

NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK NOMINATION

NPS Form 10-900

USDI/NPS NRHP Registration Form (Rev. 8-86)

OMB No. 1024-0018

JOHN FARSON HOUSE

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

Page 1
National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

1. NAME OF PROPERTY

Historic Name: JOHN FARSON HOUSE

Other Name/Site Number: Pleasant Home

2. LOCATION

Street & Number: 217 Home Avenue

Not for publication: N/A

City/Town: Oak Park

Vicinity: N/A

State: IL

County: Cook

Code: 031

Zip Code: 60302

3. CLASSIFICATION

Ownership of Property

Private:
Public-Local: X
Public-State:
Public-Federal:

Category of Property

Building(s): X
District:
Site:
Structure:
Object:

Number of Resources within Property

Contributing

1

Noncontributing

buildings
sites
structures
objects
0 Total

Number of Contributing Resources Previously Listed in the National Register: 1

Name of Related Multiple Property Listing: N/A

**JOHN FARSON HOUSE**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

**4. STATE/FEDERAL AGENCY CERTIFICATION**

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this \_\_\_\_\_ nomination \_\_\_\_\_ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property \_\_\_\_\_ meets \_\_\_\_\_ does not meet the National Register Criteria.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Certifying Official

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
State or Federal Agency and Bureau

In my opinion, the property \_\_\_\_\_ meets \_\_\_\_\_ does not meet the National Register criteria.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Commenting or Other Official

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
State or Federal Agency and Bureau

**5. NATIONAL PARK SERVICE CERTIFICATION**

I hereby certify that this property is:

\_\_\_\_ Entered in the National Register \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_ Determined eligible for the National Register \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_ Determined not eligible for the National Register \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_ Removed from the National Register \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_ Other (explain): \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Keeper

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date of Action

**JOHN FARSON HOUSE**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

**Page 3**

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

**6. FUNCTION OR USE**

Historic:	Domestic	Sub:	Single Dwelling
Current:	Recreation & Culture Landscape	Sub:	Museum Park

**7. DESCRIPTION**

ARCHITECTURAL CLASSIFICATION: Late 19th & Early 20th Century American Movements:  
Prairie School

**MATERIALS:**

Foundation:	Fieldstone
Walls:	Brick (Roman)
Roof:	Asphalt
Other:	Limestone

## Describe Present and Historic Physical Appearance.

The John Farson House is located at the intersection of Home Avenue and Pleasant Street in Oak Park, Illinois. Called "Pleasant Home" due to its location, the Farson House was designed by the Prairie School architect George Washington Maher (1864-1926). The smooth surfaces of Roman brick, the low-pitched, hipped roof and the broad entrance porch of the Farson House are characteristic features of Maher's work that link him to the early modern designs of his Prairie School contemporaries. In the Farson House Maher also introduced his personal design philosophy, which he called motif rhythm theory, to unify the decorative details of the house and its furnishings. The house retains its historic integrity in terms of materials, design and setting. Virtually all of the original decoration specified by George Maher is preserved and the lavish decorative treatment is everywhere apparent on the interior. The house is located at the northeast corner of a seven-acre site that today is known as the Herbert S. Mills Park, named in memory of the house's second owner.

The John Farson House is approached on Home Avenue by a formally landscaped, raised garden. The house is set back from the street and its grounds are still surrounded by the ornamental iron fence that George Maher designed. Concrete urns near the public sidewalk are incorporated into the layout of the staircase. The grounds in their outline remain largely as Farson assembled them from 1892 through 1906.

The building is a three-story structure of buff-colored Roman brick with limestone copings, window trim and decorative details. The broad, hipped roof and the deep porch that extends across the front (east) elevation of the Farson House stress the horizontality of Maher's design. Originally the porch ended at the south in an open, semi-circular space, but the south end is now enclosed. A rigorous symmetry about a central axis is defined by the entrance, by the arrangement of second-story windows, by the prominent roof dormer and by chimneys at the ends.

