

# Conservation of Landscape Histories: Reinterpretation of Chicago's Ecological past and Complexities Encountered While Searching for Its Original Native Landscape

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## Abstract:

This paper explores the contemporary routes that citizens of Chicago have access to historic natural landscape environments. Two ecological nature preserves examined in this historical case study offer windows into an ecological past, equitable to the landscape which preceded the existence of Chicago. One residential home, the Widow Clarke House, a Greek revival style homestead built in 1836, is a tangible remnant of Chicago's early colonialist settlement. Today it is a celebrated house museum possessing much architectural gravitas and civic pride, signifying supposed credence for foreign occupation of Native American Indian lands. However, it could not have existed without the eight hectares of land which the Clarke's used for agricultural farming to support themselves and their growing family. This paper explores how the home's historic landscape has been ignored, suppressed and eliminated from the conservation protocol, which instead primarily focuses on the repair of the home's architectural fabric and interiors, in lieu of an interpretative restoration of the perimeter enveloping landscape. Furthermore, history surrounding an 1849 Cholera epidemic shall be linked to hardships Caroline's home would eventually face over the next 122 years (1850~1972), before becoming developed into a bona fide house museum. The difficult conservation narrative the Clarke home and its 'lost' landscape traverses will be critically examined in this paper. Vignettes of the past will provide today's reader with cautionary tales about the erasure of a cultural landscape, agrarian customs, and other traditions. None of these factors have received appropriate consideration for landscape restoration and re-creation, due to too much focus upon architectural primacy—and its ill-assumed supremacy. This paper shall provide plentiful reasons for landscape architects and design professionals to develop a more comprehensive set of criteria to rank and evaluate a wider array of contributing landscape elements worthy of conservation, including the original ecological environment.

## Keywords:

## Chicago House Museums, Historic Landscape Conservation, Freshwater Sand Dune Conservation, Urban Landscape Rehabilitation

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### 1. Introduction

In most major metropolitan cities in the Western hemisphere there exists the societal value that early domestic architectural heritage is both noteworthy and appropriate for memorialization. In many cases, old homes are assigned a “build-date” and if they fit into a category of “very old,” a metal plaque or sign is affixed to demarcate to the general public the expert-evaluated importance of the house. The house may or may not be open for public access. This act of preservation of memory and the fastening of insignia to the exterior of a home, proves that the concept of “the oldest house” (still standing) in a city brings with it a certain degree of honor and recognition which could be followed by civic pride, pomp and circumstance, after academic recognition is proved and believed by the general populace.

The notion of Civic importance certainly governs this recognition process; such methods of identification, verification and demarcation fall upon multiple levels of bureaucracy which often times is shared among federal, state and local hierarchical governmental administrations. Some of these themes originate from the author’s study of six historic house museums in Chicago, Illinois “House Museums in Chicago: A Re-examination of Motives, Origins, and Transformation of the Institution” (as of yet, unpublished at the date of submission of this paper).[1] The six which were placed under a fine-degree of examination in the dissertation include: The Palmer castle, the Clarke house (Fig.1), the Glessner house, the Harding castle, the Madlener house and the Robie House. Of these six case studies, two homes were demolished (Palmer and Harding) just prior to the onset of a serious historic preservation movement and ‘protective’ legislation in America in the late 1960s.



**Figure 1.** *The Clarke house in its current hybrid urban/sylvan setting (East-facing elevation).*

*Photograph taken by the author.*

Beyond questions concerning the process of research which leads to the identification and recognition of historic homes, the initial question of this paper’s investigation must be addressed: *Why is the architectural fabric of the home (which often is damaged but not entirely obliterated by time) always paramount in these inquiries while the historic landscape (which often times is entirely lost or erased) is seldom, if ever, brought into the conversation as having value, importance and worth for restoration?* Several aspects leading to this unfortunate and all too common behavior and institutional assumption shall be dissected at length in this paper.

