



The Westcott House Foundation
1340 East High Street
Springfield, Ohio 45505
www.westcotthouse.org

Wasmuth Drawings - Westcott House through the Years

When Burton J. Westcott moved from Richmond, Indiana, to Springfield, Ohio, in March of 1903, he was already a successful businessman of considerable wealth. His father had founded the Hoosier Drill Company and the Westcott Carriage Company in Richmond. Young Burton had been Hoosier's treasurer and became treasurer of the Springfield-based American Seeding Company. Orpha Westcott frequently accompanied her husband to Chicago on business trips, and it is believed that there she may have seen some of the houses in the suburbs of Oak Park and River Forest that were built by architect Frank Lloyd Wright. Or perhaps she had seen his sketches of "A Home in a Prairie Town" published in the February 1901 issue of Ladies' Home Journal and was inspired to seek him out to design a house for her in Springfield, Ohio.

Frank Lloyd Wright was known to study his clients carefully before actually working with them, and he came to Springfield to live with the Westcotts for as much as two weeks to "get the feel" of the family and its household requirements.

In July 1907 Burton Westcott purchased property on the northwest corner of East High Street and Greenmount Avenue from John Crowell. Construction on the Westcott House began in the fall of that year.

Wright chose many of Springfield's finest builders. Since Wright's presence was not required much during construction, Mrs. Westcott and several friends frequently were at the construction site helping to make decisions. The house was completed by the end of 1908. The article that appeared on this occasion in the local newspaper is titled "Springfield's Most Unique Residence." It reads: "When Mr. Westcott was asked what was the type of architecture, he answered: 'I asked that question of the architect, and he said it was really a Frank Wright type....He also said that the type was only of one thing; there was no mixture of Gothic and Colonial as one so often sees. Every line of the house is correct of that style of architecture'" (Springfield Daily News, 20 Dec. 1908).

Three of the earliest photographs of the house may have been taken prior to occupancy, since the rooms appeared rather bare. The photographs also do not include the two large cast concrete "Wrightian urns" that became a trademark of Wright's work.

Wright designed the Westcott House in a new and distinct regional style that became known as the Prairie Style. Its features were open planning, slightly pitched roofs with broad overhangs, bands of casement windows often designed in stained glass, and an overall strong horizontal emphasis. It was important that the house appear natural to its setting. Siding was frequently stucco of an off-white or earthy tone and had decorative banding that suggested the low horizon of the prairie. Prairie houses grew in popularity during the first ten years of the century. Though popular in the Midwest, the Prairie Style and its openness offended eastern architects, and many felt the occupants would have "no more privacy than a goldfish."

Frank Lloyd Wright regarded the hearth as the center of a family's life and so made it large and inviting. In the Westcott House, he placed two wooden partitions at right angles to the fireplace and into them built fireside seats, book storage, and indirect lighting. From two symmetrically-placed doors in the living room, the Westcotts could exit onto an elevated patio. Overhead was a metal grid designed as a support for a summer awning. Built into the masonry were planters and soil-beds that focused on a large twenty-two-foot wading pool below. There were no visible downspouts to detract from the horizontality of the house.



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A pergola connected the house with the garage, and a driveway ran on the west side of the property northward from East High Street to the rear, where it curved eastward to Greenmount, enclosing the tennis courts and the children's riding areas.

At the northwest corner of the house was a 125-barrel cistern to collect rainwater trapped by basins at each corner of the house. The collected water was used for bathing and was fed via a spigot into the large bathtubs. A small door on the west side of the house was used by the ice man to place his deliveries directly into the Westcotts' large built-in refrigerator unit.

The main entrance of the Westcott House was on the east side, facing Greenmount Avenue. One had to climb several steps before entering a door that then led to the reception area. Many have noticed that Frank Lloyd Wright used unusual positioning of entrances. It is felt that he did so deliberately to negate any sense of boundary between indoors and outdoors.

