

Frank Lloyd Wright's Biography

According to Meryle Secrest, author of *Frank Lloyd Wright - A Biography*, William Cary Wright (1825-1904) married Anna Lloyd Jones (1839-1923) on August 17, 1865. William Wright was fourteen years her senior and had been previously married to Permelia Wright who died in childbirth in 1863. Three children from William's first marriage - Elizabeth Amelia, almost three years of age, George Irving, age five, and Charles Williams, age seven, were put in the care of their maternal grandmother. In May of 1867, William and Anna moved from Lone Rock to Richland Center, where he was hired to oversee the construction of the Central Baptist Society's new building. One month later on June 8, 1867, Anna gave birth to Frank Lincoln Wright.

In March of 1869, the family moved to McGregor, Iowa. There William Wright worked initially as part owner of a music department in a general store and later as temporary pastor of the Baptist church. Frank Lloyd Wright had two sisters, Mary Jane (sometimes referred to as Jennie) was born in 1869. A brief return to Wisconsin was followed by a move to Pawtucket, Rhode Island in 1871 where Wright was a pastor. In 1874, the family moved to Weymouth, Massachusetts, for yet another Baptist pastorate. Margaret Ellen (referred to as Maginel) was born in 1877; in the same year the family returned to Wisconsin. With a passion for music, William Cary taught all three children, Frank, Jennie and Maginel, to play musical instruments.

Anna Wright was an intense, independent woman with a fierce belief in the value of education. According to Wright's autobiography, she was determined that her first born (she was certain of a boy) would become a great architect. She attempted to cultivate this interest even before his birth by hanging engravings of English cathedrals on the walls of his nursery. In 1876, she visited the 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia. She returned with a strong desire to utilize the Froebel Gifts she discovered and purchased at the Friedrich Froebel kindergarten exhibit.

As a boy, Wright was raised in an environment reflecting his mother's taste for simple objects crafted of natural materials. He later recalled his childhood homes with their gleaming bare wood floors, arrangements of wild flowers and branches, and simple furnishings. In addition, his mother's readings introduced him to people of great ideas and ideals.

After the family's return to Wisconsin in 1878, William Wright again gave music lessons, was a pastor in a Unitarian church, and lectured at other churches. Frank attended the Second Ward Grammar school in Madison spending his summers on the Lloyd Jones farm at Spring Green. Those early years in the Wisconsin countryside had a profound effect on Wright:

"As a boy," he wrote in his autobiography, "I learned to know the ground plan of the region in every line and feature. For me now, its elevation is the modeling of the hills, the weaving and fabric that clings to hem, the look of it all in tender green or covered with snow or in full glow of summer that bursts into the glorious blaze of autumn. I still feel myself as much a part of it as the trees and birds and bees are, and the red barns."

The Lloyd Joneses (his mother's family) were a strong (even clannish) family group, who valued hard work and nurtured Wright's appreciation of nature and the beauty of simplicity. Their family motto was "Truth Against the World."

When problems between Wright's parents escalated in the early 1880's, only family concerts provided any unity. Eventually, his father divorced his mother having left the family in 1885. Frank Lloyd Wright never saw his father again nor attended his funeral. It was at this time that Frank changed his name to Frank Lloyd Wright.

Anna's aspirations for her son prevailed through this turbulent period, and Frank immediately entered into his first apprenticeship with Allen D. Conover, a professor of Civil Engineering at the University of Wisconsin who specialized in the design of heating, ventilation, sewers and drains. Wright was one of the first assistants employed in Conover's new architectural office, where he was both office boy and apprentice. He assisted in the design of Science Hall. In January 1886, he entered the University of Wisconsin as a part-time, special student. He remained there for two semesters, ending his academic career in December 1886.

In the spring of 1887 at the age of 20, Wright set out for Chicago where he worked for a few months with Chicago architect Joseph Lyman Silsbee. In 1887, Wright undertook the design of a dormitory at Hillside Home School in Spring Green, Wisconsin for his aunts Jane and Nell. It was also during this year that Wright developed his association with other apprentices in Silsbee's office: George Maher, George Elmslie and Cecil Corwin.

