

5/23/74

# 'Millionaires' row' is closer to reality

By Stanley Ziembra

CHICAGO's plans to establish an historical district on what used to be South Prairie Avenue's "millionaires' row" in the 1890s received a boost recently from the Northeastern Illinois Planning Commission.

NIPC, the official planning agency for the six-county Chicago area, endorsed an application from the city's Department of Public Works for a \$350,000 state grant to help purchase 5.04 acres of land for a park within the district.

The historic district is two miles south of the Loop and is bounded by Indiana Avenue, the Illinois Central Gulf railroad right of way and 18th and 19th Streets.

The public works department is seeking the grant from the Illinois Department of Conservation's open space land acquisition program.

**PURCHASE** of the land, which would cost the city about \$1.4 million if the grant is obtained from the state, would serve the dual purpose of providing urgently needed city open space and restoring the gardens and lawns that set

the environment for former Chicago socialites, city officials said.

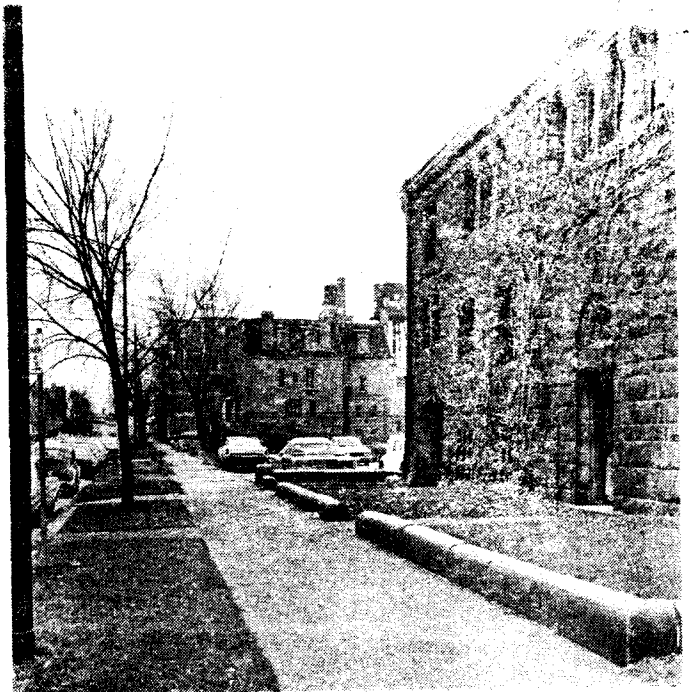
Prairie Avenue was the focal point of the rich during the regeneration that followed the Chicago fire in 1871. The mansions of George S. Pullman, P. D. Armour, and Marshall Field, all since destroyed, were three of the finest of the era and typified the ostentatiousness of the affluent Midwesterners.

Two landmark buildings that remain in the district are on the National Register of Historic Places, as is the district itself. Architect Henry Hobson Richardson's Glessner House, 1800 S. Prairie Av., constructed in 1886, laid the foundation for the Chicago School of Architecture. The Kimball House, 1801 S. Prairie Av., completed in 1892, was designed by Solon Beman, who also planned and designed the Pullman community on the city's far South Side.

The 1837 Widow [Henry B.] Clark House, believed to be Chicago's oldest standing structure, also may be moved to the architectural park from its South Wabash location. It originally was at 16th Street and Michigan Avenue.



Prairie Av. as it appeared in the 1890s (above) and as it looks today (right). Views look south from 18th, with Glessner House on the right. (Sun-Times Photo by Pete Peters)



# Turning back Prairie Av.'s clock

By Harry Golden Jr.

Prairie Av. will be restored with 19th Century gas lamps and cobblestones and the renovation of five celebrated houses, Mayor Daley announced Monday.

He joined Ruth Moore, architectural writer and head of a committee of the Chicago School of Architecture Foundation, in announcing joint public-private plans to establish the city's first architectural district at Prairie and 18th.

Said Miss Moore, in private life Mrs. Ruth Moore Garbe, "Here is our history — more than that, a way of life. This district will rank in significance with Williamsburg in Virginia, the French Quarter in New Orleans, Independence Square in Philadelphia.

At a press conference in his office, Daley said the city would make a contribution from a newly proposed \$40-million neighborhood-improvement bond issue to restore the street, curbing, lamps and landscaping.

Restoration of historic houses, the moving of the famous Widow Clarke House to the site and creation of an architectural park and possibly a museum will be financed by the foundation, privately and possibly the federal government, Daley and Miss Moore said.

The Clarke house, believed to be the city's

oldest, was built about 1837 by Henry B. Clarke, hardware businessman and banker, on Michigan near 16th. About 1871, shortly before the Great Fire, it was moved to its present site at 4526 S. Wabash.

