

## **HISTORY OF THE DANA-THOMAS HOUSE**

The Dana-Thomas House in Springfield, Illinois is probably the best preserved of Frank Lloyd Wright's Prairie School houses. It exemplifies many of the innovations in design that Wright was developing in his quest to redefine the style of the American family home. Frank Lloyd Wright was given an unequalled opportunity and an unlimited budget to experiment with his ideas by Susan Dana, a wealthy heiress who wanted a unique residence that would become a showplace for the city of Springfield.

### **SUSAN DANA**

Susan Lawrence Dana, the only child of Mary and Rheuna Lawrence, was born in 1862. Rheuna, the father that Susan adored, worked as a mason for a short period of time, but quickly began to amass a fortune by supplying military supplies to state and federal governments during the Civil War. He went on to invest his savings in a wide range of enterprises including banking, stock-raising, coal mining, railroading, lumbering, and real estate, as well as owning a silver mine in Colorado and a gold mine in Oregon. Rheuna Lawrence's political influence grew with his fortune, and he was quite involved with the Republican Party in Illinois. It is probably from her father that Susan learned to savor contact with influential members of society.

Susan Lawrence grew to be a lovely, young woman. Blonde and full figured, she dressed fashionably and with a flair that made her the center of attention at society affairs. However, Susan Lawrence's life was filled with tragedy. In 1883, Susan Lawrence married a young mining engineer, Edwin L. Dana, who later worked for her father. They had two children both of whom died in infancy. This brought tremendous grief to Susan who loved children. In 1900, more sorrow came to Susan's life when Edwin Dana died in a mining accident. She went on at age forty-nine to marry a young Danish singer, but he died suddenly a year later. A third marriage ended in divorce. Rheuna Lawrence's death in 1901 struck Susan another deep blow.

Her father left Susan a large fortune, however, and she turned her energies into building a new house incorporating her father's Italianate style residence in Springfield, Illinois. She vigorously pursued her public life including campaigning for women's rights, working for the equality of African Americans, and participating in committees for social services and the arts. Using her elegant new house to entertain prominent members of Springfield society, Susan Dana was considered an impeccable hostess. Politicians such as Charles Deneen, the Governor of Illinois, often asked Susan to host

parties for them. However, had women been allowed a greater role in society during that period of time, it is certain that Susan Dana would have been a participant in the legislative process rather than a mere hostess.

By 1928, Susan Dana grew weary of her social life and was increasingly lonely due to the death of her cousin and constant companion Florence Lawrence who lived with her. She became increasingly eccentric and more reclusive. Although Susan had many investments, she was unable to access money for her living expenses and had to move out of the large house into a small cottage behind the Dana House. During her last years Susan became senile, and she was declared incompetent and hospitalized in 1942. The following year, Susan Dana's personal property was sold at auction to satisfy her debts. Prior to the sale, Susan's jewelry and other possessions were displayed in Springfield store windows for potential bidders and curiosity seekers to see. A tent was pitched near the Dana house, and the five day auction was held from there. Newspaper accounts described the collection of her belongings as eccentric and flamboyant. However, they did not mention the large library of books by authors such as Voltaire, Goethe, Mark Twain, and George Sand, or describe her collection of studies for comparative religion, human sexuality and astrology.

In 1944, two years before Susan Dana's death, the publisher Charles C. Thomas purchased the Dana house. Because buyers at the auction had considered the furniture too odd and uncomfortable to purchase, Thomas was able to acquire almost all of the original Wright designed furniture with the house. Buyers at the auction had considered it too odd and uncomfortable to purchase. Therefore, the collection remained virtually intact. Thomas used the house for the offices of his publishing company. In 1981, the State of Illinois purchased the Dana house and furniture and began the work of preserving and restoring the house to its former elegance. The State declared that the house would be known as the Dana-Thomas house in reference to the two owners who had cared so much for the home.

## **FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT**

Frank Lloyd Wright (1867-1959) is America's most famous architect. He is known internationally as an innovative designer and a founder of the Prairie School of Architecture. Wright's personal style of design particularly influenced the way Americans felt family homes should look and function. Wright is known for his careful attention to every detail of a building's design. He was a perfectionist and insisted that his clients allow him to detail both exteriors and interiors of their homes.

Frank Lloyd Wright was born in Wisconsin and spent much of his childhood on the farms of his mother's family. There he came to think that

architecture is governed by the same rules that nature must follow, with each part related to the other. He also decided that buildings should be closely tied to the soil and natural site. Wright's mother was very influential in his life, deciding that young Frank would be an architect before he was born. She hung prints of great cathedrals in Frank's nursery and later bought him a set of Froebel kindergarten blocks at the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia so that he could begin building. Young Frank was fascinated by the blocks and much of his architectural design was influenced by the geometric shapes he experimented with as a child. Wright said that he had an easy time in life because he knew what he would do as an adult and didn't have to spend time agonizing about his choice.