Although the wall surfaces are smooth and details simplified, ornament is used on the front elevation in patterns that are repeated inside the house. In a 1907 article by Maher the dominant motif of the Farson House is described as the American honeysuckle.<sup>1</sup> This motif appears in the fence, in the medallions carved into the porch's piers, in carved pilasters flanking the entrance and in the art glass. Lion's heads and a shield are two other motifs used. Lion's heads are on the porch and on the roof dormer. An elongated shield is repeatedly used in the fence surrounding the Farson estate. These motifs are used again in the plaster, carved wood, art glass, hardware and mosaics specified for the interior.

The north, south and west elevations of the Farson House are more informally treated than the entrance front. The porte cochere is set back on the north side and has ornamental details similar to those of the entrance porch. On the south elevation the semi-circular porch is balanced by a bay that projects from the dining room.

The irregularity of the rear (west) elevation is in sharp contrast with the symmetry of the entrance front. A curved wall at the northwest corner encloses the library. The pergola above is a later addition but it incorporates the fascia detailing of the porch. At the southwest corner the summer dining porch projects from the main volume of the house and has steps into the garden. Above it, at the southwest corner on the second floor, is a 1905 addition.<sup>2</sup> In that year John Farson had a curved wall removed, and a room with an adjoining dressing room and bath was added above the summer dining porch. The second

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<sup>1</sup>George W. Maher, "A Plea for an Indigenous Art," *The Architectural Record* 21 (June 1907), p. 431.

<sup>2</sup>*The Oak Leaves*, August 5, 1905, p. 11.

**JOHN FARSON HOUSE**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form  
**Page 5**

floor room directly north of this 1905 addition is a subsequent addition. At the ground floor a small porch was added later at the northwest corner adjacent to the back staircase adjoining the kitchen.

The original drawings by Maher have not survived but the plan published in 1903 in *The Brickbuilder* shows the original function, dimensions and finishes of the main floor rooms.<sup>3</sup> The book of photographs entitled "Pleasant-Home" thoroughly illustrates the interior as originally decorated by Maher for the Farson family and demonstrates that there have been few alterations. Later changes are documented by photographs taken while the Mills family occupied the house.

The floor plan of the Farson House is organized around a large, centralized hall paneled in flaky, white oak with a beamed ceiling. The focal point of the hall is the fireplace which has "Pleasant Home" and an elongated shield carved into the mantel. The fireplace surround consists of simple, flat slabs of marble and on the back wall of the firebox a large lion's head is represented. Carved oak lion's heads are used as decorative corbels for the mantel. Exposed carbon filament bulbs are embedded in the arch as well as being set into the ceiling beams. The original light sconces are in place. The built-in oak bench on the south wall was designed by Maher for the hall.

Immediately to the right of the entrance is a reception room which was redecorated after the Farson family moved, although the original fireplace and some original plasterwork remain. The adjacent staircase on the north side of the hall leads to the second floor. The carriage entrance connects with the hall via a small passageway under the stairs. Above this entrance to the hall is a panel carved with a lyre and inscribed "music" to indicate the location of the music room above, at the mezzanine level of the staircase.

South of the hall are the drawing room and the dining room. Light fixtures original to the house hang in both rooms but the ceilings were redecorated while the Mills family occupied the house. The drawing room fireplace has been altered. The table and ten of the chairs designed by Maher for the house are on display in the dining room. Each chair has a pair of lion's heads on the back. The 1903 plan describes the raised alcove on the west side of the dining room as a dais. Beyond it is the summer dining porch or breakfast room. Both spaces have mosaic floors. A large shield dominates the mosaic floor pattern and is combined with a Greek key pattern.

The kitchen and butler's pantry are located directly behind the hall fireplace. In the library at the northwest corner of the first floor the original mahogany finish and ornamental plaster ceiling are preserved. Built-in bookcases carved with lion's heads and the fireplace designed by Maher are in place.

The family's bedrooms and guest rooms were located on the second floor around a generously-sized hall. The built-in seating and cabinets survive as well as a large art glass window that conceals the back staircase. The original fireplace mantles and tile surrounds in the bedrooms are intact.

The major space on the top floor was a billiard room and the adjacent sauna was called a "swimming pool" in the early photographs. A sleeping room for female servants is located on the south side of the third floor. A small maid's room with bath is in the southwest corner.