In 1888, Wright moved to the firm of Dankmar Adler and Louis Sullivan, architects working on the Auditorium Theater (1887-1889). Here, under the influence and inspiration of Sullivan, Wright quickly matured as an architect. Working directly under Louis Sullivan until 1893, Sullivan was one of the few influences Wright ever acknowledged. Sullivan, known for his integrated ornamentation based on natural themes, developed the maxim "Form Follows Function" which Wright later revised to "Form and Function Are One." Sullivan also believed in an American Architecture based on American themes not on tradition or European styles - an idea that Wright was later to develop. Wright and Sullivan abruptly parted company when Sullivan discovered that Wright had been accepting commissions for "moonlighting" residential designs, a violation of an earlier agreement between the two. Many years later, the two renewed their friendship. Wright often referred to Sullivan as his "Lieber Meister" or beloved master.

In 1889, at age 22, Wright married Catherine Tobin and built a home in the Chicago suburb of Oak Park. (The home is now known as the Frank Lloyd Wright Home and Studio.) In 1893, after parting company with Sullivan, Wright established his own architectural practice in Chicago. He soon added a studio to his Oak Park home and moved his practice there. Wright had six children by Catherine including Lloyd (1890-1978), John (1892-1972), Catherine (1894-1979), David (1895-1997), Frances (1898-1959) and Robert (1903-1986).

Wright's first revolutionary masterpiece from his own practice was the Winslow House built in 1893 in River Forest, Illinois. This home for his first client, William Winslow, clearly portrayed Wright's direction in architecture with its expansive, open proportions. Wright believed that architecture should create a natural link between mankind and his environment. "Organic Architecture" as Wright came to call his work, should reflect the individual needs of the client, the nature of the site, and the nature of the materials available.

Some of Wright's most notable designs during this period were for "Prairie Houses." These houses reflected the long, low horizontal Prairie on which they sat. They had low pitched roofs, deep overhangs, no attics or basements, and generally long rows of casement windows that further emphasized the horizontal theme. He used native materials and the woodwork was stained, never painted, to bring out its natural beauty. This was his first effort at creating a new, indigenous American architecture. Other Chicago architects

were also working in this same manner and the trend became known as the "The Prairie School." Although Wright himself initially dismissed that label, he became its chief practitioner.

In 1905, Wright traveled for the first time to Japan accompanied by his wife, Catherine and clients, Mr. and Mrs. Willits of Highland Park, IL. In 1909, at the height of his career, Wright left his family and his practice in Oak Park, and traveled throughout Europe with Mamah Borthwick Cheney, the wife of a client. Wright also began to give public lectures and to write about his thoughts on architecture. While in Europe, Wright worked on two portfolios of his work, published by Ernst Wasmuth: *Ausgefurhte Bauten und Entwurfe* in 1910 and *Ausgefurte Bauten* in 1911. These publications brought international recognition to his work and greatly influenced other architects.

In 1911, Wright returned to the land of his ancestors and began construction of his home, *Taliesin*, near Spring Green, Wisconsin. There he resumed his practice and soon received a large commission for an entertainment center in Chicago called *Midway Gardens*. He was working on the design for the *Imperial Hotel* for Tokyo. The next year, 1914, while Wright was in Chicago working on *Midway Gardens*, a servant by the name of Julian Carlton, set fire to the living quarters of *Taliesin*, killing Mamah, her two children - John and Martha - (some with a hatchet) and four others; two draftsmen, a foreman and a gardener. (Five died immediately; 2 died later from burns). Carlton was jailed later that day but not before drinking muriatic acid. The burns in his mouth and throat were not judged to be life-threatening. He remained in jail and died two months later from self-inflicted starvation.

Although stunned by the tragedy, Wright began immediately to rebuild *Taliesin*. Soon thereafter, he met sculptress Miriam Noel whom he married. Wright spent approximately six years (1915-22) working on Tokyo's *Imperial Hotel*, acclaimed for its earthquake-proof supporting structure. It was one of the few buildings that remained standing following the Kanto earthquake of 1923 which demolished much of Tokyo. (The hotel was demolished in 1968; however, the entrance lobby was saved and is on display in an architectural park near Nagoya, Japan.)

Coinciding with this period, Wright began developing designs for several California residences such as the *Hollyhock House* and the *Millard House*. The *Millard House* was Wright's first use of "textile block" in which specifically designed pre-cast concrete blocks were woven together with steel and rods.

Again in 1925, tragedy struck Wright when the living quarters of Taliesin were destroyed by fire, this time due to an electrical problem triggered by lightning. Wright, again, immediately began to rebuild, living for a time in Tan-y-deri, a house he had designed for his sister Jane Porter on what is now the *Taliesin* property. In 1928, Wright made his first trip to Arizona to work on plans for the Arizona *Biltmore Hotel*. During one trip to Arizona he built a temporary camp he called "Ocatilla" for himself and his draftsmen. "Ocatilla," located near Chandler, Arizona, was the forerunner of *Taliesin West*.

