

# INTRODUCTION

In September 2010, the *Wilmette Beacon* came into being, and soon afterwards, I volunteered to be a contributing columnist. Over the ensuing nine-plus years, I wrote 500 weekly columns, stopping only when the pandemic forced the *Beacon* to close down in March 2020.

At the beginning, I had no idea what I'd write about, but in the spirit of the publication, I vowed that every column would have a Wilmette connection. As of 2010, I had lived in the village for more than three decades, and my wife and I had been active in the civic and social life of the village. Our four kids grew up here and thrived in the community and public schools. Surely, I believed, I could find something local to write about, drawing from this experience and current events.

It turned out not to be easy to find a current topic to write about every week, but my time on the village board had taught me the importance of historical context and had made me aware of some fascinating stories from Wilmette's past. These stories often became the subjects of my columns, and as I researched one, I came across others.

The *Wilmette Beacon's* demise and stay-at-home directives, occurring simultaneously, left me with little to do and nowhere to go. I fell back on an idea that had been suggested by a few *Beacon* readers before the coronavirus suddenly changed my routine: Write a book based on these stories. For the next few months, I passed the days largely engaged in this project. A special impetus was the fact that the village will be celebrating its Sesquicentennial in 2022. I reasoned that folks will be thinking about Wilmette's history, and a book of stories about Wilmette's past might be of special interest now.

*Wilmette at 150* is not intended to be a comprehensive history of the village. If that's what you want, try George Bushnell's *Wilmette: A History* (2nd ed., 1984). Unlike the Bushnell book, this book presents discrete stories, divided

into 19 categories, each category with its own chapter. The stories impart historical context, but they aren't intended to present all of the significant people and events of Wilmette's 150-year existence.

The stories reveal Wilmette as a place of achievement and failure, joy and sorrow, kindness and callousness, hope and despondency, service and apathy, love and prejudice—all of humanity's virtues and frailties. While researching and writing these stories, I was touched emotionally—saddened by some, inspired by others, and amused by still more. Together, they give Wilmette a unique character.

A small sampling of subjects: Dr. Martin Luther King's inspirational visit to the North Shore, the German POW camp in Harms Woods, the colorful history of No Man's Land, an honor roll of exceptional Wilmette women, the Palm Sunday tornado that heavily damaged the Village Center, the remarkable perseverance of world pushup champion Chick Lister, and Judge Kolman's tree memorial on Glenview Road. Also, the times when Wilmette's schools almost went broke, eleven-year-old Stevie Baltz united the nation in hope and grief, and Baby Face Nelson met his maker on Walnut Avenue.

In a few stories, the subject speaks in the first person. These stories are based on facts, but most of the words and attitudes attributed to the subjects are mine. I used this and other devices in an attempt to explain Wilmette's history in an interesting, informal, and sometimes amusing way.

I also sprinkled in some opinions throughout the stories. For example, my choices of local government's best and worst decisions are purely my opinion. However, as a person who has been involved in village affairs for many years and who has spent many hours researching and writing about Wilmette's past, I believe it's appropriate and even important that I share a few insights and opinions. In that sense, the book is a little bit about me.

Many chapters end with News Flashes that are relevant to the content of the chapter. They're written as if the event just happened. I learned about these events from newspapers and other sources, but I did extensive additional research to present them fully: the exact date of the event, the ages and addresses of the people involved, background information, and future outcomes. Except for the words within quotation marks, these News Flashes are my words, not something lifted from a newspaper.

It's my hope that this book will promote unity among Wilmette residents. We who live here now need to build on the past with knowledge of the village's successes, failures, and unique experiences. No one knows what challenges will arise in the future, but I'm confident that the village will meet them successfully if unity is an underlying principle, as it has been for most of our

history. Unity doesn't require the absence of disagreement, but it does require listening, empathy, and civility.

In the spirit of unity, I selected two images for the cover of this book. The first is the beautiful image of the Bahá'í House of Worship on the front cover. It's not only the most recognizable landmark in the village—one that's a source of tremendous community pride—but it's also the symbol of a religious movement that stands for the oneness of all humankind. I gratefully acknowledge the photo by Tim Perry, copyright National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States.

The second image, on the back cover, is the 1996 logo of the Wilmette Human Relations Commission. It symbolizes the Village's official commitment to the goal of equality and unity among all people, and it asks the community to honor this goal in their daily lives.

My thanks go to the officials of local government and residents who've been helpful and supportive as I've compiled these stories over the years. I'm most grateful to the Wilmette Historical Museum and also to the Wilmette Public Library for being excellent sources of historical information. Through these institutions and various websites, I found literally thousands of newspaper articles, census records, old directories, military records, birth certificates, death records, cemetery records, photographs, and other historical records that became the basis for these stories.