## 2. Methodology

Traditional archival research composed the majority of the research conducted during the dissertation research time period, 2015~2018. In addition to this, primary source interviews took place synonymous to this time period. These in-person interviews were conducted and transcribed by the author and then sent back to each person who was interviewed in order to double-verify that what was recorded in text form, was indeed what the interviewee wished to be permanently inscribed on record. Over two dozen Chicagoans and former residents were interviewed, whose ages ranged from 65 to 99 years old (at the time of the interviews). Sadly one person was deceased prior to the final publication of the dissertation. The people interviewed had a wide variety of engagement levels with various house museums in Chicago from the 1940s onward to the present. Concerned denizens to seasoned museum curators were interviewed; hence a broad demographic cross-section of the population was obtained. There was no one common question asked of them that was identical other than a general thematic query that unified the interviews. Instead, general themes all related in some way to the question, “In what ways were you involved in the creation, maintenance and promulgation of the institution of the house museum in Chicago?” was asked. The resultant answers varied quite wide and broad, equal to that of the range of persons interviewed.



*Figure 2. IIT Architecture History Professor Emeritus Kevin Harrington, Ph.D. and retired Clarke House chief curator Elaine Harrington.*

### 2.1. Historical Discrepancies

Perhaps one of the most interesting aspects of information to emerge from all of the collected interviews involves discrepancies or arguments with the existing historical record. In multiple cases, the people interviewed had very specific points which they argued vociferously with the existing sequence of events that other researchers had previously published. This is neither immediately alarming nor surprising, for the groups of people interviewed were happy that a researcher was speaking with them to amend or correct the historic record. Vigorous fact-checking certainly was requisite following the interviews and the arguments that people presented. The notion that a collegiate researcher was re-writing or revising the historic record according to their words and memories was salient during the discussions. Several times different people aggressively stated, “*You write this down, young man!*,” in spite of the fact the author was in his late thirties and early forties when the interviews took place, 2015~2018.

Converse to the testimonies collected from sage and upstanding Chicago citizens, a very different response was felt and received from current governing institutions organized and inhabiting various house museums in Chicago. In many cases, there

was a great degree of reticence or reservation regarding a Ph.D. student researcher revising the historic timelines which these institutions have been researching, crafting and publishing for several years. The notion that new additions to *their* timelines were suggested... or that there existed discrepancies in their finely-concocted timelines, was a heretical act. Much institutional apprehension, suspicion or even downright anger was sometimes encountered. This of course makes the continuation of the research even more challenging in such an environment vacuous of serious scholarly support. None the less, one had to proceed forward with the research.

### 3. The Clarke House

At first attempt it appears impossible to surmise the history of the Clarke house even in one single paper. The original dissertation document alone contains 9,641 words, which compose the body of the work, with an additional 2,100 words on 194 lines which comprise the expanded timeline, including footnotes. With so much having been said, what portions of this research can be grown to include the state of the natural landscape and its apparent lack of restoration? The following highlights from the timeline shall illustrate the importance of the natural ecological environment which shaped the genesis of the house.

#### 3.1. Native Soils

Although the “First plat of the town of Chicago was filed,” on August 4, 1830,[2] less than one hundred white and mixed-ethnicity settlers had gathered to make the shifting outlet of the Chicago River their home, along the hilly sand dunes of Lake Michigan, then called “michi-gami” by the Ojibwe people, roughly meaning great water. Actual settlement by Caucasian American and European immigrants could not “safely” occur until the three Native American tribes: the Ottawa (Odaawaa), Chippewa (Ojibwe), and Potawatomi (Bodéwadmi), also known as “the Council of Three Fires”, “agreed” to settlement twice, with Michigan Territorial Governor Lewis Cass and Solomon Sibley, in 1821 and 1833, signing their names, [3] opening the proverbial floodgates for so-called “legal” settlement. What was promised in return for evacuating their lands around a massive swath of shoreline of multiple great lakes were promises of cash money and relocation to other “assumed un-claimed land” much farther west of the Mississippi River, of quite inferior quality.



**Figure 3.** The restored Clarke home today. Note absence of perimeter landscaping; the exception being a cast iron ornamental urn near the west-facing front steps.