Wright often used natural lighting in his structures. In this dwelling above the staircase was a large six-panel skylight of geometric designs in amber and dark bronze leaded glass that flooded the area with illumination. In the evenings lights in glass cases a few inches above the steps illuminated the way.

There were six bedrooms on the second floor. Both children had their own rooms with special compartments built into the walls for storing their toys. Two rooms were used as servant quarters and one each for Mr. and Mrs. Westcott that included a dressing room, fireplace, private bath, and outdoor porch for warm-weather sleeping. Mrs. Westcott's room had a jewelry chest built into the closet.

Sometime before 1920, the Westcotts had the wading pond filled in with dirt, and it was used as a planter. Then during WWI they had the tennis courts torn up so that they could plant a Victory Garden.

Mrs. Orpha Westcott died suddenly in 1923. Burton Westcott's health began to deteriorate shortly after her death and the failure of the Westcott Motor Car Company. The announcement of his death in January 1926 was front-page news, thus reflecting his importance to the city of Springfield.

Sometime after Mr. Westcott's death, the sleeping porches at either side of the house were stuccoed over so that the split terraced effect of the first and second floors and access to the small terrace off Mr. Westcott's quarters above the entryway were eliminated. This change is thought to have been made by the Springfield book merchant Roscoe Pierce, who bought the house in 1926 after Mr. Westcott's death. Pierce resided there until his own death in 1941.

Eva Linton purchased the house in 1944. She divided the house into five one-bedroom apartments, perhaps to help pay the mortgage. She also moved another house onto the property when an overpass went through Springfield.



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Despite these changes, the Westcott House was placed on The National Register of Historic Places in 1974, through the efforts of the Ohio Historical Society.

Dorothy Snyder inherited the property in 1981. She maintained possession until June of 1988, when her son, Ken, and his wife, Sherri, purchased it. They immediately began renovation of the caretaker's apartment, the horse stables, and the groundskeeper's quarters into an apartment for themselves. They updated the plumbing, heating, and electrical services, tore out some bowed concrete walls, replaced the rotted 2X4s inside them, and refinished much of the interior wood. One of the horse stables was converted into a laundry room, but the Snyders maintained the connection between the upper and lower floors where the straw was shoved down to feed the horses. Many original doors were found stored away, and the Snyders used them to make closets and storage areas.

In 1991 Ken Snyder met an untimely death. However, after her loss Sherri Snyder continued making improvements to the Westcott House. At first she had no idea where to start or how to go about what she wanted to accomplish. She hired a local consultant to help her make critical decisions and to put her in touch with honest, hard-working, and knowledgeable contractors.

The exterior walls between the main house and the caretaker's apartment got a new coat of stucco and paint, as did the exterior of her apartment. Wherever needed, deteriorated boards were replaced and stained. The boards that needed replacing but were not visible were replaced with treated lumber for a longer life. Metal caps were custom-made for the tops of the columns in the arbor to protect them from the elements.

One of the most pressing problems that Snyder had to deal with was the sinking of the front wall. The entire front wall was buckling. Once it was jacked up, the interior wall collapsed. Upon investigation, the contractor discovered that no central support had been built into the wall at all. Other repairs were made to the foundation and support beams, and through her diligent efforts the house was, at least, back on a solid foundation.

Snyder was eventually credited with saving the Westcott House. In August of 2000, The Frank Lloyd Wright Building Conservancy purchased the house, and later that same year Snyder was awarded "The Wright Spirit Award" in recognition of her significant contributions.

The Frank Lloyd Wright Building Conservancy then sold the house to the locally established Westcott House Foundation, which has restored the aging Westcott House to its former architectural splendor.

The Westcott House was Frank Lloyd Wright's first, and for many years only, commission in Ohio. Its garden theme was of dominant proportions and gave the structure a regal dignity uncommon to any of Wright's other Prairie homes. Frank Lloyd Wright and Burton and Orpha Westcott gave Springfield one of Ohio's lasting reminders of the genius of America's great twentieth-century architect. Those who have followed now take their place in history. Time will reveal their legacies.

http://www.westcotthouse.org/wasmuth_westcott.html