, "Police cars are stationed at the corner & no one is allowed to go south because the damage starts about a block south. The Masur Museum of Art, which is a long block south, is closed due to damage."

Shortly after, Brian M. Davis, Executive Director of the Louisiana Trust for Historic Preservation and board member of the Cooley House Foundation, corroborated Sharon's report and offered an update on the restoration work of this Louisiana treasure and Griffin's only remaining building in the South.



Catherine Cooper conducting paint analyses

According to Brian, "Painters are currently working on the exterior (fascia and windows) and work should resume soon on the interior paint analysis. Our goal is to paint the 'great room' as it originally was, and encourage more fundraising for the restoration."

"The paint analysis is one of four goals of a grant from the National Trust's Cynthia Woods Mitchell Fund for Historic Interiors. The Cooley House is on the Louisiana Trust's 'Louisiana's Most Endangered Places List.' We were able to receive a \$10,000 grant (with 1:1 match) for interior work."

Brian reported the four goals to be:

1. Interior historic paint analysis.
2. Work to support completion of new electrical system.
3. Work to support restoration of historic light fixtures.
4. Work to support the replacement of cork flooring on first floor.

Brian also sent several photographs of the restoration work in progress. The interior picture shows Catherine Cooper conducting the interior paint analysis. Catherine is with the National Center for Preservation and Training (NCPTT) on the campus of Northwestern State University of Louisiana in Natchitoches, LA. According to Brian Davis, she is finding variations of ochres, greens, and rich earth tones in the roughly 75 samples she has taken.



Exterior work on the Cooley house



Labeled paint samples at the fireplace

## UPDATE: RICKER HOUSE IN GRINNELL

By Ryan Ferguson, Grinnell, Iowa

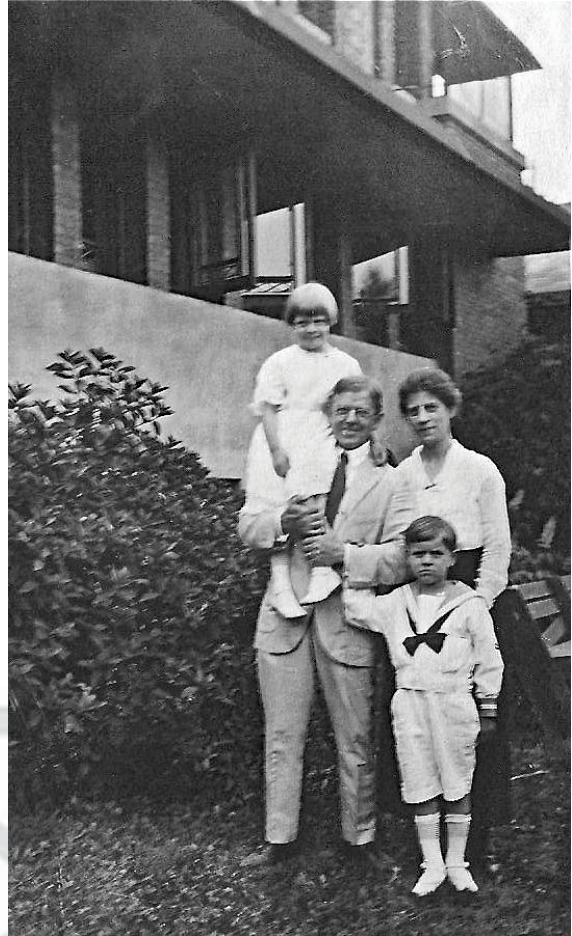
*Editor's Note: Carrie and Ryan Ferguson and their three children have lived in Griffin's Ricker House in Grinnell, Iowa, for the past two years. Society members will remember the annual meeting held in Grinnell in 2005, and the reception held there when the house was owned by Grinnell College. Its return to private ownership has brought with it a new set of joys and issues, the subject of Ryan's account offered here. He wishes to thank retired Grinnell College professor Dan Kaiser, whose "Ricker House Chronicles" blog includes an account of the Spanish flu in Grinnell. It can be found at: <https://kaiser355.wordpress.com/>*

Two years ago my wife Carrie and I purchased the Ricker House in Grinnell, Iowa, the 1911-1912 work of Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahony Griffin. I'm sitting in the veranda as I type this, perhaps as a cocoon, with the global pandemic happening as a backdrop to my thoughts. Mabel and B. J. Ricker, the original owners and home's namesake, possibly felt the same way a century ago as another influenza epidemic, the "Spanish flu," served as their backdrop. Recalling the condition of the house as we found it and the work we've done to it, however, I can't help but also ponder more philosophically our present situation.

