

Architectural Historical Spotlight

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Highland Park Building Company: Happy Homes Always On Hand

The Highland Park Building Company began operations after the Civil War in the late 1860s. The company was comprised of businessmen from Evanston and Chicago who aimed to build a community for people of “means and taste.” Their slogan was “Happy Homes Always on Hand.” Mr. Frank Hawkins founded and chaired the Company after arriving in 1867. Horace Cleveland, a nationally prominent architect (famous for designing Sleepy Hollow Cemetery in Concord and the University of Minnesota) designed a number of homes for the Company. The group bought land from Walter S. Gurnee in 1867 and platted out the forested ravines east of Green Bay Road in 1868. The Company laid out streets, subdivided lots, and built luxury homes for businessmen within easy reach of Chicago.

The flag stop on the Union-Pacific line proved unreliable for the new commuters in Highland Park and the Highland Park Building Company constructed a new station at Central Avenue. The Company also financed the first public school (Port Clinton Avenue School), a girl’s finishing school (Highland Hall), as well as Baptist, Catholic, and Methodist churches.

Highland Park was incorporated as a city on March 17, 1869 at the behest of its new citizens and the Highland Park Building Company in order to better regulate saloons along Green Bay Road. Mr. Hawkins, the Company’s founder, was subsequently elected the first Mayor of Highland Park. He refused reelection in 1872 so that others may have a chance. The Panic of 1873, caused by a land speculation bubble, forced the Highland Park Building Company to dissolve as capital diminished. The city government then took a more active role in development of the town and its facilities.

In line with the prevailing fashion at the time, the Highland Park Building Company designed and constructed homes in Italianate, Second Empire, and other high Victorian styles. Many Company-built homes are still standing in Highland Park, such as 120 Belle Avenue. Typical of the Company’s style, it is an asymmetric, two story Italianate with extensively detailed eaves and window crowns. The exterior corners contain decorative moldings matching the window crowns, and serve to break up the mass of the building. The exterior is finished in a painted, muted wooden siding which emphasizes the extensive detailing of the house. The house is part of the Belle Avenue Historic District established in 2002.

Research sources for this article included the book “Pioneer to Commuter” by Marvyn Wittelle, published in 1958 and available at the library.



Pictured Above: The home at 120 Belle Avenue. Note the extensive ornamentation and large floorplan characteristic of the Highland Park Building Company’s style, which catered to prominent Chicago businessmen from 1868 to 1873. (Source: City of Highland Park)