Frank Lloyd Wright was educated in Wisconsin and came to Oak Park, Illinois, in 1888. He worked with Chicago architect Joseph Silsbee and Louis Sullivan until he started his own independent career in 1893. Wright soon gathered a team of sensitive young architects who worked together to design the houses of the Prairie School. Wright deplored the boxed-in spaces of existing Victorian homes and sought to redefine the American family home of the future. His Prairie houses are composed of long, extended, horizontal shapes, open interior spaces divided by leaded glass, furniture that was either built-in or designed to fit the architecture, and windows organized in bands. Natural wood was used to define the interior spaces of Prairie houses. Wright had a chance to explore and define his ideas for the Prairie style home when he received the commission for the Dana house.

Wright's most famous house design was built in the woods of western Pennsylvania. Named Fallingwater, the Kaufmann house is a dramatically cantilevered home built over a waterfall. The structure is built using native limestone, glass and concrete. In all, Frank Lloyd Wright is responsible for over 400 buildings in 36 states and in Japan, Canada, and Egypt. Wright also started Taliesin in Wisconsin and Taliesin West in Arizona, educational facilities that combined the practice of architecture with education and a design ethic that permeated the lives of his students.

## **THE DANA-THOMAS HOUSE**

In 1902, Susan Lawrence Dana provided Frank Lloyd Wright with the opportunity to design an exceptionally large home that was to be used mainly for entertaining. Susan gave Wright an unlimited budget and free reign to remodel and add onto the house she inherited from her father. The redesign of the house resulted in a 35 room, 12,600 square-foot residence and a 3,100 square-foot carriage house. The original house was no longer visible, and

only one room, a parlor with a Victorian fireplace, was left intact in memory of Rheuna Lawrence. The Dana house was designed to be used for entertaining large groups of people. Its gracious beauty lent itself well to Susan's needs and it was used as a meeting place for organizations and charities as well as elegant parties.

Susan Dana gave Frank Lloyd Wright an open checkbook to build the Dana house. The house cost approximately \$60,000.00 at a time when an eight-room brick house would have cost \$4,000.00 and a six-room frame house \$1,500.00.

The Dana-Thomas house contains many of the Prairie School features of Wright's designs including low horizontal roofs, gently sloped gables, continuous bands of windows, wide overhanging eaves, a large central fireplace, and an open floor plan. The Dana-Thomas house has an extraordinary collection of Frank Lloyd Wright designed art glass in windows, interior doors, bookcases, and lamps. The house is filled with original Wright designed furniture. In this house the architect integrated all design elements giving them the "Wright" touch.

The large rambling Dana-Thomas house is built on a corner lot. The house is composed of many shapes to reflect the sixteen level changes on the interior. Six-foot high walls provide privacy to the interior courtyard where Susan Dana gave many lawn parties. A thirty-foot-long reflecting pool is located in the yard. Frank Lloyd Wright designed complex copper gutters for the horizontal roofs. The corners of the gutters turn upward in an imitation of Asian architecture. The upper exterior of the Dana-Thomas house is decorated in a plaster frieze stained a metallic, silvery green. The remainder of the building is constructed of long, narrow bricks. The horizontal mortar has been carefully "raked" so that the bricks seem to float and emphasize the horizontal plane.

The entrance to the house is designed in the shape of a large Romanesque semi-circular arch around the door with a rectangular band of windows above. A geometric butterfly motif in art glass forms two arches on the inside of the door. Inside the entry way is a sculpture created by Frank Lloyd Wright's friend, Richard Bock. The statue is named "Flower in the Crannied Wall" and is based on a poem by Alfred Lord Tennyson. A large arched fireplace graces the main reception area and, just off the foyer, a quiet seating area surrounds another Bock sculpture, a fountain called "The Moonchildren".

Frank Lloyd Wright coordinated the art glass designs for 250 windows, doors, and light panels for the house as well as more than 200 light fixtures. The Dana-Thomas house has one of the most extensive collections of art glass that can be seen in a Wright designed home. The motifs chosen for

the art glass take their inspiration from two natural shapes: the butterfly, a Lawrence family favorite, and the Sumac plant, which grows on the prairie. Wright abstracted these shapes into geometric designs and then repeated the theme throughout the house.

Susan Dana wanted large spaces for dinner parties and social gatherings, so Wright used structural steel to design large, high ceiling spaces for the dining room, reception hall, and the Gallery. The dining room is an elegant, barrel-vaulted space which could seat 40 people. Four elegant butterfly chandeliers grace the corners of the room. The Gallery has a musician's balcony and a large barrel-vaulted ceiling. Many windows bring sunlight into this spectacular space. The lower level of the Gallery contains a library with built-in bookcases, built-in seating and a row of windows facing the garden. The lower level of the Dana-Thomas house contains spaces for different types of entertainment: a large billiard room and a duckpin lane.

In all, each of the 35 rooms has unique character. Yet all are unified by Wright's use of interior space - rich passages of leaded glass, art glass windows following a central motif, oak woodwork, built-in furniture, and rough plaster walls. The Dana-Thomas house remains a beautiful reminder of a time of elegance when attention to detail was demanded and craftsmanship and artistry enhanced human life.