John Farson initially purchased property at the corner of Pleasant and Home in November 1892 for \$20,430., reportedly "the largest price ever paid for a residence lot in Oak Park." In

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<sup>3</sup>Robert C. Spencer, Brick Architecture in and about Chicago," *The Brickbuilder* 12 (September 1903), pp. 178-87.

**JOHN FARSON HOUSE**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form  
**Page 6**

October 1897 Farson announced in local newspapers his plans to build a residence and a stable on the grounds after George Maher's plans. A rendering of the house appeared in the *Oak Park Reporter* on November 19, 1897, showing it substantially as it was constructed. *The American Contractor* reported in December that the general contract was let to William Adams & Co.. The cornerstone was laid on April 2, 1898. The Oak Park directory first lists John Farson at 217 Home in 1899.<sup>4</sup>

While the house was under construction in 1898 plans were being drawn by Maher for a two-story stable, estimated to cost \$10,000. It was noted for its arrangement: a circular stable attached to a rectangular carriage house that was later used as a car garage. In 1913 a fire destroyed the stable but the Mills family rebuilt it. The reconstructed stable was demolished in 1966.

Beginning in September 1898 John Farson added substantially to the three lots he originally purchased in 1892. He extended his grounds south along Home and west on Pleasant and also purchased lots on Wisconsin (now Marion). By late 1901 Farson had the grounds directly south of his house landscaped as an Italian garden by the Fair Oaks Nursery Company of Oak Park under George Maher's supervision. This included a circular fountain, walkways and a south terrace. None of these landscape features survive.

Although John Farson continued after the turn of the century to purchase property surrounding his house, he was unable to assemble his grounds in their entirety until 1906. In July 1905 the Chicago newspapers described at length his plans to extend the grounds in order to display a collection of classical statuary. In the Jens Jensen papers at the University of Michigan Architecture Library there is a single preliminary sketch for the landscaping of Farson's property. Its dimensions agree with the outline of property that Farson had nearly assembled by that summer. The preliminary sketch by Jensen shows a water garden and bathing area behind the house. At the lower left of the drawing is a large grove with a curving path leading to a campfire. Directly east were to be vegetable gardens. As yet there is no evidence that this plan was executed.

John Farson died suddenly in 1910. His widow sold the house and grounds to Herbert S. Mills. On December 18, 1911 Herbert S. Mills took out a permit to erect a greenhouse on the grounds.<sup>5</sup> It has been demolished but it is documented in Mills family photographs. The Mills family owned the house until 1939 when it was sold to the Park District of Oak Park with the stipulation that the estate become known as Mills Park. The Park District has operated the house as a community center. In 1969 the Historical Society of Oak Park and River Forest opened a museum on the second floor and uses the third floor for its collections. The senior citizens of Oak Park also met in the house from 1956 until 1989.

Hasbrouck Peterson Associates prepared a *Building Condition Report and Systems Review* for the Park District in 1987. In the following year the Park District Board formed a Task Force to examine the best use of the Farson House. The Pleasant Home Task Force concluded that the house and grounds should be preserved and should function as a house museum and exhibition facility.

In 1990 the Park District Board formed the Pleasant Home Foundation, a not-for-profit organization, to raise funds and to restore the house. John Eifler & Associates currently is

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<sup>4</sup>*Oak Park Reporter*, November 25, 1892, p.4 and November 19, 1897, p.1; *The American Contractor* XVIII B, December 11, 1897, p.21; *The Oak Park Vindicator*, April 8, 1898, p. 1; *The Economist* 19 (April 16, 1898), p. 455; and *Directory of Oak Park*, Oak Park, 1899. An inscription on the entrance porch at the north end includes the date November 18, 1897. This does not refer to the laying of the cornerstone which took place on April 2, 1898 and is described at length in *The Oak Park Vindicator*, April 8, 1898, p.1 and in *The Economist* 19 (April 16, 1898) p. 455.

<sup>5</sup>Permit Records, Village of Oak Park, Permit Number 3315, December 18, 1911.

**JOHN FARSON HOUSE**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

working on the preliminary stages of an Historic Structures Report for the house and fundraising for this report is now underway.

