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100 Years of Solitude: A Progressive Era Retreat in the Heart of a Modern City

“A chandelier? Why the hell do you have a chandelier in your bedroom?” Whether my friend was confused, envious, or bemused that I of all people would have such a classy light fixture in my sleeping area, I’m not quite sure. Regardless, it was a good question, and a detail I had managed to overlook in the process of moving into a new house during Madison’s infamous moving weekend. My justification was this: there were some other things about my new place that had kept my mind preoccupied, namely the fact that James Madison Park was a stone’s throw away and Lake Mendota was just out the backdoor. The last thing I was worried about was inspecting the interior design of my house. It was only after the warm days of August were long past, and the chills of October had forced us to hunker down inside, that I thought seriously about my friend’s question.

What *was* a chandelier doing hanging from the ceiling of my college bedroom? It was unlikely any college student had put it there, and considering the make-up of my neighborhood consists mostly of young adults and college-age students, I realized I would have to go back to the first decade of the twentieth century to begin to try to understand. By unraveling the history behind the chandelier and the house, and inspecting it from the viewpoint of its first occupants, I managed to come to terms with my place within the house, landscape, and social history of 646 East Gorham Street.

Cornelius C. Collins, a well to do lumberman who had made his living harvesting the forests of northern Wisconsin, purchased the land at 646 East Gorham Street in Madison,

Wisconsin in 1907,¹ and built his home the following year. Collins had moved to Madison in 1903 and run C.C. Collins & Son Inc. until his death in 1950. Known as “The Dean of Wisconsin Lumbermen”,² it is probable that Collins was considered a prominent member of Madison’s society, and likely wished to construct a home for his wife and children that would reflect his position among the upper class. Today the Collins’s house is part of the Fourth Lake Ridge Historic District; a neighborhood located roughly between Franklin and Brearly Streets along Gorham.³ This area is significant for the architectural integrity and historical value of many residences that belonged to such distinguished Madisonians as former University of Wisconsin Board of Regents member Dr. Charles H. Vilas.⁴ During the latter part of the nineteenth century as Madison was expanding outwards from the downtown area where the State capital is currently located, natural geographic areas like the ridges and hills on the isthmus were highly coveted real estate. As the city grew, the most desirable land went to the lawyers, doctors, and businessmen like Collins who could afford to build their homes on the ridges. Consequently, places like the Mansion Hill neighborhood formed identities as upper-crust neighborhoods that were highly sought-after for their proximity to the downtown areas, lake views, and elevated position.⁴

By now I had figured out the chandelier hanging from my bedroom ceiling was probably a remnant from a time when the house was occupied by an elite family, part of a different social class. So the small mystery of the fancy chandelier that now doubled as my studying lamp was solved, but in the process of finding that answer, other curiosities about the rest of the house, the land it was perched on, and Cornelius the lumberman had been piqued. In order to get a better idea of who Cornelius Collins was, it made sense to study the house he had built at 646 East Gorham Street and look for clues that would reveal something about his values and tastes.

The Collins house is situated near the top of the ridge running northeast southwest along the curvature of Lake Mendota. This ridge, along with Madison's lakes, the former marshy lowlands of the isthmus, and the other hills in the vicinity are the products of receding glacial action that took place over 13,000 years ago.⁵ Today, the property sits near the intersection of Gorham and Blount Streets and the front façade opens up to face Gorham. The back of the house looks down the backside of the ridge onto Lake Mendota and a public walking path that winds along the lakeshore from James Madison Park to the Lincoln School Apartment building.

However if one were to view a map of what is today the 600 block of East Gorham Street, a century ago, several noticeable differences would highlight the way the neighborhood landscape has changed.⁶ Most obvious would be the presence of other residences along the entire block where James Madison Park is located today. Today, these houses are gone, and the Collins house remains the sole original structure built during or before 1908 (Its neighbor at 640 E. Gorham was completed in 1920, replacing a residence built prior to 1908).⁸ Aerial photos from 1937 show trees present on the slope behind the house, although the present asphalt path that borders the lake was non-existent.⁷ One feature not found today however, would be a small wooden boathouse with a shingle roof that presumably was built at the same time the Collins residence was constructed.⁶ Whether the family used the lake for boating, fishing, swimming or any combination of these, this boathouse signals to me that Cornelius valued the location of the house on the lake not only for its aesthetic qualities, but also for its recreational opportunities. Upon learning of the little boathouse I walked down to the spot where it probably stood and tried to picture his family enjoying a hot summer day in the cool water. Along the southeast shore the lake bottom is relatively shallow and level several hundred feet out into the water, providing perfect swimming and wading conditions. In my mind's eye, I could easily picture them

splashing each other and goofing off in their backyard lake, as I had done a few months earlier with my friends and roommates.

Later that evening as the sun was setting and I was grilling my dinner in the backyard, I thought of how someone 100 years ago would have viewed a similar sunset from the back of the house. To me, the slope running from the street down to the lakeshore provides a sense of spaciousness and seclusion from the busy Gorham traffic. It also allows the house's rear windows stunning views of the lake and western horizon, which means the setting sun's vibrant rays illuminate the lake and property in the evenings. Although the neighborhood and development around the house have changed considerably, it is likely that the same hillside and the view of the lake and were just as powerful to Cornelius as he watched the sun set behind Picnic Point.

