

Presidential Address
**A Murder, a Car, a Genius, and a House:
Frank Lloyd Wright's Westcott House**

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For Ohioans, the name "Wright" understandably suggests "Orville" or "Wilbur." But it also might imply "Frank Lloyd," for twelve of Mr. Wright's buildings stand in our state. Eleven were built between 1948 and 1957. But the twelfth, the Burton and Orpha Westcott House in Springfield, was built in 1907-08 at the peak of Wright's "Prairie Style" work done out of his home and studio in Oak Park, Illinois.

The basic story of the Westcott house's origins was well told in a 1978 article by Stephen Siek. But the house now is under restoration, and new research fleshes out the story.

A Murder

A little after 4:00 a.m., on July 14, 1869, 43-year-old Mrs. Elizabeth Ormsbee, a widow, left the first-floor bedroom she shared with her mother, an "aged widow lady" named Mrs. Barrett, and headed into the dining room of the family's two-story house. The Ormsbee home was located at the eastern edge of town, one hundred yards south of the National Road, with only the city cemetery lying beyond to the east. The address was East High Street; a few blocks to the west lay the city's wealthiest and most fashionable block.

Mrs. Ormsbee's husband had died the year before, and her two sons, Benjamin and Richard slept upstairs. For a while, a man had stayed in the house overnight, but that had ended. As she left the room, she and her mother exchanged a few words about household matters for the day. A few moments after leaving her bedroom, her mother heard a scream, followed by a shot, and then her daughter's voice saying, "Oh Mother." Mrs. Barrett and young Benjamin raced into the front room, to find Mrs. Ormsbee doubled over on the window sill, dead. The window was propped open with a two-foot long stick of firewood, and when Benjamin looked out he saw a man, about one hundred yards away in an orchard, walking away and looking back at the Ormsbee window. The man walked farther, then turned left through a potato patch and into Warder's Woods.

Mrs. Ormsbee had died of a gunshot wound. Dr. J. J. Rodgers eventually concluded that the ball had entered around her collarbone, and then traveled into her lung, suggesting that it struck “while the deceased was stooping,” though Rodgers and (his brother) Dr. Robert Rodgers never found the ball, despite removing every one of Mrs. Ormsbee’s organs. The local newspaper called the murder one of the most cold-blooded, causeless and inhuman murders ever recorded. The man had not been attacked – he could easily have escaped, and must have seen that only a helpless woman was likely to pursue him—and the killing of that helpless woman was simply prompted by devilish malignity.¹

Mrs. Ormsbee’s family was well connected. She had two well-known brothers-in-law in the city, and her step-daughter, Ellen Ormsbee, had married Benjamin Warder², one of the city’s most prominent businessmen and a future partner of Asa Bushnell, the governor of Ohio. The youngest son, Richard, would remain in Springfield and was raised in the Warder household, later becoming an attorney.

Unsurprisingly, the city council met that very week to augment the police force. But no assailant ever was indicted, much less convicted, for the murder. By the turn of the century, the Rodgers family and the Warder families were immensely prominent and wealthy folks, who carried with them the remembrance of the unsolved murder of one of their own. As for the house and land, in 1881 Richard sold the Ormsbee family property for \$5,000 to another local businessman, John S. Crowell, in whose building Collier’s magazine was published. But Crowell would not sell the site for another 20 years.

A Genius

Frank Lloyd Wright turned two the summer of Mrs. Ormsbee’s death. Born into a Welsh clan that deeply valued both education and individuality, he received from his mother a love of design, as well as a self-confidence that would meet few equals in his long life. After two semesters at the University of Wisconsin, he moved to Chicago and spent a year working in the architectural firm of Joseph Ilesbee. He worked for Adler and Sullivan for several years, until he broke with Louis Sullivan, and then started his own firm in 1893, working out of his home and studio in Oak Park, Illinois.³ Wright’s style flowered in his now independent practice, and in the first decade of the 1900s he produced masterpieces of prairie architecture, like the Willits house in Highland Park, Illinois; the Susan Lawrence Dana House in Springfield, Illinois; the Frederick Robie House in Chicago; the Darwin

Martin House in New York; and Unity Temple in Oak Park, Illinois⁴ Three signed articles in *Ladies' Home Journal* made him well known among even middle class Americans, just as his essay "In the Cause of Architecture," published in *The Architectural Record* in 1908, secured his standing among American architects.⁵

Sometime after 1903, however, Wright's personal life entered a crisis. Mamah Cheney (born June 1869) and her husband moved to Oak Park in 1903, where she became friends with Kitty Wright, and Frank designed the Cheney's new home. Wright's famous affair with Mamah Cheney probably began before his trip to Japan in 1905. But whenever it started, sometime between 1905 and 1908 Wright concluded that he could not continue in his marriage. During those same turbulent years, very important Wright structures like Unity Temple and the Robie House were constructed. And so was Wright's only prairie house in Ohio, the Westcott House in Springfield.