Four months after we moved in, Carrie gave birth to our third daughter in a birthing tub in the sun-filled master bedroom. Almost exactly 100 years before that, an Australian immigrant in Chicago named Sarah Murray succumbed to the Spanish flu. She left three children without a mother, two of which—a twin boy and girl—were put up for adoption by their father. Mabel and Ben found out about the orphaned twins and adopted them. Pandemics change lives. In this case, these young twins moved from the bustling city of Chicago to the rural town of Grinnell, suddenly had different parents, no longer lived with an older brother, and even got new names. Named Edith and Ivor by their biological mother, they were renamed Elizabeth and Edward by the Rickers.

Walter Burley Griffin is noted for designing open floorplans, which perhaps can be best appreciated by active children. I'd like to imagine that Elizabeth and Edward ran in the same excited loop around the main floor that our kids do. Assuming they were like our daughters, their perspective of what's important is different than that of us parents. And, if Mabel

and Ben were at all like Carrie and myself, the children helped remind them that love and family are more important than anything, a beautiful house in a small Iowa town being no exception. The Rickers hopefully had this perspective as financial misfortune a few years later caused them to leave Grinnell for California.



Ben, Mabel, Elizabeth and Edward Ricker, 1919

Our daughters haven't recognized, or at least have never commented on, the beauty of the modern Stickley furniture that came with the house when we purchased it from Grinnell College, which had furnished the home as temporary guest accommodations. What the kids continue to notice, by force, is that the horizontal framing of Stickley furniture is at the perfect height to hit a child's head and is most unforgiving. Those pieces are now relegated to lower traffic areas and a sectional sofa from Ikea has taken their place, still atop one of the multiple gorgeous hand-woven rugs the college included in the sale. Our kids take no more precaution to not spill on the nice rugs than they would to not spill on an Ikea rug. In front of the couch, where we enjoy board game nights, is the bare concrete outer hearth floor of the

fireplace. I tore up the 70s glossy brown tiles over a year ago and it likely will remain without replacement tiles for another year, one of many examples of my enthusiasm and over-optimism for how quickly I'd be able to get a project done. The kids don't notice or care. Nor do they notice the brick lower mantle that also isn't original and might someday fall victim to my over-optimism. About the only original thing about the fireplace that Elizabeth and Edward Ricker would have run by a century ago is the gorgeous Japanese-motif tile mosaic by Marion Mahony Griffin. It's arguably the highlight of the entire home. As we raise three daughters, it's come in handy as a way to talk about powerful women who bucked the trend of what was expected of them. Did Elizabeth, too, know that the tile scene was designed by a talented, ground-breaking female architect?



The Ferguson children, 2020

Truthfully speaking, more times than not I've ignored that beautiful scene, intent on the missing wood ceiling trim overhead—the victim of the most recent of two unfortunate water “events” the home suffered while the college owned it. We purchased the house with half of the living room ceiling plaster missing. We found a skilled plasterer who helped us match the living room ceiling to how it might have been textured originally based on pictures of other WBG homes and original plaster color staining samples in

the attic of our own house. The ceiling plaster turned out beautifully. The wood trim, on the other hand, has been resting for almost two years in the shop of a local craftsman who is as busy as he is talented.

While our running kids notice the sharp corners of the beautiful dining room table we inherited with the sale, they don't notice the spliced-in dining room woodwork where Elizabeth and Edward would have been running past a beautiful built-in buffet that was later dismantled for unknown reasons, some of the doors of which lay in our attic, covered in decades of dust.

The kids notice the space to run, the big yard, the basement playroom, the drumset and keyboard in front of MMG's tile installation over the fireplace of the study. Mostly they notice the time we spend together. They notice how much they get to see my parents living in a nearby town, the reason we looked in Grinnell to begin with.

I was originally so enamored with the home and all its uniqueness that I downplayed the flaws that came along with it. The decorative details of Marion Mahony Griffin drew me in initially: the outside panel mosaics, the windows, the two interior mosaics. I embraced the Australians and other architecture aficionados who showed up at our door or in the yard. This honeymoon lasted about six months before I started to feel the burden of the day-to-day projects I had previously ignored. What began as a gorgeous architectural treasure I felt so lucky to call home started to become the old house that never let me ignore it. Always a project; always something distracting me from spending time with my family. I had days where I started thinking I had made a mistake. Why didn't I buy a newer cookie-cutter house? Or why didn't we stay traveling in the motorhome we lived in for a year before buying the home?

