

Frank Emerson

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Frank Lloyd Wright was not the only renowned architect in Illinois' history. Over the years there have been numerous incredible architects in Illinois' history with contrasting styles. Many of these architects used a classical style when designing structures. Frank Emerson was one of them. His classical style is shown spectacularly in the Hotel Pere Marquette, his most well-known work. Herbert Hewitt, his main architectural partner, practiced in a classical style. When they worked together, the classical style showed beautifully in their work. Because Frank Emerson designed the Hotel Pere Marquette, he became a popular Peoria architect.

Frank Emerson was born and raised by George Emerson and Harriet Woodruff Emerson of Peoria. He wanted to be an architect ever since he learned to talk. This goal was not outlandish. He excelled in school and impressed many of his teachers who encouraged him to skip a grade because he was far above the standards of his grade level. He proved to be a superlative student at Peoria High School as well and graduated in 1894 with high honors. Following high school, he received degrees from Princeton University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Subsequently, he was invited to study at the Ecole des Beaux Arts, an illustrious fine-arts school in Paris, France. Many believe this was where he learned his extraordinary talent of designing buildings in a classical style, which showed in his work in the early 1920s when he had become acquainted with Herbert Hewitt.

In 1909 Herbert Hewitt and Frank Emerson united to form an architectural firm named Hewitt and Emerson. The classical style unmistakably showed itself especially during the early 1920s. Hewitt and Emerson were known specifically for three buildings in Peoria's great downtown area.

The Hotel Pere Marquette made by far the biggest impact of any of their buildings. It was designed in a classical style, and it turned out to be the finest hotel in central Illinois at the time of its opening. However, the Hotel Pere Marquette was not their only brilliant building. Also designed by the firm of Hewitt and Emerson was the Peoria Life Insurance Company Building, which is now the Commerce Bank. The classical style was expressed in this building. The firm of Hewitt and Emerson also designed the First Bank of America. It became the second most famous building of Emerson's firm. This too has a classical style and survives in the center of Peoria's fabulous downtown.

In 1919, Richard Gregg joined Hewitt and Emerson. In 1938, the firm published a booklet with 400 buildings designed by Hewitt, Emerson, and Gregg. It included homes, schools, churches, country clubs, and commercial buildings. One hundred and forty of these houses are still standing in Peoria. Gregg added a new spice to the buildings with his unusual schemes and bizarre techniques seldom seen at this period in history. This is well shown in the Hotel Pere Marquette.

The famous Hotel Pere Marquette opened on January 5, 1927, and was immediately popular among Peorians. Nonetheless, the Pere Marquette became a victim of Peoria's changing downtown. Although many ambitious owners tried to return it to greatness, the magnificent hotel closed. The hotel did not remain closed for a long time; however, it was reopened in the eighties. Today, it is still an elite hotel in downtown Peoria. The grand hotel is conveniently located across from the Peoria Civic Center, one of the main recreational areas in Peoria. At the time of its opening in 1927, it was by far the finest hotel in central Illinois.

The location of the Hotel Pere Marquette is very convenient for Peorians because it is located close to the city's business and entertainment center. Interestingly, the Pere Marquette

was the first air-conditioned hotel in the state of Illinois. A contest to name the extraordinary hotel was brought up after numerous names failed for the hotel. The winner was Mrs. H. M. Kipp who submitted the name "Pere Marquette." Kipp received a fifty-dollar grand prize. Father Jacques Marquette was the first prominent white man in Peoria. [From Charles Bobbit and LaDonna Bobbit, *Peoria, A Postcard History*; Theo Kenyon, "He Was a Classic in Life, in Design," *The Journal Star*, Dec. 22, 2002; Theo Kenyon, "Reconstructing Emerson," *The Journal Star*, Dec. 22, 2002; Jerry Klein, *The Very Best of Old Peoria*.]