The house was acquired in 1945 by Bishop Louis Henry Ford and the St. Paul Church of God in Christ, and extensive repairs were made. Porticos removed a century ago will be restored when the structure is moved to the historic district.

The district will encompass four other historic houses: the 1886 Glessner House, 1800 S. Prairie, now owned and largely restored by the foundation; the 1886 Kimball House, 1801 S. Prairie; the 1886 Coleman House, 1811 S. Prairie, and the 1871 Keith House, 1900 S. Prairie.

The Kimball and Coleman houses have been bought by R.R. Donnelley and Sons Co., and Keith House has been bought by Wilbert R. Hasbrouck, an architectural authority.

Miss Moore, a former Sun-Times reporter, said all the houses are in "protected ownership." Although they will remain in private hands, she pointed out that the Commission on Chicago Historical and Architectural Landmarks is expected soon to recommend a landmark designation for the entire district. This would bar any alteration in it without permission of the City Council.

Miss Moore said Prairie Av. once was "the symbol for almost the ultimate in urban living." Leaders of Chicago, she said, built mansions on the street from 1600 South to 2200 between 1870 and 1900, as Chicago expanded

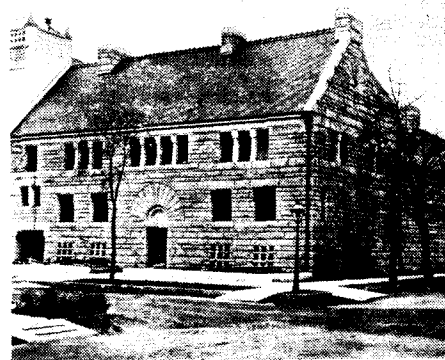
south after the fire.

Residents included George M. Pullman, builder of the Pullman car; Marshall Field I, the founder of the Chicago merchandising house which bears his name; P. D. Armour, meat packer, and John J. Glessner, an official of International Harvester.

William W. Kimball, a dealer in pianos and organs, commissioned Solon S. Beman to design his \$1-million house as a French chateau.

The house of Joseph G. Coleman, a hardware manufacturer, was designed by the architectural firm of Cobb and Frost.

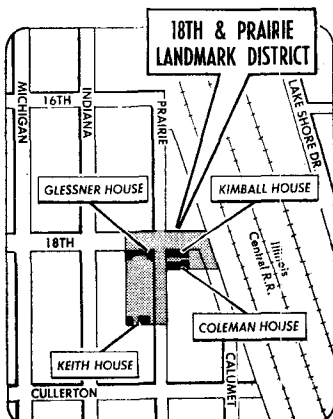
Elbridge G. Keith was a hat wholesaler and banker whose three-story brick house, with huge, paneled rooms and parquet floors, reflects the Prairie Av. life-style.



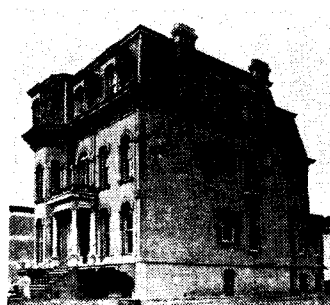
Glessner House



Kimball House



Four of five houses to be restored are spotted in proposed historic district (shaded). Widow Clarke House is to be moved from its present Wabash Av. site. (Sun-Times Map by Jack Jordan)



Keith House



Widow Clarke House



Coleman House

Historic 19th Century houses to be renovated as part of the Prairie Av. Heritage District program.

# Warm, vital presence of Glessner House

By Rob Cuscaden  
*Sun-Times Architecture Critic*

In 1885, a very large and very fat Boston architect named Henry Hobson Richardson, who liked to work in his drafting rooms dressed in a monk's habit, received a visitor from Chicago.

The visitor was John J. Glessner, a very successful industrialist, and he had come to Boston to see if the world-famous architect would design a home for the Glessner family, which had just bought a corner lot on prestigious Prairie Av., at 18th St.

Glessner was a great admirer of the architect's work.

His own conservatism was reflected in the Richardsonian simplicity, proportion and sturdiness. But he had heard that the architect would only undertake monumental buildings — such as the Pittsburgh Courthouse and Jail and the Field Warehouse in Chicago, which had such an enormous influence on Louis Sullivan and his subsequent Auditorium Building.

**BUT GLESSNER** needn't have worried.

"Nonsense," boomed Richardson. "I'll plan anything a man wants, from a cathedral

to a chicken coop. That's the way I make my living."

Later in Chicago, Richardson and Glessner drove out to the site in a carriage. The architect didn't get out of the vehicle. He sat in the carriage, wordlessly, and stared at the corner lot for a long time.

Finally, he turned to Glessner, and said, "Have you the courage to build the house without windows on the street side?"