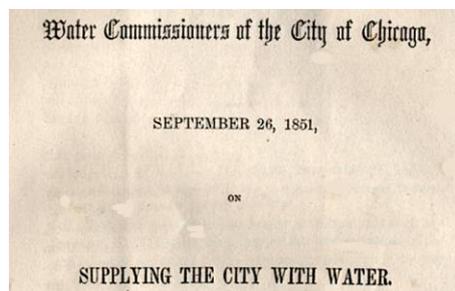
*Photograph taken by the author.*

#### 3.2. White Settlement

In 1835 Henry Brown Clarke, relocating in search of business and fortune moved from Waterville, New York to the village of Chicago (~3,000 inhabitants) and in that same year purchases a plot of land encompassing twenty acres (8 hectares) for \$2,000 USD (equivalent to \$52,000 today, equivalent to 357,182 RMB).[4] A single log cabin stood on the land, created by an unknown former inhabitant; the Clarkes, having no other place to go, moved into the cabin and eventually transferred to a small local hotel (Mrs. Clarke must have gotten tired of the soggy earthen walls!). One year later, after finding success in a partnership to create the city's first bank and hardware store, the Clarkes hired John C. Rye (or Rue, nobody seems to have a clear record of the builder's name) [5] to construct what was incredibly en vogue at the time, a home in the reviled Greek Revival style for his wife, Caroline Palmer and their (then) two children. Today, it possesses a grand colonnaded pedimented portico facing west towards what once was a Native American Indian trail, now known as Michigan Avenue, and a mirror image faces east, towards an urbane city park.

### 3.3. *Panics and Solutions*

Just one year later, in 1837, land speculators and others contribute to a financial panic which wrecked the village's economy in the same year the city incorporated (on 4 March). Containing only about 4,000 inhabitants, the Clarke family resolved themselves to stay in the village of Chicago and turn to more agrarian pursuits to sustain the family by running a dairy and hunting wild game on their twenty acres for food. A year later, the family's fortunes improved and although the interior southern one-third of their home is incomplete, Clarke hires the same gentleman (JRC) to build a monumental formal triangular pedimented portico facing east towards shallow hilly sand dunes and eventually the shore of freshwater Lake Michigan. Henry doesn't have much time to watch the sun rise from his newly completed porch, for only eleven years later, in 1849, Henry is one of 678 victims who perish. Emblematic of the growth of the city, in that same eleven year time period, Chicago burst from 4,000 people to about 23,365 inhabitants, a 5.8-fold increase. Such growth would continue to beleaguer the city, for there were more Cholera epidemics to come in the next decade, wiping away scores of more victims. Unbeknownst to (many of) them, the cause was drinking polluted water from the same repository of their own sewage: the no longer safe to consume Lake Michigan. During this time, it was popular believe that poverty alone caused sickness; of course this is rather oxymoronic to the fate that an educated, wealthy Mr. Henry B. Clarke encountered.

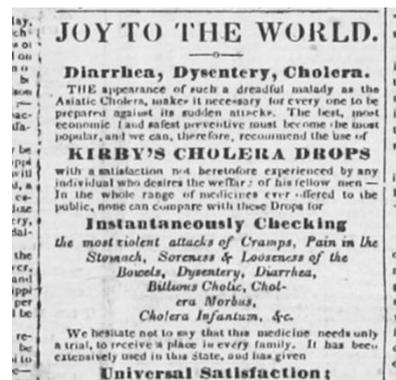


**Figure 4.** *Searching for solutions for plentiful potable water, cover excerpt.[6]*

*Photograph taken by the author.*

### 3.4. *Identifying the Issues*

Civil Engineer, William J. McAlpine, published a report especially made for the Water Commissioners of the City of Chicago. The pollution of Lake Michigan was certainly known; the assumed solution was to simply move the “fresh water” intake portal pipes a greater distance away from the shoreline. The first water intake crib was not accomplished until 1865. Called “Two-Mile Crib,” it was designed by Ellis S. Chesbrough. Unable to ‘beat’ the pollution entering the lake from the city, 26 years later, in 1891, a second fresh-water intake pipe construction project, called “Four-Mile Crib,” was initiated and completed with a steam heat plant in 1898, which prevented freeze-up in the coldest of winter months.[7] In the annals of popular urban legends and beliefs, the myth that the “simple” digging of the 28-mile (45 km) “Sanitary and Ship Canal to reverse the flow of the Chicago River away from Lake Michigan,”[8] was the first attempt at public drinking water sanitation, and completely cured all the city’s ills, has persisted. Assumed historical “facts” circulating as highly plausible or seemingly logical panaceas are quite hard to quash, over one-hundred years later. However this gargantuan excavation project to build the now-called “Chicago Sanitary Canal” was not finished until 1900. The effects of unclean water upon the general populace was certainly known in the decades preceding its financing, dredging and excavation. Methods for remedies, beyond the consumption of pure water, surprise the contemporary reader as incredibly bizarre, implausible, and complete hyperbole.