There's a recurring theme that plays out in my head: we long for what we don't have and we take for granted what we do have. This theme has become especially apparent at the time we're going through now. I hope a positive outcome of the global health crisis is the realization that we need to focus on the most worthwhile priorities in life: loving those around us to the fullest and not taking for granted our short lives.

As for the house: the kids, Carrie, and I have seemed to settle on the same feelings at this point despite having reached them in different ways. We love the

house as the background to our lives. It's our safe place, our fun place. It's an inspiring place. It's home. I still have multiple projects: the fridge is finally in the kitchen instead of in the hallway. The master bathroom has lost its 70s glossy tiles, with white subway installed tiles in their place, a decision validated by the recent discovery of what I believe is a piece of the original white ceramic tile in one of the bathroom walls. The four corner sleeping porches were originally open; wooden framing and storm windows were added by 1916 that took away the dramatic Prairie Style component. While I'm considering removing the storms for the sake of curb appeal, Carrie wants to leave them for practical reasons. Of course we've done rounds of insulating, roof repairs, and re-routed plumbing to avoid future freeze damage.

The projects won't end for a while; however I'm now making sure to include plenty of time with the kids as to not burn myself out. We're grateful we get to spend our days here. I'm back to noticing and appreciating more all the details of the home that made me fall in love in the first place. And someday, it won't be our home anymore, just like for many families before us, including the Rickers. That's OK. A house should never be more than a backdrop for what's truly important in life anyway. I hope we can all remember that after Covid-19 joins the Spanish Flu in the history books.

## NEWS FROM AUSTRALIA

Adrienne Kabos from the Walter Burley Griffin Society Incorporated, Sydney, reports that "2021 is a big year for the Griffin story with the centenary of Castlecrag and the 150th anniversary of Marion's birth. We are planning quite a few events." Watch for a list of these happenings with appropriate dates in the next newsletter. News about the wildfires in Australia in January concerned many of us. Apparently no Griffin buildings were in danger. In a note of 11 February, Adrienne explained, "The fires have been horrific and so extensive on a scale previously unthinkable. Fortunately heavy rains (the heaviest in 22 years) in the last five days have put many of the fires out. The sun returned today and with the fire situation much improved it felt like the real summer had just started." Meanwhile, the country continues to remain in virtual lockdown, a situation shared by all of us here in the Griffins' native land.

## GRIFFIN SOCIETY PUBLICATIONS

**On His Own: Walter Burley Griffin's First Two Houses; The Gables, Diamonds and Flowing Spaces of 1906 and 1907.** By Paul Kruty, with contributions by Richard H. Berry, Tannys Langdon and Paul E. Sprague. 2017.

**Rock Crest/Rock Glen, Mason City, Iowa: The American Masterwork of Marion M. and Walter B. Griffin.** Essays by Robert E. McCoy, Paul Kruty, Paul E. Sprague and James Weirick. 2014.

**Walter Burley Griffin and the Stinson Memorial Library: Modernism Comes to Main Street.** By Paul Kruty. 2010.

**Marion Mahony and Millikin Place: Creating a Prairie School Masterpiece.** By Paul Kruty and Paul E. Sprague. 2007.

Copies of the exquisite posters hand-printed on fine paper by Peter Kruty Editions of Brooklyn, New York, are still available for the past six meetings, including Mason City, Madison, Beverly, Edwardsville, Park Ridge, and Decatur.

To order copies of each, please see our website: [www.wbgriffinsociety.org](http://www.wbgriffinsociety.org)

## MEMBERSHIP

The Walter Burley Griffin Society of America is a not-for-profit, tax-exempt corporation under IRS Code 501 (c)(3). We invite you to become a Friend of the Society. For annual dues of \$25.00, you will receive a periodic newsletter keeping you abreast of the Society's activities, such as lectures, tours, exhibitions, and other events related to the Griffins' work. (\$20.00 for seniors 65 and older.) All donations are tax-deductible.

If you wish to join the Society or renew your membership in the Society, please fill out the following form and mail it to us at the address below - or email us that you are attending the Annual Meeting and you can pay for both membership and meeting at that time.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

City: \_\_\_\_\_ State: \_\_\_\_\_ Zip: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone Number: \_\_\_\_\_

Email Address: \_\_\_\_\_

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