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THE WARD WILLITS HOUSE BY FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT

by Mark David Linch

This is the second of a series of three articles on the Ward Winfield Willits House (Highland Park, Illinois, 1902) designed by Frank Lloyd Wright. The purpose of this article is to integrate information into a sequence of events leading to the completion of the house. The information derives from specifications, photographs, legal documents, and letters.

The initial association between Willits and Wright has origins which are not totally known. However, the association probably began in this way:¹ Ward Willits, a young man trained in the law, joined the firm of Adams and Westlake, a brass and bronze foundry, in 1879 and was promoted to vice-president and director in 1891. Orlando Giannini joined the same firm as a designer and foreman in 1891. Although he remained only until 1898 and although the firm employed roughly one thousand people at the time, it is probable that Willits and Giannini were acquainted. Willits was a very sharp, intelligent, and managerial man, and it is unlikely that a talent such as Giannini's would have escaped his notice. This acquaintance, then, would provide the link with Frank Lloyd Wright.

Orlando Giannini subsequently entered into a partnership with Fritz Hilgart in 1899. Prior to the Willits commission, they produced the glass for at least two houses by Wright. The *1902 Chicago Architectural Club Catalogue* indicates that these houses were the Joseph Husser House (Chicago, 1899) and the Frank Thomas House (Oak Park, 1901). Giannini was the artist/designer and Hilgart was the technician.²

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Being the thorough and meticulous man he was, Willits may have even located a copy of this catalogue in an effort to find an architect for the new home he was contemplating.³ It becomes even more likely that Giannini was the initial link to Wright when one considers that Giannini was listed in the catalogue. Willits could then have arranged to formally meet Wright through his previous acquaintance, Giannini, which would have been the proper procedure during that Victorian time. The meeting of Willits and Wright is plausible in this scenario.

The next step in the commission of Wright also remains nebulous. The working drawings of the house are dated June 2, 1902, but the early contacts between client and architect and the specific order of events are sketchy. There are, however, two valuable clues. In the first, a letter to Wright dated May 4, 1902, Willits states:

I've been looking over that plan again today and am more strongly than ever of the opinion that the arrangement of the east side is not right. The arrangement for the reception room and den is too expensive for the little use we will have for the former. The scheme is all right artistically from the outside, but it is neither in the line of utility nor economy. Moreover, I doubt the wisdom of so great a width overall on a 200' lot. Better narrow it down some so we will have more lawn on the west side of the house. I've been thinking too that the plan of narrowing down the nursery to 12' will not do. As when we come to make two rooms of it they will likely be only 12 x 12 each which is too small.

1. The speculative ideas herein presented are based on my proximity to the material. These theories are intended to fill critical gaps in the story. They in no way can be viewed as absolute fact at this juncture. During this embryonic period of developing a more complete work, it would be beneficial to acquire reactions regarding such material.
2. Postcard from Robert C. Spencer to Grant V. Manson in mid-1950s. Manson Collection, Oak Park Public Library.
3. The old family home on Clark Street in Chicago which his father, Job Evans Willits, had bought, no longer suited the needs of the young family. His 1897 marriage to Cecilia May Berry had resulted in the birth of three children by 1901.