In 1928, Wright married Olga Lazovich (known as Olgivanna) daughter of the Chief Justice of Montenegro. With few architectural commissions coming his way due to the stock market crash and resulting depression, Wright turned to writing and lecturing which introduced him to a larger national audience. In 1932, at the age of 65, he published *An Autobiography* and *The Disappearing City* both of which influenced several generations of young architects. That same year Wright and his wife founded the Taliesin Fellowship, a school for apprentice architects that continues today as the Frank Lloyd Wright School of Architecture.

Wright was at this time considered a great architect, but one whose time had come and gone. In 1936, Wright proved this sentiment wrong and went on to stage a remarkable comeback with several important commissions: the *S.C. Johnson Wax Administration Building* in Racine, Wisconsin; *Fallingwater* house in rural Pennsylvania (designed in 1935 but built in 1936); and *Jacobs I* (a functional yet inexpensive home, the first executed "Usonian" house). These works were widely publicized and brought a flood of commissions interrupted only by World War II.

"His surge of creativity after two decades of frustration was one of the most dramatic resuscitation in American art history, made more impressive by the fact that Wright was seventy years old in 1937," wrote Robert Twombly in his 1973 biography of Wright. In 1937, Wright designed *Wingspread* near Racine, Wisconsin, a residence for Herbert F. Johnson of the Johnson Wax company. In addition he began work on his third home,

Taliesin West in the Arizona desert. A year later he worked on the first of many versions of his *Monona Terrace Civic Center* for Madison, Wisconsin.

In addition, he continued to work on the designs for his "Usonian" homes which proved to be very popular. "Usonian" homes were low cost houses for individuals of moderate means. They included such innovations as radiant heating (through hot water pipes placed in the cement slab floor); sandwich walls made of boards and tar paper (a cheap and efficient building technique); the open plan with greater flow of space; and the invention of the carport.

In the last decades of his career Wright received many awards, titles, medals and citations. Several international exhibitions were developed, including "*Sixty Years of Living Architecture*" which opened at the Palazzo Strozzi in Florence in 1951. He continued to write, producing *The Natural House* in 1954. This book discussed the Usonian home and a new concept called the "Usonian Automatic"-- a house that could be owner built. In 1959, the University of Wisconsin conferred an honorary Doctorate of Fine Arts degree on Wright. Upon receipt of the degree, Wright returned to *Taliesin* and began to work on a "thesis" called *The Eternal Law* which he submitted to the president of the university.

In 1955, Wright took an apartment at the Plaza Hotel in New York City to work on plans for the *Guggenheim Museum*. He completely redecorated the apartment with black and red lacquer furniture and thick peach colored carpet and called it *Taliesin East*.

The next year Wright was honored by Chicago Mayor Richard Daley who proclaimed October 17 as "Frank Lloyd Wright Day in Chicago." Although the majority of Wright's work during his lifetime had been for residential designs, 1957 marked a change. That year 59 new projects came into his studio - 35 of which were public buildings. The most significant of these works was the commission for the *Marin County Civic Center* in California. Wright also traveled to Baghdad in 1957 to confer with the Shah of Iraq concerning the design of an opera house and other municipal works. The Iraqi revolution of 1958 brought a halt to this endeavor. In 1957 Wright also designed a state capitol building for Arizona and a house for Marilyn Monroe, neither of which were built. And finally, in this whirlwind year, at age 90, Wright produced another book, *A Testament* in which he, according to Archivist Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer, made "his final statement concerning the place of his work and his art in the 20th century."

In 1958, with Wright now in his nineties, 31 new commissions came into his studio, bringing the total number of different commissions on the board to an astounding 166. He also produced the book *The Living City* that year and continued to supervise the *Guggenheim* which was completed after his death. In 1959 he worked on a design for a large auditorium for Arizona State University, also completed after his death.

Of the more than 1100 projects Wright had designed during his lifetime, nearly one-third were created during the last decade of his life. Wright had an astounding capacity for self-renewal and was tireless in his efforts to create an architecture that was truly American. Through his work, his writings, and the hundreds of apprentice architects that trained at his side his ideas have been spread throughout the world. Frank Lloyd Wright died on April 9, 1959.

Basic Text taken from the *Frank Lloyd Wright Heritage Tour Program, Resource Guide*
Enhancements to the text were borrowed from Merle Secrests' Book *Frank Lloyd Wright - A biography*