Burton and Orpha Westcott moved to Springfield in 1903, while she was expecting their second child. They probably were uncertain about their ultimate plans. Born in 1868, the year after Wright and the year before Mrs. Ormsbee's murder, Burton came from the leading business family in Richmond Indiana, about sixty miles west of Springfield on the National Road. In Richmond, he and his father, his brothers, and his brothers-in-law owned and operated several businesses, with the relatives serving in various combinations as officers or managers. In 1903 the family's Hoosier Seed Drill Co. merged with others to form the American Seeding Machine Co., a \$15,000,000 trust that absorbed five such businesses in Ohio, Indiana, New York, and Kentucky.⁶ Later that year, the company, now dubbed "The Grain Drill Trust" by *The New York Times*, announced wage and salary cuts.⁷ This merger mirrored the nearly simultaneous merger of harvester and reaper companies into the new International Harvester, which also had plants in Springfield. Though chartered in New Jersey, American Seeding Machine Co.'s headquarters were in Springfield. Burton relocated to Springfield as treasurer of the new company, along with his brother-in-law, James Carr, as vice president. For at least one year, all the company's officers lived on the same block on East High Street.

A House

The Westcotts – Burton and Orpha and their two children – maintained residences in both Richmond and Springfield for a time, and lived at three different Springfield addresses within a few years. Within five

years the Carrs had moved back to Richmond. But ultimately the Westcotts stayed and decided to build a house. We do not know how they obtained the services of Frank Lloyd Wright – no correspondence between Wright and the Westcotts survives in the Wright archives. But at least three possibilities present themselves. Like most industrial Midwestern cities, prominent Springfield businessmen had strong ties to the Chicago area. (For example, Warder and Bushnell's third partner was John Glessner of Chicago). Another more direct link could have lain through Springfield's newest architect, W. K. Schilling. Arriving in Springfield by 1906 and lived just two blocks from the Westcotts. He had worked for Louis Sullivan in the early 1890s, when Wright worked as Sullivan's chief draftsman. The likeliest explanation, though, is that the Westcotts simply saw Wright's *Ladies' Home Journal* designs and were intrigued. Wright's 1901 article in particular might have caught their eye. It described a large block with four houses – the Westcott households in Richmond lived on such a block with four mansions. And the upstairs in that plan bears resemblances to the upstairs eventually designed for the Westcotts, including unusual matching bedrooms of identical size.

John Crowell was advertising the last spacious lot to be sold on East High Street – the Ormsbee property he had obtained in 1881. It had not sold, however, and so he divided it into two lots of unequal size. The smaller one sold, and in the summer of 1907 the Westcotts bought the other. The lot in question was 290 feet in length, and 75 feet wide, and unfortunately the fashionable East High Street exposure was the 75 foot. side. Wright's initial design failed to work for the lot, and the final design was rotated 90 degrees to make the adjustment, with a long pergola connecting the house to a carriage house in the back, making use of the lengthy eastern line of the property. Indeed, one of the most striking aspects of this project was Wright's adaptation to the unusual shape of the lot.

Although uncertainty over the contract date persists, construction clearly began in the fall of 1907 and was completed after the summer of 1908. At least two fires occurred during construction, and Wright himself seems to have stayed with the Westcotts for at least part of the time. The last surviving electrician who worked on the project, William Hicks, told Stephen Siek in 1976⁸ that one worker took Wright aside and told him that he knew of his work, but was surprised at this house, thinking that Wright only did bungalows. (This may have been a reference to the "Small House" article in *Ladies' Home Journal*). According to the story, Wright responded that this was a "bungalow with a college education." One surviving photo

shows the house as it looked nearing completion in mid-1908. The front lawn urns –the largest Wright ever designed for a residence – have not been installed, and the severely terraced lawn has few plantings, but this only serves to underscore the sharp lines and the classic prairie style, accented by the unscreened sleeping porches and Japanese style windows.