Glessner nodded, yes, and thus cemented the architect-client relationship that was to produce one of the most famous homes in the world.

**IT ALSO WAS** to be one of the last works of Richardson, who, at 48 years of age, had less than a year to live.

The Glessner House is still with us in Chicago, one of our very few successful attempts at landmark building preservation. And while the old home was kept pretty busy during Glessner's day, it currently is positively jumping with activities.

After a checkered past following the death of Glessner in 1936 — the usual fumbled and bumbling attempts at historic preservation — it was acquired in 1966 by the Chicago School of Architecture Foundation, and it is now a center of architectural activity.

The Glessner House today is the home of the Foundation, the Chicago Chapter of the American Institute of Architects and the magazine *Inland Architect*, as well as a meeting place for such groups as the Chicago Heritage Committee, Society of Architectural Historians, etc. It also is very much open to the public, and guided tours are provided. (Phone 326-1393 for details.)

**BUT MOST** importantly, the Glessner House is just the Glessner House — a legitimate architectural masterpiece.

Of course, as is true of all pioneering works of archi-

Architect Henry Hobson Richardson's Glessner House is shown under construction in a photo taken in 1886.

ture, the Glessner House was not exactly everyone's favorite building, then or now. George Pullman lived on Prairie Av., too, as did most of Chicago's elite at that time, and he positively hated the building. His own home was the usual curious amalgam of Domestic Gothic, Botched Queen Anne and Misplaced French Chateau.

"I don't like it, and I wish it weren't there," growled Pullman. "I don't know what I have ever done to have that thing staring me in the face every time I go out of my door!"

**BUT WE MUST** not be too hard on Pullman; the new and innovative is always disturbing to the less imaginative. After all, Frank Lloyd Wright's Robie House was equally disparaged, and this continuity of misunderstanding runs right up to today. Even Mies van der Rohe's astounding Farnsworth Home in Plano, Ill., eventually resulted in Mrs. Farnsworth suing Mies because of her unhappiness with the home.

But Richardson surely designed a masterpiece. And those previously-referred-to small windows on the exterior are a part of its genius.

Richardson intuitively realized that the windows of a house in the city were really not to "look out of," and there was no valid reason for making them large. There is no bucolic, suburban vista, so what's the point? "You no sooner get large windows than

you shroud them with two thicknesses of window shades, and double sets of curtains," Richardson mused.

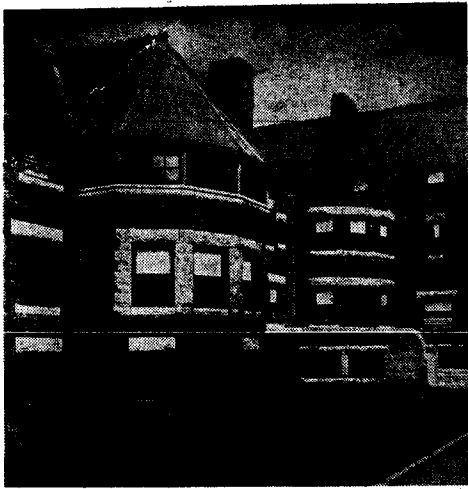
Instead, the architect structured small, outside windows on the public sides of the house. And he sited the basically L-shaped home right up to its corner sidewalks, which allowed for a large, enclosed courtyard, upon which the court's windows look — and they are large windows. Richardson thereby opened up the house on the inside, providing a private, secure, green area for the family, away from the dust and noise of its urban area.

**THE GLESSNER** House is thus a true City House, and refuses to masquerade as anything else.

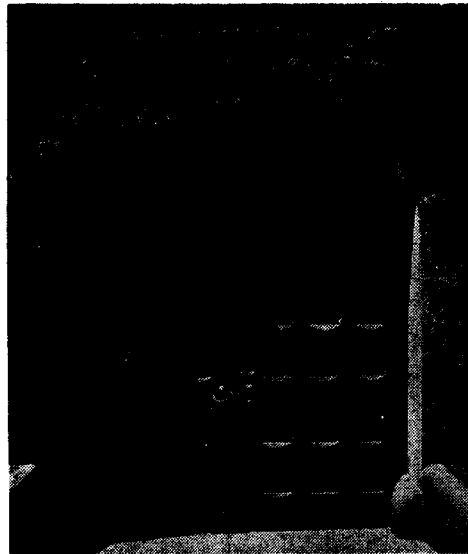
Note also the main entrance to the home. It is a quiet entranceway, almost a narrow entranceway, with only a simple arch over the door to express its function. But it clearly states: This home is private.

And, so, the Glessner House survives, a warm, vital presence in our curious age. It is a part of the fabric of Chicago, and it contributes to our society as only great architecture uniquely can.