And finally, my deep gratitude goes to the team of advisers who helped me find a better and more accurate way to tell the stories in this book: Alan P. Henry, Elaine Fandell, Kathy Hussey-Arntson, Lisa Roberts, James Petrie, Vernon Squires, and the folks at Amika Press.

A minor technical note: Many Wilmette street names have changed over the years, which complicates the telling of these stories. Green Bay Road, often referred to in these chapters, began as West Railroad Avenue. In 1922 it became Main Street, and in 1936 it became Green Bay Road. I'm using the name that applied at the time of the events being described.

## **CHAPTER 1**

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# The Shoreline

The poet William Wordsworth figured it out. A lake, he said, “carries you into recesses of feeling otherwise impenetrable.” Perhaps that explains the intimate connection that Wilmette residents have always had with their lakefront.

Wilmette’s Lake Michigan shoreline is 1.8 miles long. About 75 percent is publicly owned. The Metropolitan Water Reclamation District owns Wilmette Harbor and the North Shore Channel, which are part of the metropolitan-wide system of canals, tunnels, reservoirs, and pumps that prevents sewage from entering and polluting the lake. The Village owns the waterworks north of Lake Avenue and the Elmwood Dunes Preserve at the foot of Elmwood Avenue. The Wilmette Park District owns the rest of the public portion: Gillson Park’s 60 acres and Langdon Park’s 3.4 acres. The private shoreline consists of three areas: the magnificent home sites on Canterbury Court, east Linden Avenue, and Sheridan Road across from the Bahá’í House of Worship; the shoreline properties on Michigan Avenue and Sheridan Road between Forest Avenue and Langdon Park; and the high-rise section of No Man’s Land.

The lake has been a major factor in the village’s history and development. As a shimmering blue contrast to the beaches and flora, it dazzles lovers of nature and beauty and comforts seekers of peace and contemplation. It affects the climate, sometimes for the good, sometimes not. Its waters and beaches offer swimmers, sunbathers, boaters, and anglers opportunities for fun, exercise, and relaxation. Since 1892, it has supplied water to the homes of Wilmette.

There’s also a dark side to the lake. People who use it for recreation must respect its dangers, including undertows and sudden storms. At least 38 people have drowned in the lake waters off Wilmette and in the harbor and channel (see Appendix 1). Swimmers and waders are the largest category of victims, followed by boaters, victims of falls, and heroes who attempted to rescue others. Two people have drowned at the Park District’s guarded beach.



The U.S. Coast Guard left Evanston in 1931 and established a new station at Wilmette Harbor. Courtesy of the Wilmette Historical Museum.

Two drowning victims were guardsmen stationed at the U.S. Coast Guard Station at Wilmette Harbor, which is credited with saving countless lives over the years. On October 28, 1951 guardsmen Robert Sawyer and Max Wage risked their lives by searching in rough waters for three missing duck hunters. The guardsmen themselves disappeared, and only a few scraps of boat wreckage were ever found.

Another challenging feature of Lake Michigan is the constantly changing water level. Measurement data goes back to 1860, when the lake was near its historic high. In more recent years, highs were seen in 1952, 1974, 1986, 1997, and 2019–2020, while lows occurred in 1934, 1964, and 2013. The difference between the record high (1986) and the record low (2013) is an astounding six feet. The highs can cause significant beach and bluff erosion and damage to structures near the shoreline, especially during wind storms producing high waves. Langdon Park in particular has suffered greatly.

## The Gates Estate

With this background, let's take an imaginary stroll along Wilmette's Lake Michigan shoreline, beginning just north of the Evanston border at the Gates Estate, 336 Sheridan Road. In the mid-1880s Philetus Gates purchased a five-

acre wooded expanse at this location, fronting on Sheridan Road and extending east to the lake. For the next two decades, the property remained undeveloped.

Gates was the son of a wealthy Chicago manufacturer of industrial equipment and owner of the Gault House, a hotel at the corner of Madison and Clinton streets in Chicago. He began his career as manager of the hotel, and after his father's death in 1888 he took over the manufacturing business as well. In 1901 Allis-Chalmers Co. bought the business and made him an officer of the company. He ran its manufacturing plants until 1904 when he resigned. He ended his career as president and director of Hanna Engineering Works (1908–1922).

In 1908 Gates decided to turn his Wilmette property into a luxurious estate for himself and his wife Phimelia. The main building was an elegant three-story brick mansion with a tile roof and interior decor of mahogany, oak, and white enamel. The estate included a two-story coach house where the chauffeur and his wife lived. The grounds were attractively landscaped from Sheridan Road to the lake. The project cost \$35,000, not including the land. Fifteen years later, in 1923, Gates sold the estate to Albert and Fannie Cross for \$200,000.