**8. STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE**

Certifying official has considered the significance of this property in relation to other properties:  
Nationally: X Statewide: \_\_\_ Locally: \_\_\_

Applicable National Register Criteria: A \_\_\_ B \_\_\_ C X D \_\_\_

Criteria Considerations (Exceptions): A \_\_\_ B \_\_\_ C \_\_\_ D \_\_\_ E \_\_\_ F \_\_\_ G \_\_\_

NHL Criteria: 4

NHL Theme(s): XVI. Architecture  
P. Prairie

Areas of Significance: Architecture

Period(s) of Significance: 1898-1906

Significant Dates: 1899, 1905

Significant Person(s):

Cultural Affiliation:

Architect/Builder: George Washington Maher

**State Significance of Property, and Justify Criteria, Criteria Considerations, and Areas and Periods of Significance Noted Above.**

The John Farson House is one of the earliest and most distinguished examples of the Prairie School designed just as that regional expression of the Arts and Crafts movement was taking form in the Midwest. Along with Frank Lloyd Wright's William H. Winslow House, River Forest, 1894, this house is a very significant example in the development of the Prairie School which is heralded internationally as one of America's greatest, most original contributions to architecture. This is the earliest surviving Prairie School house in which the building and its interiors were carefully integrated according to an ornamental scheme, which George Maher called motif rhythm theory. Throughout the house the original custom furniture, light fixtures, art glass windows, wood carving, decorative plaster and carved stone are preserved. George Maher used organic forms with classical detailing for this ornament, which he considered a "style of architecture American". The Farson House type became enormously popular in America and George Maher consistently used it throughout his career. Situated on its original seven-acre estate, the Farson House is the finest surviving example of George Maher's work.

The term "Prairie School" is of fairly recent origin.<sup>1</sup> Early in this century architects and writers searched for a proper term to describe the new work that was being done: the "New School of the Middle West", "the Sullivan school of design", "progressive", and "Chicago School" were used. "Prairie School" came to be accepted in the 1960s since it described the architects' response to the distinctive features of the Midwestern prairie, the broad land forms and flora that they incorporated into their designs. Their buildings echoed the horizontality of the prairie landscape in the low hipped or gabled roofs, broad massing and horizontal banding of windows, and the ornament was inspired by native plants and geometric forms. The Farson House and Wright's Winslow House are the earliest expressions of this original, indigenous architecture.

Paul Sprague has recognized the modernity of the Farson House design for 1897:

Its clean lines, flat surfaces of Roman brick, stone and wood, and its simple rectangular window frames, chimneys and porch openings would have been hard to parallel anywhere at the time except in the buildings by Sullivan and Wright.

In the evolution of Maher's architecture his Farson House is of signal importance for it was in this design that the architect perfected his own version of Prairie architecture.<sup>2</sup>

In the Farson design Maher decisively broke with the irregular massing and the picturesque use of highly textured, shingled surfaces and rock-cut boulders that Silsbee popularized in his Midwestern shingle-style houses. Maher described the house as having a "style of Architecture American, but not colonial. The lines are classic, the surfaces broad but the ornamentation centralized. The style betokens comfort and home in every line."<sup>3</sup> The ornament used in the Farson House becomes extraordinarily rich inside the house. It was based upon Maher's idea of repeating certain motifs throughout the house's decoration and furnishings. He wrote that "there must be evolved certain leading forms that

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<sup>1</sup>H. Allen Brooks, *The Prairie School*, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1972, pp. 8-13.

<sup>2</sup>Paul E. Sprague, *Frank Lloyd Wright and Prairie School Architecture in Oak Park*, Oak Park, Illinois: Village of Oak Park, 1976, p. 40.

<sup>3</sup>*The Oak Park Reporter*, November 19, 1897, p.1.



**JOHN FARSON HOUSE**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form  
**Page 9**

will influence the detail of the design; these forms crystallize during the progress of the planning and become the motifs that bind the design together. These motifs are susceptible to repetition, varying in proportion and ornateness as the various situations arise."<sup>4</sup>

Although George Maher identified the Farson House's dominant motif as the American honeysuckle (a new version of the classical anthemion) he combined it with interlocking patterns of circles and squares - shapes that dominated the ornament of other Prairie School buildings by Sullivan, Wright and Garden. Lion's heads, fretwork, cartouches and an elongated, shield-like shape are also repeated throughout the decoration.