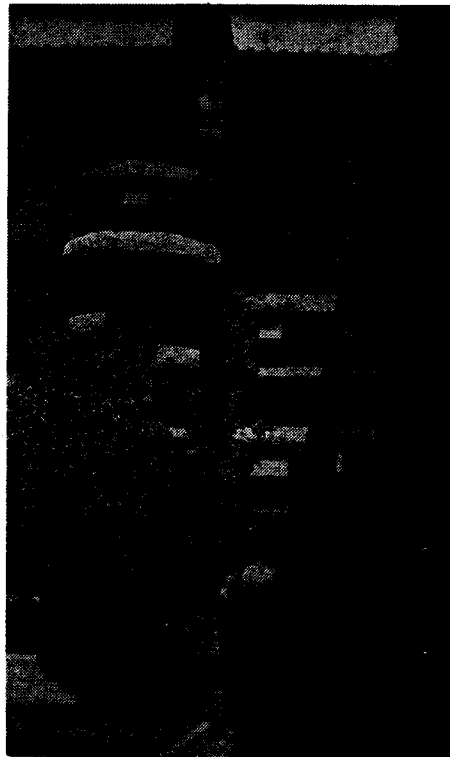
**AND THAT IS** important, too. We revere the Glessner House because it is a great work of architecture. But we also must realize that these historic structures are of crucial civic importance to a city, to Chicago.



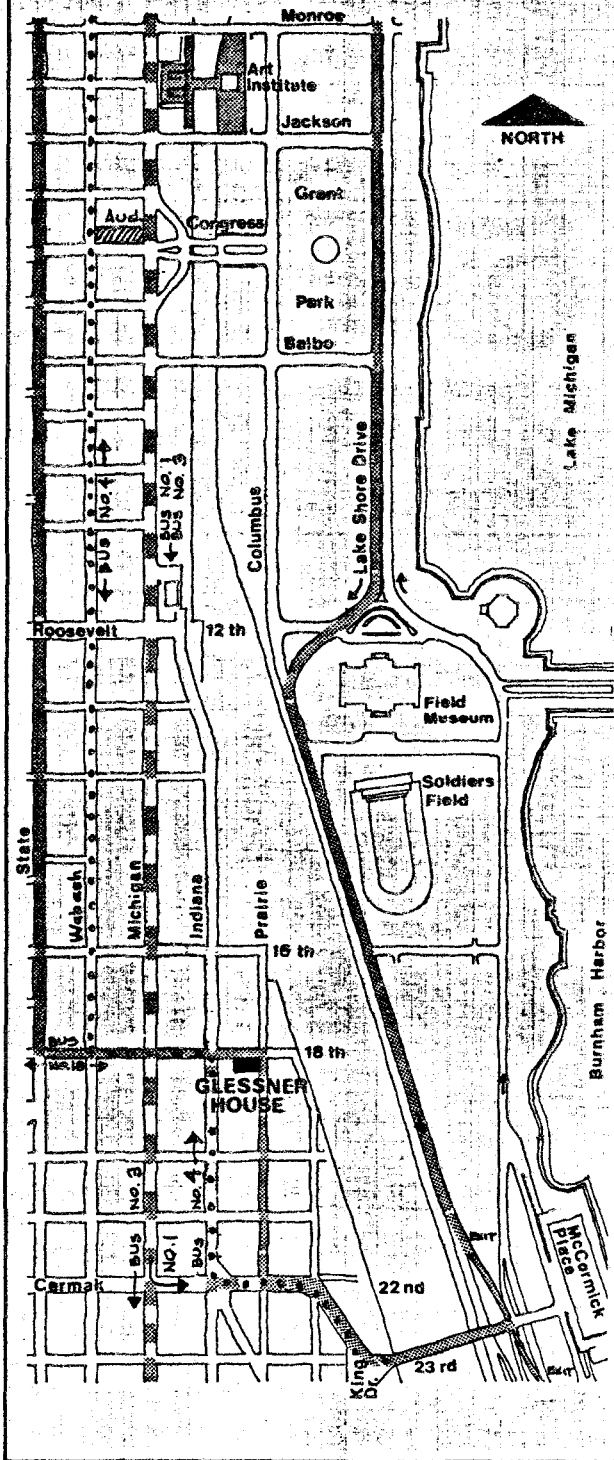
The Glessner House, an L-shaped structure, was built right up to its corner lot lines; this enabled the architect to structure a large, enclosed courtyard. This home's front and backyards are thus inside, and wholly private.



The photo above shows the carriage entrance on Prairie Av. At right is the carriage entrance shown from the courtyard. The simplicity and sturdiness, the exquisite detailing and precise proportion of Richardson's penchant for Romanesque is everywhere in evidence at the Glessner House.



# map to glessner house



Saturday  
June 29, 1974  
4:30 P.M.