Wright's "In the Cause of Architecture" article appeared in early 1908, with a photo display that included the Westcott house. The house was also included in the famous Wasmuth portfolio published in 1910.⁹ But otherwise, Wright passed out of the Westcotts' lives. He did not mention the Westcott House in later writings, such as his *Autobiography*, but it did appear in the first full-scale, scholarly retrospective of Wright's work, the invaluable *In the Nature of Materials*, published by Henry-Russell Hitchcock in 1942, which included photos of the house by noted Wright photographer, Gilman Lane.

As to Wright's personal life, the years of the Westcott construction corresponded to the disintegration of his marriage. He asked Catherine for a divorce, but she insisted on a year's delay. In 1909 Wright closed the Oak Park studio and left for Europe with Mamah Cheney, to tour and to establish his continental reputation. Upon this return to America, Wright relocated to Wisconsin and built his first Taliesin, where, in August 1914, Mamah, her two children, and four others were murdered by Wright's mentally unstable Barbadian cook.

We still know only fragments about the Westcotts. By 1909 they had moved into the house, with their daughter Jeane and son John, and two middle-aged, second-generation Irish servants named Nora and Margaret. All six had bedrooms upstairs. An African-American chauffeur named Robert Jackson, also lived on site at first, probably in the carriage house.¹⁰ Orpha Westcott had a progressive streak – her good friend was Dr. Benedetta Titlow, the only woman physician in the city. A graduate of the Women's Medical College of Pennsylvania, she would serve in the French Legion during World War I, and would deliver Orpha's grandchildren in the 1920s. Orpha also liked travel, and not long after moving into the new house, they were off for one of their annual trips to Europe.¹¹ Their return trip was delayed by family illness – a good thing, since they were booked on the *Titanic*. Burton too was a progressive – he served on the original city commission when that body formed in 1913 and remained there most of the next decade, becoming mayor after the world war.

But as a businessman, his passion undoubtedly was the automobile.

A Car

Though impossible to confirm, oral tradition has it that Burton's father John disliked automobiles and resisted making them. But after John's death in 1907, son Burton was free to convert the Westcott Carriage Co. in Richmond into the Westcott Motor Car Co. The first Westcott car appeared in 1909 and clearly was a two-seater Westcott carriage with an added single cylinder, air-cooled engine. The "Model 40" utilized a Continental 40hp engine, and sold for around \$2,000.

The Westcott car placed second in a 100-mile race at Indianapolis in 1910 and could average 75 miles per hour.¹² The company entered a car in the first Indianapolis 500 in 1911, a messy affair that killed one "mechanician" and injured several other participants. Mechanic John Wood was hurled from his car, and most cars swerved around him safely. But Harry Knight, piloting the Westcott car, drove into the inner fence to avoid hitting the injured mechanic. In so doing, however, he and his mechanic, John Glover were injured, and their car also careened into another vehicle. Knight eventually was hailed as a hero for wrecking his own vehicle in order to spare the injured John Wood.¹³ According to descendants, the family lost interest in racing after a raceway death, probably Knight's in a race in Columbus in 1913.¹⁴

Westcott cars were assembled from parts manufactured elsewhere. Engines came from Continental, bodies from Muncie, Indiana. By 1915, four-cylinder models had been replaced by six-cylinder cars, and sedans were added to the line. Westcotts were sold in agencies as far away as New England and Florida. It was known as "The Car with the Longer Life."

In 1916 Burton moved the company from Richmond to Springfield. Westcotts were made in a building shared with the Davis Motor Car Co., and when the room proved inadequate, the Davis Co. attempted to find additional space elsewhere in Richmond. But when that effort failed, the Westcott Motor Car Co. moved instead into buildings abandoned by the American Seeding Machine Co. in Springfield.¹⁵

During the same years, Springfield overthrew its city council system for a city commission system. A local group of businessmen backed five men, including Burton Westcott, to run for the new commission. Four of the five were elected, along with one other, Burton's own next door neighbor, John Hoppes.