*Figure 5. Advertisement from the Chicago Democrat, 7 June, 1849. [9]*

*Photograph taken by the author.*

### 3.5. Saving Henry

What methods might have Henry Brown Clarke undertaken in 1849 to preserve his health in order to not succumb to Cholera? Most likely he was a highly literate man, reading the daily papers. Within such period pieces (Fig. 5), we find a tablet or drop made by a Mr. Kirby which was advertised to check or cure: “Cramps, pain in the stomach, soreness & looseness of the bowels, dysentery, diarrhea, billious cholic, Cholera Norbus, Cholera Infantum...”[10]. A few years later, in 1851, in Quincy, Illinois, the Quincy Weekly Whig newspaper elucidated the public by publishing a piece titled, “Health of the City.” Within, the editors opined: “We regret to be compelled to report that there were an increased number of deaths during this past week... from cholera, or a disease that resembles it in many of its symptoms... These deaths in the most instances were among a class of people but poorly provided with the necessities or comforts of life, and as a general thing can be traced to imprudence in their manner of living... Our citizens feel no alarm and there is no cause for any, in

fact. Prudence in diet—a cheerful disposition—will do more towards warding off the disease than all the medicines ever invented or compounded.”[11]

The conventional notion, in the mid-nineteenth century, that sickness was the consequence of a lack of economic prosperity is redolent in this passage. The idea that a simple “cheerful disposition” will fend off Cholera and preserve health, instead of trusting in various medicinal tinctures or examining the source of water one chooses to imbibe, leaves the contemporary reader aghast! Discussion about miasmatic or germ theory was clearly far and absent from commonplace conversations in the early American Midwest. One would have to wait another thirty years until the 1880’s, when notions of germ theory were introduced to public consciousness and further debate.

#### 4. Caroline’s Search for Solutions

In 1850, in the year following the death of her husband, Caroline sold seventeen acres (6.8 hectares) off the original twenty acres she and her late husband once owned. All that remained was a scant three acres (1.21 hectares) surrounding her Greek Revival home, housing herself and her six children. Real Estate values had increased substantially during their fifteen year stay, and with the proceeds, Caroline was able to complete the dining room and front parlor first floor rooms. In addition, facing westward, a Doric order “portico and [Italianate] cupola were added sometime after” Henry’s death.[12] Living as a single woman who must tend to her children, in the 1850s in Chicago, must not have been easy, to say the least.



**Figure 6.** “Chicago in 1868.” *The mystery of hand-color-tinting implies pure, clean, beige sandy beaches abound aplenty along the edge condition. Quite a bit of illustrated hyperbole by a late middle-nineteenth century artisan illustrator. [13]*

*Photograph taken by the author.*

After a decade of solitary existence (with no historical record of male suitors or otherwise) Matriarch Caroline traveled back in 1860, to visit her family in Buffalo, New York. Unfortunately, historical records indicate she died there, at age 53, leaving behind between three to five surviving children. The only children with a documented age being two sons: Edward Dwight Clarke, age 16, who lived until 1881, to age 37. The elder son, James Henry Clarke, was 22 years old upon his mother’s passing, and lived until 1856, to age 28.[14]. Oldest daughter Mary, age 28, continued to dwell in the home and take care of the remaining children, (of which records are missing or are not clear) after their mother’s death. Mary herself lived to the ripe old age of 60, and died in 1892. Clearly, the sustainment of life in the American midwestern plains was quite a challenging and difficult endeavor. The lack of clean drinking water was certainly one major factor in the short life-span of what we today call, ‘brave pioneer frontier-men... and women.’

#### 4.1. *Alternative Husbandry*

Due to the inability of women, in this early age of America, to hold serious business or even have the right to franchise, what options did Caroline Palmer have upon the death of her husband? In fact it was commonplace for a widowed wife to return to her husband's family and seek companionship and economic sustenance through any surviving, single, adult sons. It is not known if romantic desires were also an objective or not. What is known is that Henry had a younger brother, Cyrus, who also lived in Buffalo. A fine and famous example of such practical (but today viewed as an antiquarian practice), concerns a Dr. John Hull Olmstead. He died in Nice, France, in 1857, after six years of marriage (resulting in the procreation of three children). His widowed wife, Mary Perkins (1830-1921), married his older brother, landscape architect extraordinaire, Frederick Law Olmstead in 1859, and eventually they had four children together. Mary ended up outliving both Olmstead brothers; for Frederick died in 1903. [15]