As in later Prairie School houses, great emphasis is placed on the entrance hall and formal living spaces, particularly the dining room. The central hall of the Farson House, while descended from the colonial house plan, is monumentalized and the details made more elaborate to suit the house of a wealthy Midwestern banker. The house is personalized through the use of the motifs that Maher chose. The hall with its great fireplace carved with "Pleasant Home", John Farson's name for the house, glows with light from small bulbs set into the carved, oak woodwork surrounding it. The fire was lit in a hearth lined with a great lion's head at the back. In the parlor and dining room the focus is upon the mahogany table and chairs crafted for the house. Maher uses motifs on the table and chairs that he repeats around the dining room fireplace, in the ceiling molding and on other furnishings: the lion's heads on the chairs, shields across their backs, and cartouches surrounded by roses on the corner of the massive table.

John Farson's house was the first large estate in Oak Park and once he completed the house and its furnishings he carried his ideas into the landscape. Over time the landscape that Farson set about to create was a blend of the formal and the natural, just as his house combined ideas of symmetry and order with organic ornament. Initially Farson added Italian gardens created under George Maher's supervision including plantings and flowers, a fountain, a pergola, rustic furniture, and a clubhouse for his children. At times Farson himself was observed in the gardens, planting and adding shrubs that he bought from Swain, Nelson & Sons. He opened the grounds to public groups, like the Indiana Society, and had George Maher design a rose-garlanded stage for the festivities.<sup>5</sup>

In a more private way the house, with its broad entrance porch and the summer dining porch in the rear, provided the Farson family with a means to live in the landscape. Following current fashion, Farson created a roof garden on the second floor at the northwest corner and he and Mrs. Farson slept in the open air. The final step came when John Farson hired Jens Jensen to draw up a plan for the grounds beyond the stables at the rear of the property. A preliminary sketch in the Jensen archives at the University of Michigan shows the gardens that would have extended behind the house. Dated June 1905, the plan calls for formal elements near the house - a water garden surrounded by flowers, a semi-circular bath with a pergola connecting with the grape arbor, small fruit trees, and vegetable gardens beyond. Finally at the rear of the grounds, Jensen drew a grove with a winding path to a campfire. George Maher had collaborated with Jensen before, most notably on the early landscape of the Harry Rubens House in Glencoe, Illinois, 1902-6, and also at Maher's own house in Kenilworth, 1902-3.<sup>6</sup>

The completion of plans for the Farson House in the fall of 1897 came as the Prairie School architects began practicing in the Midwest. In the previous winter a small group - Frank

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<sup>4</sup>George Maher, "An Architecture of Ideas," *Arts and Decoration* 1 (June 1911), p. 330.

<sup>5</sup>John Farson scrapbooks, Historical Society of Oak Park-River Forest.

<sup>6</sup>Robert E. Grese, *Jens Jensen*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991, pp. 95-8 and Appendix A.

Lloyd Wright, Dwight Perkins, Myron Hunt and Robert Spencer - opened their offices in Steinway Hall, which became a gathering place for the group. Walter Burley Griffin worked alone for two years before joining Wright's office in 1901 and Hugh Garden drafted for a number of firms in the 1890s before becoming Richard E. Schmidt's partner.<sup>7</sup>

George Maher's work was well established by this time. By late 1897 he had been commissioned to design 130 buildings, including houses, apartment buildings, churches, office buildings and a hotel.<sup>8</sup> In the 1880s he had apprenticed in the Chicago firm of Bauer & Hill and then worked for Joseph Lyman Silsbee with Wright and George Grant Elmslie. Maher formed a brief partnership with Cecil Corwin in 1889. George Elmslie remembered Maher among the Adler & Sullivan employees in the Auditorium Building office; the influence of Sullivan's architecture and ornament pervades much of Maher's work and that of the Prairie School.

