

Midwest travel: Exploring Frank Lloyd Wright's first and last Prairie Style homes



Wright in Kankakee, the nonprofit owners of Kankakee's B. Harley Bradley House, claim its 1900 design makes it Frank Lloyd Wright's first Prairie Style home. *Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier*

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When they think of Frank Lloyd Wright, many fans of the famous architect envision his distinctive Prairie Style. Horizontal lines, earth tones, overhanging eaves and rows of casement windows.

Two Midwest homes claiming to be the first and the last of his Prairie Style welcome tours in Kankakee, Illinois, and Wichita, Kansas. A close look at each of these bookends reveals similarities between them while illustrating how Wright's work evolved as he tinkered with his signature design at the turn of the last century.

A storied past

In 1900, Wright designed the B. Harley Bradley House in Kankakee, which claims to be his first Prairie Style home. Some students of Wright's work disagree. They point to the Ward W. Willits House, dating from 1901 in Highland Park as his first mature Prairie Style work. However, the nonprofit Wright in Kankakee that oversees the landmark, has copies of Wright's original drawings for the house dated June 1900. In any case, the privately owned Willits House is not open for tours while tours of the Bradley resume in March after a winter hiatus.



Chairs in the dining room of the B. Harley Bradley House in Kankakee have the high backs preferred by Frank Lloyd Wright. - Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier

Some might find it ironic that funds behind the building of the Bradley, with Wright's design mimicking the Midwest's tallgrass prairie, came from ripping the prairie apart. B. Harley Bradley's grandfather manufactured farm implements, including plows, and passed his fortune to his descendants. Bradley's wealthy wife, Anna, inherited the land for the house and persuaded Wright to build adjoining houses for her and her brother, Warren Hickox Jr. The Hickox House, privately owned and closed to visitors, stands next to the Bradley on an acre along the Kankakee River. Both are in the Riverview Historic District listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

As it changed hands among owners, the Bradley House became the site of much success but also terrible tragedy. For three decades it operated as the white-tablecloth Yesteryear Inn. Another wealthy owner indulged his personal passion by using the Bradley's stable to build and sell birdhouses.

But two deaths mar the house's history. Bradley committed suicide in a Chicago hotel in 1914 after financial failures. Later, owner Stephen Small, whose family ran a multistate media company, was murdered in 1987 in a kidnapping gone wrong. He was buried in a box while his kidnappers awaited ransom but suffocated when they failed to provide proper ventilation.



Art glass windows in Kankakee's B. Harley Bradley House were designed by Frank Lloyd Wright. - Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier

New owners began restoring the house in 2005, and in 2010 Wright in Kankakee took over and opened the property for tours and events.

The massive house measures 6,000 square feet on two floors in addition to a basement and two-story, 3,000-square-foot stable. Wings flank the central living room. To some eyes, the plaster and dark wood exterior with the low, flared gable roof looks like an English half-timbered home but with a Prairie Style makeover.

The interior of the Bradley was the first house Wright had total control over, including carpets and furnishings. He designed 90 art glass windows in geometric patterns inspired by plants. About 35% of the house is original, the remainder painstakingly reconstructed. Workers bored holes in the walls to find Wright's original gold paint and were able to replicate it from samples sent to Sherwin-Williams Co.



Much of the Allen House Wright designed in 1915 in Wichita, Kan., is original, including 40 pieces of furniture by Wright and George Mann Niedecken. - Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier

A governor's home

Much of the house Wright designed in Wichita for newspaper owner Henry J. Allen and his wife, Elsie, is original, including its art glass windows. Forty pieces of furniture were designed by Wright and George Mann Niedecken, with whom Wright collaborated on a dozen projects.

The house stands in College Hill, a neighborhood of oil and cattle barons when Wright designed the home in 1915. It was to be Wright's last true Prairie Style residence. The Allens moved in 1918 but left for the state capital when Allen became governor of Kansas, serving from 1919 to 1923. When they returned, they remained until 1947. The home, with 4,012 square feet of living space plus a basement, appears on the National Register of Historic Places. Tours through the Allen House Foundation resume in February.

Wright's design for the Allen House was years ahead of its time, foreshadowing homes of the 1950s and 1960s. Glass doors in the living and dining rooms open onto a quarry-tile terrace and sunken garden with a koi pond. Rooms show Japanese influences, such as movable screens and light fixtures. At the time, Wright was working on the Imperial Hotel in Japan and commuted between Wichita and Tokyo.



Windows and glass doors in the living and dining rooms of Frank Lloyd Wright's Allen House in Wichita, Kan., overlook its quarry-tile terrace and sunken garden. - Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier

Wright employed his oft-repeated compression and release tactic in the entryway, dropping the ceiling to a height of just over 6 feet before opening onto an expansive space. Fans of Wright designs might notice his familiar dining room chairs have lower backs than those in his other houses. It was a change the Allens insisted he make.

Outside, a ribbon of gray Carthage marble runs along the base of the house. Rising above, bricks in tan and ocher are joined by horizontal mortar gilded in gold, another similarity to the Imperial Hotel. A circulation gallery on the second floor has a band of windows overlooking the terrace and a garden house. Wright's familiar horizontal lines continue along the red tile roof.

Some students of Wright's architecture say the Allen House appears to be a precursor to Wright's Usonian houses of the 1930s. Wichita residents Louise and Charles Hoult commissioned Wright to draw his first Usonian design in 1936. It was never built.

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If you go

COVID-19 precautions: Face coverings required; limited tour sizes.

B. Harley Bradley House: 701 S. Harrison Ave, Kankakee. Tours resume in March. \$25 standard, \$30 in-depth. (815) 936-9630 or wright1900.org/

Frank Lloyd Wright's Allen House: 255 N. Roosevelt St., Wichita, Kansas. Tours resume in February. \$22 standard or moonlight tour, \$40 grand tour. (316) 687-1027 or flwrightwichita.org/

- Information for this article was gathered during a writer's conference sponsored by Visit Wichita and a media tour sponsored by Visit Kankakee County.

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