

GLORY DAYS

1872–1904



(Left) Field Mansion, 1905 South Prairie Avenue
(Right) Pullman drawing room, 1729 South Prairie Avenue

When Philip Armour joined Field and Pullman on the street in 1875, Chicago's three wealthiest citizens lived within a four-block stretch of Prairie Avenue. Leading architects were commissioned to design elegant free-standing and attached houses on Prairie and Calumet avenues in a variety of styles. H. H. Richardson of Boston was hired to design the house for John and Frances Glessner, a radical departure from its French-inspired neighbors that received mixed reviews from residents initially, but has come to be recognized as an icon of modern residential design. Richard Morris Hunt of New York designed the Marshall Field house, but most houses were designed by local architects including Cobb & Frost, Treat & Foltz, Solon S. Beman, John Van Osdel, Francis Whitehouse, and William LeBaron Jenney. Burnham & Root received nearly a dozen commissions on the street, beginning with the John Sherman house at 2100 S Prairie Avenue. The neighborhood became the center of the social and cultural life in the city with lavish dinners and balls announced regularly in the society pages. By the time of the Columbian Exposition, Prairie Avenue was touted as one of the must-see sites in Chicago. A guidebook issued by Rand McNally & Co. shortly thereafter proclaimed, "That remarkable street is home to merchants whose business affects every mart on the earth...and who possess wealth that at last aroused the jealousy of New York." By the turn of the century however, forces were in place that sent the neighborhood into a steady decline, and the last new house on the street for nearly a century was built in 1904.

DECLINE

1905–1965



(Left) Hump Hairpin Mfg.Co., 1918 South Prairie Avenue
(Right) R.R. Donnelley & Sons under construction, 1917

The close proximity of the neighborhood to downtown, originally an asset, became a major factor in its decline. Increased noise and pollution from adjacent transportation routes and the southward spread of businesses from the Loop quickly made the area a less desirable place to live. At the same time, new residential areas, including the Gold Coast and suburban communities along the North Shore were luring residents away, especially the children who were raised on the street and now starting families of their own. The houses themselves were considered old-fashioned and outdated and many were soon converted to non-residential uses. By 1910, a medical school and a clinic for the treatment of drug and alcohol addiction operated in former homes. Other houses were adapted for use as offices for the publishing and printing industries or converted to boarding houses. As early as 1905, mansions in the neighborhood were razed and replaced with large commercial buildings, the first two appearing on Indiana Avenue. The R.R. Donnelley & Sons printing plant, designed by Howard Van Doren Shaw, was begun in 1912 on Calumet Avenue. In 1915, the Hump Hairpin Mfg. Co. factory became the first to replace a residence on Prairie Avenue. The automobile industry firmly established itself along Michigan Avenue with over one hundred showrooms, rapidly transforming that residential street into "Motor Row." Only a handful of residents remained by the 1930s with the very last resident, Addie Hibbard Gregory leaving Prairie Avenue in 1944. Eventually, all but eleven houses in the entire area were razed.

REBIRTH

1966–PRESENT



(Left) Clarke House Museum, 1827 South Indiana Avenue
(Right) Chicago Women's Park and Gardens

In 1966, a group of preservationists banded together to purchase the Glessner House, which was threatened with demolition. This effort created a renewed appreciation of the neighborhood and served as an important catalyst in the citywide preservation movement. When three neighboring houses were demolished within the next few years, discussions began to bring formal recognition and protection to the remaining eight houses on Prairie Avenue. In 1973, the City of Chicago announced plans to create a historic district with a restored 1890s streetscape and the addition of the Henry B. Clarke house, which was relocated to the 1800 block of Indiana Avenue. The Prairie Avenue Historic District was designated in 1979 and includes five houses on the 1800 and 1900 blocks of Prairie Avenue, along with three rowhouses on Cullerton Street. Clarke House Museum, individually designated as a landmark, opened in 1982 following an extensive restoration. The opening of the National Vietnam Veterans Art Museum in 1996 and the Chicago Women's Park and Gardens in 2000 brought additional cultural offerings to the area. As businesses began moving out in the early 1990s, several loft buildings underwent residential conversion, the first being the Eastman Kodak Co. building at 1721 S. Indiana Avenue in 1993. In 1999, the Hump Hairpin Mfg. Co. building was demolished and replaced with a townhouse development, the first new residential construction on Prairie Avenue in 95 years. A strong housing market has resulted in numerous additional residential developments, ranging from loft conversions to condominium towers.