Certainly the social highlight of these years was the marriage of the Westcotts' daughter, Jean Elise Westcott, to Lt. Richard Mast Rodgers, in a wedding in the front room of the house in September 1918. The wedding linked by marriage three of the city's most prominent family names, Mast, Rodgers, and Westcott. Surrounded by yellow chrysanthemums, palms, and orchids, the bride dressed in "a stunning suit of blue broadcloth" married the wealthy and dashing Rodgers, a pilot with the Royal Canadian Air Force, who was related to the same two Drs. Rodgers who autopsied Elizabeth Ormsbee forty-nine years earlier, after her death on the same lot as the wedding. In attendance were several of the city's more prominent citizens: Orpha's friend Dr. Titlow, the widow of the original president of American Seeding Machine, Mrs. Buchwalter; all the leading figures in the Rodgers clan, as well as the various Westcott relatives from Richmond. In the crowd was a young Margaret Bauman, later the mother of Jonathan Winters.¹⁶

In many ways, their lives must have been idyllic. But it would not last.

Westcott served as mayor in 1920-1921 and was credited by some with quelling riots that year. By this time his motor car company dominated his work life. When they opened the company in Springfield in 1916, they planned on turning out 1,000 cars per year, and sales of Westcott cars peaked in 1920 at 1,850. The company built an extension on to its factory, and then a new warehouse, in early 1921.¹⁷ But the 1920s were tough for the country's hundreds of smaller automobile manufacturers. Undercut by Ford and the mergers that were sweeping the industry, Burton held out. Having participated in the turn of century mergers that consolidated the agricultural machinery business, he surely must have sensed what was occurring. It was merge, face buyout, or risk ruin.

New models followed in 1922, but price reductions became necessary in 1923, and then the bottom fell out. The company's assets declined by 30% in one year, employees dropped from 210 to 140, and production declined from 1376 to 1057. Such occurred throughout the country. Tragically, Orpha died in Philadelphia following routine surgery in 1923, with Burton and Dr. Titlow at her side. The company was bought by a syndicate before the end of the year. Burton had gambled everything – and lost.

As if all this were not enough, Burton's health also began to fail in early 1925. By Christmas he was seriously ill, and he died on January 10, 1926, at age 57. It was front page news: "B. J. Westcott Dies After Long

Illness – End Comes at Residence in East High St.” Business leaders lauded him, and the local editors called him “one of the outstanding citizens whose deeds themselves stand as monuments to their activities.”¹⁸ They did not note that his house had been designed by Frank Lloyd Wright, nor did they disclose that at the time of his death, the house already had reverted to a local bank.¹⁹

NOTES

1. *Springfield Republic*, July 14, 1869.
2. Benjamin Head Warder (1824-1894) married Ellen Nancy Ormsbee in December 1867.
3. Neil Levine, *The Architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996), 2-3.
4. Meryle Secret, *Frank Lloyd Wright* (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), 124-156, 156-201.
5. Frank Lloyd Wright, “A Home in a Prairie Town,” *Ladies’ Home Journal*, Feb 1901; “A Small House with Lots of Room in It,” July 1901, and “A Fireproof house for \$5000,” April 1907. Wright’s work also appeared among many others in two other *Ladies’ Home Journal* articles, “Inside of a hundred Suburban Homes,” in November 1902 and January 1903. “In the Cause of Architecture” appeared in the *Architectural Record* of March 1908.
6. *New York Times*, March 14, 1903.
7. *New York Times*, December 13, 1903.
8. Stephen Siek, “Frank Lloyd Wright’s Westcott House in Springfield,” *Ohio History* 87 (1978): 276-293. William Hicks told this story to Professor Siek in December 1976.
9. *Ausgefurhte Bauten und Entwurfe von Frank Lloyd Wright*. Ernest Wasmuth, 1910.
10. Westcott household, 1910 and 1920 U.S. Census; interview with Florence Rodgers, 2003; interview with Jay Westcott, November 15, 2001.
11. Interview with Nannette Jackson, 2003.
12. *Richmond Morning News*, Sept. 27, 1910.
13. E.g., see *New York Times*, June 18, 1911.
14. *New York Times*, July 6, 1913, p. 1; Jay Westcott interview, November 15, 2001.
15. *Evening Item*, April 25, 1916.
16. *Springfield Daily News*, September 25, 1918. I am indebted to Corinne Smith of Springfield for this article.
17. Westcott Collection, Clark County Historical Society.
18. *Springfield Daily News*, January 10, 1926.
19. Clark County Deed Book, v. 162, p. 233.

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