George Maher played an active role in the architectural community. In his 1887 talk "Originality in American Architecture", delivered to the Chicago Architectural Sketch Club, he advocated the formulation of a new residential style based on Henry Hobson Richardson's example and a respect for earlier American frame houses. "The idea of massiveness, imposing centralization, of grouping novel ideas for comfort in the interior arrangement" were qualities he admired in Richardson's work and that he reused in the Farson House design.<sup>9</sup>

Throughout his career George Maher acted as a spokesman for the Prairie School. He wrote numerous professional articles promoting "the Western Spirit" or the "indigenous architecture" that was being created in the Midwest. An entire issue of the *Western Architect*, the magazine aimed at publicizing the Prairie School, was devoted to George Maher's work.<sup>10</sup>

Beginning in 1894 George Maher exhibited his work at the Chicago Architectural Club and he formally became a member in 1901. Maher submitted a watercolor of the Farson House in 1898 along with drawings and photographs of houses in Kenilworth, Illinois and Chicago's Edgewater community, where his early work is found. In the same exhibition the Chicago Arts and Crafts Society, founded at Hull House on October 22, 1897, was given a gallery to exhibit their work alongside the Chicago Architectural Club. By 1902 the work of the Prairie School architects dominated the annual exhibition.

George Maher's architecture in the 1890s grew out of his experience designing for J. L. Silsbee, who popularized the shingle style in the Midwest. His principal work in the 1890s was in Kenilworth starting in 1891 and in Edgewater after 1892. From 1891 through 1926 George Maher designed more than 40 houses in Kenilworth, the Sears School and the prairie style Kenilworth Club; he supervised its municipal improvements; and he contributed a plan

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<sup>7</sup>Brooks, *The Prairie School*, pp. 28-31.

<sup>8</sup>Susan E. Karr, "The Work of J. L. Silsbee (1883-1897) and G. W. Maher (1886-1897)," M.A. thesis, University of Chicago, 1969 with additions by Kathleen Cummings in preparation of a monograph on George Maher's architecture.

<sup>9</sup>George W. Maher, "Originality in American Architecture," *Inland Architect and News Record*, 10 (October 1887), pp. 34-5.

<sup>10</sup>George W. Maher, "The Western Spirit," *The Western Architect*, 9 (November and December, 1906), pp. 113-5 and 125-6 and Maher, "A Plea for an Indigenous Architecture," *The Architectural Record* 21 (June 1907), p. 433, and "Geo. W. Maher a democrat in Architecture," *The Western Architect* 20 (March 1914), entire issue.

for the suburb's extension. In Kenilworth every phase of his stylistic development is represented and nearly all of his buildings still stand.<sup>11</sup>

In the Edgewater community on Chicago's north side Maher initially designed modestly priced, frame houses on speculation for J. Lewis Cochran (earlier Silsbee's client there), but later in the 1890s substantial residences were erected near the Lake. By 1900 there was an enclave of Maher-designed houses in north Edgewater and his Presbyterian church; nearly 30 commissions have been identified but only two major houses remain: the Harry M. Stevenson House, 1909, and the Adolph Schmidt House, 1917.<sup>12</sup>

Many of these early houses had classical details - Palladian windows, stuccoed garlands, and fluted Corinthian columns - while others had Tudor revival half-timbering like the John Scales House, 1894, on Hutchinson Street in Chicago (Buena Park). The leaded glass used by Maher - as by Wright and others in the mid 1890s - had simple geometric patterns in clear glass but no consistent ornamental motif was used. Maher gradually simplified his style through the 1890s, a process which culminated in the Farson House, his first formal, prairie house.

Of Maher's large estates only the Farson House and the Frederick T. Gates House, Montclair, New Jersey, 1902, remain. The large houses designed on the scale and with the elaborate interior treatment of the Farson House have all been demolished: the Leach House, South Orange, New Jersey, 1899; the Rubens House in Glencoe, 1904; the Patten House, Evanston, 1901; and "Rockledge", Homer, Minnesota, 1912. Early photographs of the Gates House show that only a few pieces of furniture and lighting were custom-designed, although exquisitely carved oak and mahogany trim and paneling was used throughout the house.