#### 4.2. *Loss of Landscape*

The loss of the original plot of land the Clarke house once stood on occurred in the year following the Great Chicago Fire of 1871. The new owner of the home, John Chrimes, feared another conflagration would attack the city. He clearly did not trust the delicate urban condition of hastily reconstructed Chicago. He did not want to live in a wood-frame home within a city populated by perhaps non fire-safety-savvy citizens; more so in a village filled with wood houses (even though brick was legislated as the de rigeur material, post-fire). In 1872, he had his purchase, the old Clarke home, lifted and pulled laboriously by a team of horses, twenty-eight blocks south to 45th Street and Wabash Avenue—clearly out of the (then) Chicago city limits, to the “new” eleven year old township of Hyde Park (est. 1861). [16] While today, this sounds quite dramatic, in the past, houses were often moved. A 1880s builder, Peter B. Wight remarked, “The frame buildings which were the rule—stone or brick being the exceptions—were always built with heavy sills, so that they could be moved away. The best avenues were cluttered with mean, cheap frame houses...”[17]. Another criterion why Chrimes may have relocated the home, was the still-dismal state of public health in Chicago, as described by architectural historian Gwendolyn Wright: “As one Chicago builder badly put it, his houses were outside the city limits, ‘away from the streets leading to the cemeteries.’”[18]



**Figure 7.** Not 1872; but 1977: City moves the house back to a newly prepared site. [19]

*Photograph taken by the author.*

### 5. A Return to Home

The multiplicity of factors and agencies involved in 1974~75, propelling the so-called “return” of the Clarke home to a location not more than a block in a southeasterly direction, diagonally away from its virgin site, is well-chronicled by its “sister” house museum organization, the Glessner House. [20] What is of greater concern to this study is an analysis of how the actual new land was ‘formatted’ for new habitation and occupation by a house museum (as centerpiece architecture). How was the relocated house to sit on the site, and what landscape features were to be placed around it? Was the house to sit in an exclusive protected, gated park... or a space that was publicly accessible at all times? Was the park to host athletic events such as youth soccer or was it to host a rose garden along with quaint summertime band concerts? First and foremost, a very recent historical discrepancy was found pertaining to the actual name of the park.

### **5.1. *Alternative Names***

Landscape architect Mimi McKay, practicing at the firm of Tanys Langdon Landscape Architecture, penned a plan for “Hillary Rodham Clinton Chicago Women’s Park and Gardens of Chicago,” in 1997. [21] An *Associated Press* article indicated, “As a gift from the city, a new four-acre [1.6 hectare] park will be named in her honor. One proposal for the ‘Hillary Rodham Clinton Women’s Park of Chicago’ calls for a special walk honoring women’s contributions to the city.” [22] Photographs of a strident First Lady Hillary Clinton marching triumphantly, hand-in-hand, with a multitude of women from varying ethnicities populate what appears to be a sylvan setting, promoting the ribbon-cutting on the First Lady’s Fiftieth birthday (b.1947). Local press corroborated, stating in 1997, “...a Near South Side park... The park was renamed ‘Hillary Rodham Clinton Women’s Park’ in her honor.”[23] Four years later, *Chicago Reader* reporter, Susan Figliulo, still referred to the park the Clarke home sat within as, “Hillary Rodham Clinton Park” in her article titled, “Prairie Avenue Historic District: What’s Left.”[24] Current Glessner House curator, William Tyre, captured recent history’s historic moment: “The inspiration for the park came from Lois Weisberg, commissioner of the Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs, who desired a park that would honor important Chicago women throughout history.”[25]

### **5.2. *Post-historical Rationalization***

In 2013, revisionist history seems to have crept into public consciousness from an alternate electronic-newsroom, for Cultural Affairs Commissioner Weisberg is reported to have redacted her earlier statements recorded in the press, and later said, “‘We never really definitely named it [the park] that,’ [the ‘Hillary Rodham Clinton Women’s Park’] ... Weisberg said the Chicago Park District, which maintains the garden, has a policy against naming parks for living people.”[26] The oxidized machinations of the Chicago political machine once again are witnessed by the masses; a minor press exposé was facilitated by the conservative right. This being *The United Press International*, owned by the Unification Church, led by right radical South Korean, Sun Myung Moon, until his death in 2012. His heavy conservative editorial hand over the so-called journalism he published in the *Washington Times* (starting in 1982), simultaneously revealed and colored the “truth” consumed by many un-savvy (and unknowing) contemporary readers at the time. Courtesy of infinite perpetuation via the Internet, historians onward into the future can always read and review on-line his past publications of “alternate-reality” news.