Albert Cross also was a successful businessman. He began his career as a stenographer and teacher of a shorthand system invented by his father. In 1893 he became a grain and provisions merchant. He was a member and officer of the Chicago Board of Trade, and he was associated with a string of brokerage firms bearing his name. He was also a trustee of Northwestern University and first vice-president of Chicago's YMCA.

In 1927 Cross subdivided the five-acre estate and sold nine lots while retaining two lots for the existing mansion and coach house on Sheridan Road. He marketed "Canterbury Court" to wealthy buyers able to pay \$30,000 to \$90,000 for a lot and a minimum of \$30,000 to \$50,000 for a house. Each lot had 100 feet of frontage on an ornamentally lighted private drive and "a pleasing view of the lake." Homeowners were required to have incinerators and were prohibited from burning coal. All utilities were underground. An impressive "English gate" at the Sheridan Road entrance welcomed visitors.

Canterbury Court attracted a Who's Who of prominent Chicagoans: Charles Wrigley, president of an advertising agency and brother of William Wrigley, Jr., the chewing gum magnate; Craig Hazlewood, chairman of Lake Shore Trust and Savings Bank, executive vice-president of the First National Bank of Chicago, and president of the American Bankers Association; and Halsey Poronto, president of United States Cold Storage Co. and trustee of the Central Manufacturing District. Other notables followed: Frederick Croll, treasurer, vice-president and director of Amour & Co.; James Kraft, founder of Kraft Foods;

Carl Wickman, founder of Greyhound Bus Lines; Albert Dale, editor of the *Chicago American* and other newspapers; William Engel, grain company executive; Robert Crown, manager of the Crown family's industrial empire; and Andrew McNally IV, head of Rand McNally & Co. and great-great-grandson of its founder.

In 1930 the Crosses built and moved to their "dream home", just two blocks south at 2837 Sheridan Place, Evanston. Legend says that the movers left several crates of books in the driveway, and Albert suffered a fatal heart attack carrying the books inside.



In 1907 Philetus Gates created this five-acre estate at 336 Sheridan Road. Courtesy of the Evanston History Center.

### **The Marshall Mansion**

On the east side of Sheridan Road across from the Bahá'í House of Worship is a vacant property owned by the Bahá'ís that's used as a parking lot. At one time, this property was the site of perhaps the largest and most elaborate mansion ever to grace Wilmette, although several recently constructed lakefront mansions might be worthy rivals. The only remnant of the mansion is the former entrance to the property: two stone columns and a wrought iron gate.

The 32-room mansion was built in 1921 by architect Benjamin Marshall for his own use as a residence, studio, and entertainment venue. His acclaimed works in Chicago include the Blackstone Hotel and Theatre, the Drake Hotel, the Edgewater Beach complex, and many elegant apartment buildings on the

Near North. He also designed the doomed Iroquois Theater, discussed in Chapter 11, and the Wilmette Post Office, discussed in Chapter 4.

Marshall's pink-stuccoed edifice at Wilmette Harbor was beyond elegant. It was as flamboyant as his personality. Reportedly, it cost more than \$1 million to build, the equivalent of more than \$14 million in 2020 dollars. While the exterior was classical Spanish, the interior was eye-popping. The centerpiece was a tropical garden, 150 feet long by 75 feet wide and three-stories tall. Palm trees, cissus vines, and gardenias surrounded a turquoise-blue tile pool. Glass walls could be rolled back in summer, opening the garden to Lake Michigan beyond.

The uppermost space in the mansion was a solarium, decorated in red and gold fabric with Egyptian furnishings. It offered a panoramic view of Wilmette Harbor, Lake Michigan, and environs. One of its features was a dining table that could be lowered to the kitchen below, set for the next course, and raised back up.

Marshall entertained lavishly. His guests included David Windsor (later King Edward VIII of England), Ethyl Barrymore, Beatrice Lillie, Ed Wynn, Walter Hagen, Noel Coward, Leopold Stokowski, and Ina Claire. On July 18, 1933 General Italo Balbo, the Italian Air Marshall and fascist leader, was his guest. Balbo arrived in Chicago days earlier leading a squadron of 24 seaplanes to celebrate the Century of Progress World's Fair. Upon seeing the Chinese pagoda, carpeted by a satin mattress, Balbo asked in Italian, "Why do you bring us here when we are but men?" Then in the living room, he lamented, "I am dismayed that we have not come to your beautiful home before the eve of our departure."

The Great Depression forced Marshall to sell his mansion in 1936 for a paltry \$95,000. The purchaser was Nathan Goldblatt, one of two brothers who, in 1914, opened their first Goldblatt's department store at Chicago and Ashland avenues in a neighborhood of Polish immigrants. The store was successful, and the brothers opened more medium-size department stores that offered merchandise at low prices. By 1933 the company owned five stores in Chicago, as well as stores in Joliet and Hammond.