The smaller houses that Maher designed are partially preserved. In the Magerstadt House, Chicago, 1906, the iridescent glass fireplaces remain, but the furniture has been sold, the poppy ceiling decoration covered, and original fixtures removed. While leaded glass, wall coverings and fireplace mosaics using the thistle motif remain in the Murdoch House, Sault Sainte Marie, Michigan, 1906, the furniture is gone. By contrast virtually all of the furniture, fabrics, wall coverings and lighting fixtures in the Farson House were custom designed and the original integrity of much of this work remains.

Maher considered the Farson House to be an ideal type for the homes of his wealthy Midwestern clients. When photographs were published in the *Inland Architect and News Record* in November 1899 the editor wrote that "the architect submits this design as a type for an American style."<sup>13</sup> The type influenced other Prairie School architects after 1900 and it became an enormously popular model for architects and builders, as H. Allen Brooks remarked:

So successful was the design that within a few years architects throughout the Midwest were building dozens of houses based on Maher's Peters or Farson types, and even today they may be seen in virtually every Midwestern city.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>George W. Maher in Kenilworth, Kenilworth: The Kenilworth Historical Society, 1993.

<sup>12</sup>Alice Sinkevitch, ed., *A.I.A. Guide to Chicago*, San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1993, pp. 232-3.

<sup>13</sup>*Inland Architect and News Record*, 34 (November 1899), p. 32.

<sup>14</sup>H. Allen Brooks, "The Early Work of the Prairie Architects," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 19 (1960), p. 4.

**JOHN FARSON HOUSE**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

**Page 12**

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

Nourse and Rasmussen's Butler House, Fort Dodge, Iowa, 1903, is derived from the Farson House's facade. A variety of architects showed Maher's influence in houses designed shortly after 1900: Wilson & Marshall's C. J. Wolff House, Chicago, 1901; Frank Lloyd Wright's Jessie and William Adams House, Chicago, 1900-1 (designed for the Farson's contractor); Robert Seyfarth's own house, Blue Island, 1903; E. E. Roberts's Henry Magill House, Oak Park, 1903; Tallmadge & Watson's Linthicum House, Evanston, 1907; and Ernest Wood's W. A. Dodge House, Warsaw, Illinois, 1910. The Farson House type was simplified by builders like the Radford Architectural Company, Oak Park's Gunderson & Sons and companies throughout the Midwest which offered Maheresque houses by mail.

The type provided a precedent also for Maher's later work. The low hipped roof, cubic massing, prominent roof dormers and the finely detailed ornament became signature features of Maher's style. Around 1904 he began to design clean, stucco-surfaced houses like the Franklin Corbin House, Kenilworth, 1904, that relate to the English Arts and Crafts houses or Secessionist architecture, but which always retain Maher's personal, intricate ornament based on flowers. Other forms become part of Maher's vocabulary - the segmental arch and canted buttresses are used for building forms as well as furniture details. The Farson type also was reused by Maher for inexpensive houses; several for builder Thomas Carson still stand in Evanston, Illinois.

George Maher designed the Farson House as the Arts and Crafts movement was being formulated in the United States.<sup>15</sup> It is an example of an early house that was conceived as a total design in much the same manner as the major Arts and Crafts buildings in the United States: Frank Lloyd Wright's Robie House, Chicago, 1908-9; Greene and Greene's Gamble House, Pasadena, California, 1908; Price and McLanahan's houses in Rose Valley, Pennsylvania, 1905-6; and Gustav Stickley's Log Inn at Craftsman Farms, Morris Plains, New Jersey, 1908-10.

Maher became intimately involved in the Arts and Crafts movement as it emerged in the Midwest. In 1904 he built a small craftsman bungalow on Chicago's south side. He bought property across Lake Michigan in 1907 which he transformed into a family summer place and fruit farm with bungalows for himself, his sister Mary Hooker and the artist Alden Brooks and his wife Ellen, the sister of Maher's wife. Later in 1910 Maher drew up a plan for a New School in Indiana focused on manual training and outdoor life. The house that Maher designed for its headmaster was based on a plan that appeared in the *Craftsman* magazine.<sup>16</sup>

In the same period he began to take an interest in municipal planning. At first submitting a plan for the development of Northwestern University in Evanston, later Maher published plans for suburban areas such as Glencoe, Hinsdale and Kenilworth. George Maher was a Fellow of the American Institute of Architects and in 1921 he formed the firm of George W. Maher and Son with his son Philip who had worked in his office since 1914. After nearly 40 years of practice, George W. Maher died in 1926.