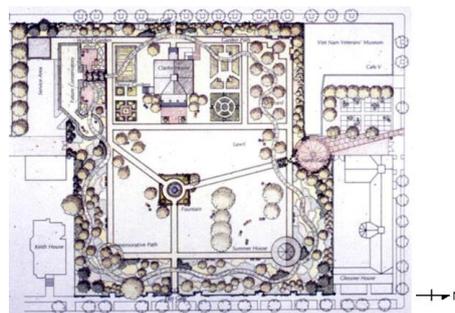


**Figure 8.** Revisionist non-historical signage: “Chicago Women’s Park and Gardens.”

Photograph taken by the author.

### 5.3. Serious Landscape Site Analysis

Examining the McKay plan of 1997, one immediately wonders if the ghost of the father of English landscape gardening, Lancelot “Capability” Brown (1715-1783) invisibly guided the hand of McKay, as she plotted out formal square and rectilinear box-hedge gardens ensconcing the north and south ends of the Clarke house. Severely contrasting the formal orthogonal spaces that plants seem to be artificially forced into, is a sinuous snake-like dog-walking path which wraps around the entire perimeter of the park, called the “commemorative path.” It can only be gleaned from the plan, and assumed, that various illustrious Chicago women would be memorialized or canonized along the walkway of this path. Three spokes radiate from a central, but not centered within the park point, occupied by a tiered, renaissance-revival fountain. The central hub fountain however is centered upon the east-facing columned portico of the Clarke House. Contradicting such visual alignment is the lack of any walking path from the “front” eastern steps of the home’s portico to the fountain basin, confusing the visitor. Instead, the three paths privilege access from either an eastern gate on Prairie Avenue or a northern alley walkway, and lastly, a southwestern green house, never built.

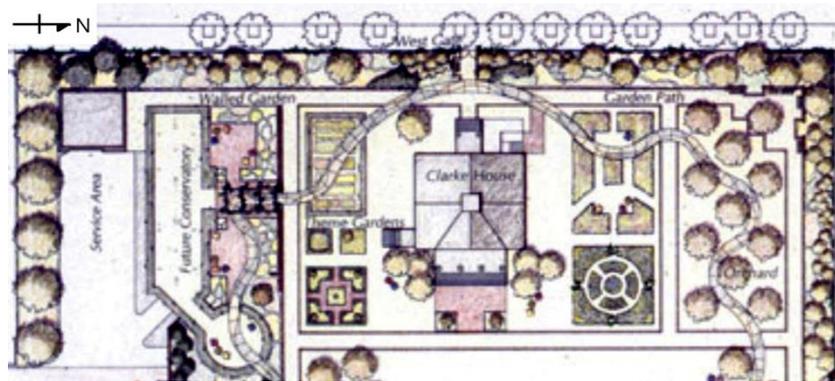


**Figure 9.** Mimi McKay’s site plan of the park surrounding the Clarke house. [27]

Photograph taken by the author.

Contemporary site observations indicate that the vast majority of patrons come from the north alley portal into the park. This is due to the fact that a popular café, now known as *Spoke and Bird*, is located in a two-story, nineteenth century commercial building in the northwest corner of the site (which also has a nice brick-paved outdoor seating area). This structure originally, (and formerly) housed, as labeled on the site plan, the “Viet Nam Veterans’ Museum.” This organization existed in this masonry

structure for seven years, from 1996~2003, before moving to a new location in the Portage Park neighborhood of Chicago. [28]



*Figure 10. Detail of McKay landscape plan around Clarke House.*

*Photograph taken by the author.*

Opposite the Museum, at the southwest corner of the site, is drawn and labeled a “Future Conservatory,” and south of that, a service area. The conservatory never materialized, perhaps due to budget shortfalls or value engineering out certain “costly” park amenities. The Clarke family surely never had such a luxury; perhaps the park designers confused the origins of the Clarke House Museum park with a grand American country estate. Records indicate the Clarkes originally used their twenty homesteaded acres for agrarian purposes—growing crops and hunting game. A glazed glass greenhouse was a novelty far beyond their economic reach. [29] McKay’s proposal may have had an alternative agenda pointing more in the direction of a greenhouse for educational purposes, or to provide fresh flora for both house museums and/or the Viet Nam Veterans’ museum.