Nathan and his wife Frances lived in the mansion until 1944 when he died at the age of 49. In 1947 Frances Goldblatt moved out. The following year, the mansion and its furnishings were put up for auction over a six-day period. Thousands of curiosity-seekers visited the premises during the preview period. Many of the furnishings were sold, but the mansion wasn't.

These events occurred in the context of a longstanding movement in Wilmette to create a community house similar to Winnetka's. The idea of using

the mansion for this purpose was publicly debated in late 1948. Mrs. Goldblatt offered the property to the Village for \$125,000, payable over 15 years, with no interest on the unpaid balance. The Village declined, primarily because the prospect of visitors crossing Sheridan Road on foot seemed too dangerous. The empty mansion was scarred by teenage vandals. In 1949 Mrs. Goldblatt decided, for tax reasons, to tear it down. Built like a fortress, it tried mightily but unsuccessfully to resist the wrecker's ball. It existed for less than 30 years. In 1951 the Bahá'ís purchased the vacant property.



Benjamin Marshall's mansion at Wilmette Harbor survived for less than 30 years. Courtesy of the Wilmette Historical Museum.

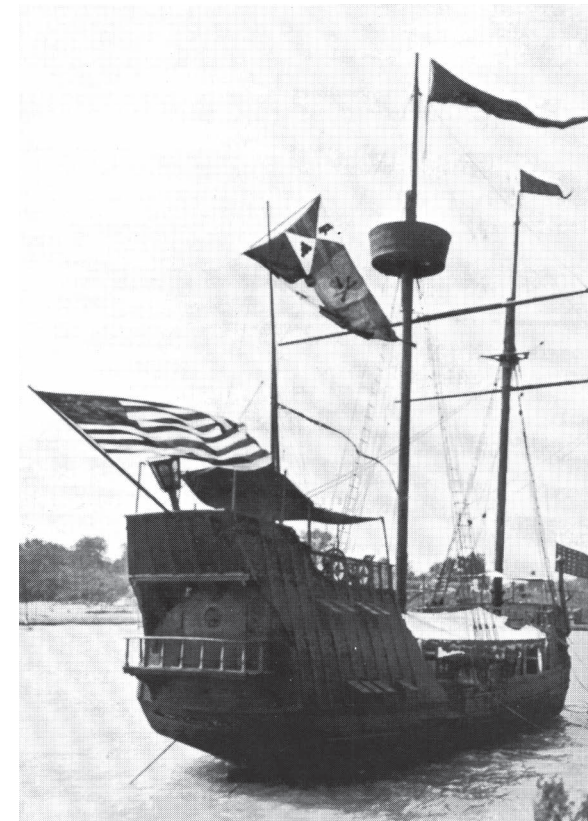
### Wilmette Harbor and North Shore Channel

The Marshall mansion overlooked Wilmette Harbor, created in 1909 by the Sanitary District of Chicago (later the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago). The harbor links the lake and the North Shore Channel. A pumping station beneath the Sheridan Road Bridge pumps lake water into the channel, helping to create a southerly flow through the Chicago Area Waterway System that sends the region's treated sewage toward the Mississippi River.

The harbor wasn't designed for boats. It was intended to be a settling basin for sand that would otherwise drift into and clog the channel. During its first ten years, the basin was used by a few fishermen as a haven for their boats. This changed after World War I, because a small harbor at the foot of Clark Street in

Evanston used by the Evanston Yacht Club became irreversibly filled with sand. Two separate groups of Evanston boaters decided to move to Wilmette Harbor.

One group formed the Buccaneers Club. Its clubhouse was an old lumber schooner, rebuilt by Chicago architects Clark & Walcott in the style of the pirate ships of the Spanish Main and renamed *The Port of Missing Men*. In 1920 the Buccaneers received its first permit to moor its clubhouse and members' sailing boats at Wilmette Harbor. The Buccaneers' lifespan was brief. Financial problems led to its dissolution in 1929, and the floating clubhouse was towed into the lake near Montrose Harbor and set afire.



The Buccaneers Club's home was a refurbished schooner. Courtesy of the Wilmette Historical Museum.

The second group organized a club that was briefly called North Shore Yacht Club but soon was renamed Sheridan Shore Yacht Club. It established a clubhouse in cooperation with Benjamin Marshall. At the time, he was seeking Village approval for his mansion overlooking the harbor, but officials nixed his plan, because a new zoning ordinance didn't allow commercial uses (i.e., his studio) at that location. Sheridan Shore and Marshall united and persuaded