As I sat there, the idea that the entire design, orientation, and location of my house were more intentional than coincidental kept growing on me. I walked around to the front door and went inside to sit on the back porch. The front of the house faces the street and offers an attractive façade to passersby, but looks out over the lake from the back of the house courtesy of floor to ceiling windows on three sides of an enclosed sun porch. The porch allows for scenic views of the lake and sky by blocking out the busy cityscape surrounding it. To me it creates a sensation of being out in nature but from inside the comfort and warmth of the home (Fig. 1). As I looked out the windows, Progressive Era interpretations of what I was seeing sprang into my mind. The house is oriented as a gateway to the lake and nature, as a link between the busy street and city to the more placid lake and grassy hillside. It reminded me of Frederic Edwin Church and his method of incorporating the landscape via "man-made" vistas in his art and his architecture, although the my porch probably couldn't hold a candle to the extravagance of

Church's Olana estate. Although I had to work to orient views of the lake so tree branches could "frame" the view along the park footpath, it was easy to picture an architect designing the house to be built not on, but into the landscape. I slowly began to see how the Progressive values of closely connected land and society during the early 1900s were part of the story behind the location of what was now my 21st century college house.

Understanding the architecture of the house is important to understanding the time period in which the Collins house was constructed. The large two and half story brick structure was designed by the Madison based architecture firm Claude & Starck for the Collins family.⁸ As architects renowned throughout the state of Wisconsin and considered among the Madison upper class themselves, Claude & Starck were commissioned to design many homes in Madison and in the Fourth Lake Historic District.⁸ Collins likely hired the firm to design a house for him in the then popular Prairie Style, which was a model for many of the prestigious homes in the neighborhood. The Prairie Style was influenced heavily by famed Wisconsin born architect Frank Lloyd Wright who interestingly lived for a period of his life within the Fourth Lake District. Wright was critically influential to the Prairie Style, including his use of broad bands of windows to allow increased light in order to "bring the outside into the house".⁸ Claude & Starck's use of the porch windows and the band of similarly designed windows on the second floor above the front door can be attributed to Wright's influence. The notion of combining nature and society through the use of a window is an example of the Progressive view of the time period.

The design and feel of the house as a tool to embrace nature is also highlighted by the use of certain materials and architectural techniques to fit the residence into a popular Progressive perspective of pastoral nature.⁸ Walking back inside from the porch, the natural feel of the house

seems to become even more accented. Soft gray-pink sandstone frames the mantel and fireplace. The oak moldings, floorboards, and timber beams on the ceilings give a warm, golden glow to the rooms to increase the feeling of comfort in a man-made “natural” environment.

As I thought about the windows, the wood, and the location of the house on the ridge, I began to try and see the house from the perspective of the architect. It seemed more and more that the intention of building a house as part of the landscape, instead of just on top of it, was correct. To me the goal of creating a house in close proximity to nature was accomplished and although the architectural vision is a century old, the feeling can still be felt. I experience this sense of security and comfort within “nature” strongest around the fire pit behind the house. Although located near the downtown area of a large city, sitting around the fire within the presence of the lake, the trees on the hillside, and the bustle of the street reduced to a hum, the feeling of separation and seclusion granted by the house and its surroundings is comforting.

Comforting too is the fact that a warm meal or a comfortable bed is just upstairs, and that I can easily transition from the illusion of a smoky backcountry camping site to the conveniences of electricity and indoor plumbing whenever I wish. As I go to switch off the chandelier before getting into bed, I look at the light fixture in a new way. I see it not as the butt of a friend’s joke, but as a symbol for a time when the house and neighborhood belonged to a class of citizens much different from the one that occupies them now. It is reassuring to me that even 100 years later the original designs and vision behind the house at 646 East Gorham Street are still valued for their simple but appealing comforts. Although life must have been vastly different for Cornelius Collins and myself, I like to think he might have occasionally retreated to the same backyard where I now sit next to my fire, to catch his breath from the hustle and bustle of a busy day.

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 2. "C.C. Collins Rites to Be Held Tuesday," Obituary Notice, *Wisconsin State Journal*, 12 February 1950, sec. 1, p. 12.
 3. M.Ruggieri-Moen. Department of Planning and Development-Planning Unit. Property Map of Fourth Lake Ridge Historic District, City of Madison. June 1994. Wisconsin State Historical Society, Madison, WI.
 4. United States Department of the Interior, "State Register of Historic Places Certification Form for Fourth Lake Ridge Historic District, Madison, Dane County, Wisconsin." Certified Nov 6, 1996, Sec. 7-9, Image 5 of 18. Wisconsin State Historical Society, Madison, WI.
 5. Mollenhoff, David V. *Madison: A History of the Formative Years*. (Dubuque: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Co., 1982), 7-9.
 6. 1908 Sanborn Insurance Map, Madison, WI, Section 260, Lot 8. Wisconsin Historical Society Archives, Madison WI.
 7. Aerial photo of Madison's Isthmus, 6 July 1937. File number WU-7-504.01. UW-Madison Map Library.
 8. Bernstein, Rebecca. "Historic Collins/Connor Residences in Park's Path?" *UPDATE: The Newsletter of the Madison Trust for Historic Preservation*, December 1992, 1, 4-5.