## **6. In search of a Natural Habitat**

Absent, thus far, from all conversation and debate about the preservation of the Widow Clarke house is the preservation (conservation) of the agricultural use of the former twenty acres that used to surround the home. Nowhere in the recent historical record is there discussion about restoring elements to represent the past agrarian use of this land which sustained the growing—and tragically shrinking Clarke household. The McKay plan displays one small “Theme Garden” which is bifurcated by the serpentine perimeter path walkway and is adjacent to the “Future Conservatory” which, as aforementioned, never came to be. These two elements give neither credit nor interpretation to the family’s original reliance on home-grown agriculture right outside their home’s doorsteps.

Where then, can a city-dwelling Chicagoan go—to find either a re-creation of the original landscape which once surrounded the home, either pre- or post-agricultural use? There exist only two (non-nearby) options which lay quite a long distance away from the site that one can only travel to by personal car. These two sites are the only two locales which represent realistic near-virgin conditions of shallow sand dunes along ‘un-altered’ shores of Lake Michigan. First, due directly northbound, is Illinois Beach Nature Preserve. 46 miles north (74 km) of the Clarke House, this shallow-hill sand dune landscape provides a superior simulacrum of the land the Clarke House originally stood on. 49 miles east south-east (78.8 km) of the Clarke House, in about the opposite direction, is situated the Indiana Dunes State Park. Containing the

superlative of the tallest sand dunes in all of the neighboring state of Indiana (192 feet, or 58.5 meters tall), [30] portions of Indiana Dunes possesses a vertical height element that was originally not present on the Clarke's homestead site, but none-the-less has many natural features of a sand dune environment similar to the ground the city of Chicago is now situated upon.



**Figure 11.** *Illinois Beach and Indiana Dunes, with respect to the Clarke House. [34]*

*Photograph taken by the author.*

## 7. Illinois Beach

Created in phases beginning in 1948, and continuing land acquisition and growth in 1971 and again in 1982, the current park encompasses 4,160 acres (1,683 hectares) and six miles (9.6 km) of sandy Lake Michigan shoreline. However, the seminal date oft-advertised and promoted was the year 1964, when it was spearheaded as “The Nation’s First Nature Preserve.”[31] Striated dunes, branching off in a southwestern direction at an acute angle from the shoreline, appear today as pristine, virtuous and untouched land. In reality, at one point, this much protected park land hosted parts of a huge building materials manufacturing concern, today known by the name of the conglomerate Johns-Manville. Their plant operated for nearly sixty-five years, from about 1920 until closing in 1985. Complaints were voiced early; “Commercial fisherman... complained... [in the 1920s that] white [asbestos] slurry was clogging the gills of the white fish and killing their livelihood.”[32]. Little did they know (or were not empowered to voice their assumptions) that asbestos tailings killed a lot more than just Lake Michigan fish.



**Figure 12.** *Illinois Beach Nature Preserve: Photo taken at the outlet of Bull Creek, emptying into Lake Michigan.*

*Photograph taken by the author.*

Causal research linking malignant mesothelioma and the inhalation of microscopic asbestos fibers had not yet been ascertained in the 1920s. Even “in the early 1970’s, microscopic asbestos discharges still occurred when the United States Environmental

Protection Agency (USEPA) and State of Illinois allowed unfiltered asbestos-polluted water to discharge directly into Lake Michigan through a permitted discharge pipe.”[33] Today, a visitor hiking the trails along the Illinois Beach sand dunes will find a large posted sign indicating if any hiker discovers or stumbles across any loose, stray, and orphaned pieces of friable (fragile and easily fragmentable) asbestos, to leave it, and immediately contact a Johns Manville sub-contractor responsible for quarantine and clean-up. In other words, Johns Manville Corporation never completed a comprehensive site remediation of leftover asbestos fibers, to begin with, many local residents are quick to point out.