The John Farson House is the most important building by George Maher that remains intact with its original integrity preserved. Designed according to Maher's highly personal version of Arts and Crafts philosophy, which he applied throughout his career, the house remains an important example of the Prairie School. The fine craftsmanship used throughout the house reflects the taste of the architect but also of its owner who occupied a prominent position in the cultural and social life of Oak Park, Illinois. The Farson House proved to be a type that

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<sup>15</sup>Richard Guy Wilson, "American Arts and Crafts Architecture" in Wendy Kaplan, ed., *The Art that is Life: The Arts and Crafts Movement in America, 1875-1920*, Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1987.

<sup>16</sup>Mary Ann Smith, *Gustav Stickley: The Craftsman*, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1992, pp. 94-5.

**JOHN FARSON HOUSE**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

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was highly popular in the first two decades of this century in America and it established George Maher as a major designer.

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**JOHN FARSON HOUSE**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

**Page 16**

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

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Previous documentation on file (NPS):

Preliminary Determination of Individual Listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.

Previously Listed in the National Register.

Previously Determined Eligible by the National Register.

Designated a National Historic Landmark.

Recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey: #

Recorded by Historic American Engineering Record: #

Primary Location of Additional Data:

State Historic Preservation Office

Other State Agency

Federal Agency

Local Government

University

Other (Specify Repository):

## **10. GEOGRAPHICAL DATA**

Acreeage of Property: 7 acres

UTM References: Zone Easting Northing  
A 16 433590 4637140

Verbal Boundary Description:

That part of the north half of the east 40 acres of the west 80 acres of the south west quarter of section 7, township 39 north, range 13, east of the third principal meridian, described as commencing at the intersection of the south line of Pleasant Street with the west line of Home Avenue; running thence west along the south line of Pleasant Street 363.33 feet, more



**JOHN FARSON HOUSE**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

**Page 17**

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

or less, to the north west corner of the east half of lot 16 in J. W. Scoville's addition to Harlem; running thence south along the west line of the east half of said lot 16, 280 feet, more or less, to the north east corner of lot 21 in Pease Court addition to Oak Park; running thence west along the north line of said lot 21, 66 feet to the north east corner of lot 3 in said Pease court addition; running thence south along the east line of said lot 3, 32 feet to the south east corner thereof; running thence west along the south line of said lot 3, 165 feet to the south west corner thereof, being the east line of Wisconsin Street; running thence south along the west line of lot 4, 5 and 6 in said Pease Court addition, being the east line of Wisconsin Street, 166.26 feet, more or less, to a point which is 478 feet south of the south line of Pleasant Street; running thence easterly 396.60 feet to a point on the east line of the west 99 feet of lot 60 in Oak Ridge, which is 474.58 feet south of the south line of Pleasant Street; running thence north on the east line of the west 99 feet of lots 60 and 51 in Oak Ridge, 44.15 feet, more or less, to the north line of the south 33 feet of lot 51 in Oak Ridge, running thence east along a line 33 feet north of and parallel to the south line of lot 51 in Oak Ridge, 198.55 feet, more or less, to a point on the east line of said lot 51, being the west line of Home Avenue, 430.45 feet south of the south line of Pleasant Street; running thence north along the west line of Home Avenue 430.45 feet to the place of beginning; in Cook County, Illinois.

(See attached the 1894 map of Oak Park and the survey of the present grounds.)

**Boundary Justification:**

The grounds assembled by John Farson at the southwest corner of Home Avenue and Pleasant Street in Oak Park, Illinois from 1892 through 1906 are the historical and present boundaries of the estate, which is now called Mills Park, in memory of the house's second owner, Herbert S. Mills.

**11. FORM PREPARED BY**

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**JOHN FARSON HOUSE**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

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