In spite of all of the past industrial spoilage that has occurred (and has not been fully nor properly cleaned up according to some (Camplin, 2003), a relative amount of biodiversity is still present at Illinois Beach; a lot more than rolling sand dunes grace the site. Freshwater wetlands and prairie and black oak savanna all exist on the north-stretching rectangular plot of land, bound on the east by shoreline and on the west by the Union Pacific North (UP-N) railroad line, shared with the MetraRail, serving the Chicagoland commuter rail community in the far northern suburbs. The track line was originally laid in 1854 by the Chicago & Milwaukee Railroad, whose president (and active real estate developer and land speculator) was former Democratic Chicago Mayor Walter S. Gurnee (who served 1851-1853). [35] Later, in June 2007, the nature preserve received the name of the “Adeline Jay Geo-Karis” Illinois Beach State Park, after the namesake Republican State Senator (1979~2007). “Geo,” was a childhood immigrant from Greece, and while Senator, concurrently, she was the first female Mayor of Zion (starting in 1987), a small town near the beach park. [36]

## 8. Indiana Dunes

Neighboring Illinois to the east, the Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore was created through the United States Congress in 1966, today containing about 15,000 acres (6,100 hectares) of non-contiguous land; the smaller State Park encompasses approximately 2,182 acres (833 hectares) and was initially created through a vociferous group of dedicated, passionate citizens after years of campaigning, in 1925. The State Park is recognized as the culmination of several decades of early land-use preservation ideals, which begun even earlier in 1899. [37]



**Figure 13.** *Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore.*

*Photograph taken by the author.*

Assisting with driving public support, in May of 1919, Orpheus Moyer Schantz, writing for National Geographic Magazine, scribed: “Historically, also, the dunes have their place in the earlier history of the West. The old Indian trails can still be pointed out, and it was through the dunes that the pioneer French found their way

from Detroit to the site of Chicago, at the mouth of the Chicago River.” Furthermore, Schantz reported that: “The consideration of the dunes as a national park has received the serious attention of Congress to the extent that in 1916 a public hearing was held in Chicago to gather data in connection with the proposed project. At this hearing hundreds of men and women of prominence gave evidence as to its advantages.”[38] Further research by Stephanie Smith and Steve Mark deeply investigated historical interest by ecologists in the site in 1913, which eventually led to the formation of The Nature Conservancy (Smith, Mark: 2009). [39]

A driving force for all of this early citizen mobilization was certainly the intensity of industrial land-use and consumption due west of the site. Often Burns Harbor is mistaken as the catalyst for the preservation of the neighboring dunes while in fact Burns Harbor itself was a fairly recent creation, being founded in 1965. When constructed, both Bethlehem Steel and U.S. Steel argued for preservation of high union-paying steel manufacturing jobs (instead of preservation of the sand dunes). Also, the concept of preservation of inland industries for national security crept into the conversation as a credible argument for extensive dredging and construction of breakwaters (Federally subsidized, of course), which forever severely altered the nature of the shoreline condition of Lake Michigan, for the progressive march forward of American industrial might.

## 9. Conclusions

In conclusion, the evolution of the village of Chicago into a metropolis of nine million inhabitants has, without a doubt, severely altered the original native environment which once cradled and enabled the early settlers to survive and flourish. The Clarke House is a fine representative of the capitalist achievements and aspirations of a fledgling commercial village whose own explosive growth brought about extensive deterioration of natural freshwater sources, eventually leading to the sickness and death of its patriarchal founder.

Responses to such dire public health conditions were slow but deliberate; eventual technological solutions, championed by some (and dismissed by others) were slow to gain acceptance. The presence of the contemporary city with its internal parks and substantial adjacent nature preserves today mark noteworthy victories for the re-evaluation and re-creation of the former environs which once graced the un-touched pre-colonial settlement shores of the southern end of Great Lake Michigan.

Political wrangling, authoritarian claims over the writing of history and the re-writing of recent history still abound aplenty, codified in the very park meant to celebrate the founding of the city through the celebration of the so-called “oldest house” still standing in the city. Today, it is used as a prime representation of tangible credence providing a *raison d’être* for the state, and all its associated tools required for the creation of law-abiding industrious citizens and concomitant devices proving success of colonialist settlement over the land. Multiple facets challenging these presumptions of permanence and privileged absolute right, remain yet to be questioned. This investigation’s primary focus found numerous hidden narratives and furtive attempts to present history in a sanitized and more recreational platform for easy, non-challenging consumption by local residents, which may truly be the base purpose of an urbane park for use by a busy and distracted cosmopolitan citizenry today. How the narrative of natural ecological landscape preservation surrounding the

old Widow Clarke House fits into the attention span and schedules of Chicago's park-visiting denizens has yet to be examined.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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