

NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK NOMINATION

NPS Form 10-900

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

OMB No. 1024-0018

CHARNLEY, JAMES, HOUSE

Page 1

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

1. NAME OF PROPERTY

Historic Name: CHARNLEY, JAMES, HOUSE

Other Name/Site Number: CHARNLEY-PERSKY HOUSE

2. LOCATION

Street & Number: 1365 North Astor Street

Not for publication: \_\_\_

City/Town: Chicago

Vicinity: \_\_\_

State: IL County: Cook Code:031

Zip Code:60610-2144

3. CLASSIFICATION

Ownership of Property

Private: X

Public-Local: \_\_\_

Public-State: \_\_\_

Public-Federal: \_\_\_

Category of Property

Building(s): X

District: \_\_\_

Site: \_\_\_

Structure: \_\_\_

Object: \_\_\_

Number of Resources within Property

Contributing

1

\_\_\_

\_\_\_

\_\_\_

1

Noncontributing

\_\_\_ buildings

\_\_\_ sites

\_\_\_ structures

\_\_\_ objects

\_\_\_ Total

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

Name of Related Multiple Property Listing: N/A

**CHARNLEY, JAMES, 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  X  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

**CHARNLEY, JAMES, 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:	Education Recreation & Culture Commerce/Trade	Sub:	Education-Related Museum Office Building

**7. DESCRIPTION**

ARCHITECTURAL CLASSIFICATION: Late 19th and Early 20th Century American Movements: Early Modern

**MATERIALS:**

Foundation:	Stone
Walls:	Limestone and Roman brick
Roof:	Metal: Copper
Other:	Wood

**CHARNLEY, JAMES, HOUSE**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

**Page 4**

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

**Describe Present and Historic Physical Appearance.**

The Charnley house is a three-story building situated in Chicago's Gold Coast neighborhood, on the southeast corner of Astor and Schiller streets. The lot measures 35 feet by 84 feet. The small footprint of the house (65 feet by 25 feet) lies tangent to the property lines along both Astor and Schiller streets, abutting the sidewalks. The remainder of the lot is used as a service drive (10 feet by 84 feet) to the rear, or east, of the house, and a service courtyard (20 feet by 25 feet) to the south.

The principal elevation of the house, facing west on Astor Street, is symmetrical, divided vertically into unequal thirds. However, the compositional emphasis is horizontal, formed by a random ashlar gray limestone base that extends over the raised basement to the sill line of the main floor, and courses of yellow Roman brick that extend from that base to the roofline. The smooth brick skin of the façade is broken only by two single limestone courses that roughly correspond to the floor and ceiling of the uppermost level. In the central section of the façade, the limestone veneer rises to frame a narrow, deeply recessed front door and flanking casement windows. Aligned with this grouping, directly above, is a projecting wooden loggia that sits in the recessed center bay of the second and third floors. It is the most embellished component of the exterior. This two-and-a-half level sequence forms the dominant focus of the front, its prominence accentuated by the austerity, unusually pronounced for the period, of the two adjacent sections. The central section also brings a classicizing balance to the composition, visually anchoring its divergent parts to present a strong, coherent whole.

At the basement level on both the north and west facades are groups of square windows covered by inset iron grills. Three low limestone steps on the west facade lead to the oak front door, decorated with an iron grill of three vertical ovals and acanthus leaves, its design characteristic of the work of Louis H. Sullivan. The casement windows on either side of the door have panes of leaded art glass in a circular pattern. The wood loggia on the second floor sits above the portal, and is supported by eight Tuscan columns. Its balustrade and frieze are decorated with jig-sawn flat patterns of ovals, beads and foliage, patterns that are repeated inside the house. The roofline of the loggia features a pressed copper cornice. On the first and second floors, a recessed double-hung window pierces the brick façade to the left and right of the entryway and loggia. The windows are without frames or any kind of surround; the shallow arches at each window's top are their only decoration. The third floor contains a pair of small square casement windows framed by limestone on each of the three thirds that comprise the main facade.

The north and south facades are dressed in the same limestone and roman brick as the west façade. On the north, a large double-hung window is centered at the first and second floors; three small casement windows surrounded by limestone are centered at the third floor. A bay projects slightly from the center of the south façade, and is flanked by two small double-hung windows at both the first and second floors and two small casement windows at the third floor. The east, or rear, facade of the house is of Chicago common brick, and is windowless except for one small opening at the second floor level toward the south end of the building. The terner copper roof is gently hipped at both ends of the house, at so low a pitch that it is almost invisible from the street, suggesting instead a flat, projecting roof. A pressed copper cornice, identical to the one

**CHARNLEY, JAMES, HOUSE**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

**Page 5**

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

that marks the roof of the loggia, emphasizes the low, horizontal line of the roof. Four chimneys are low and wide.

**Interior**

The front door leads into a small foyer, which is entirely sheathed in vertical oak panels with beaded borders. Five broad stairs featuring dentils under the treads lead to the inner oak entry door. This second door is decorated on both sides with carved acanthus leaves at the top portion of the recessed center panel of the door; these carved forms again reflect work characteristic of Louis Sullivan, as do many of the decorative elements throughout the house. One progresses from the small, rather dark, enclosed vestibule into a spacious, light-filled hall that rises to the roof and is topped by a skylight, creating a three-story atrium. This space serves as the main circulation area. At either end, to the north and to the south, is a large, rectangular room. This center hall, single-file configuration is repeated on each floor.

Immediately in front of the entrance door, in the center of the house, is a fireplace with a mosaic tile surround and hearth. It is low, without a mantel, and its tiles are patterned in a series of green, red, blue and yellow ovals against a pale yellow background. As the stairs to the second floor run behind the wall into which the fireplace is carved, the flues were installed in between the stairs to the second floor and the ceiling of the basement stairs below it to the rear, or east, wall of the house. The plaster walls of all three floors of the central hall and throughout the first floor are restored sand textured plaster and have been painted in a warm beige color. The original texture and color were researched and documented during a 1986/87 restoration of the building.<sup>1</sup>

Throughout the house, there is an abundance of carefully detailed woodwork, primarily quartersawn oak. The floors throughout the house are also of oak. (Floors of secondary spaces, such as closets, are of pine.) On the first floor, broad, oak arches lead into the living room to the north and the dining room to the south. Two more arches on either side of the front door frame the small alcoves housing window seats that cover radiators beneath them. These latter arches are mirrored on the opposite wall by ones on either side of the fireplace: an arch to the right framing an oak cupboard; to the left, the stairs. A smaller arch is set in the east wall of the stair landing between the first and second floors. The stairs then turn abruptly south and rise behind the wall. At the bottom of the stairs is a large, square newel post featuring a carved circle of acanthus within a square on each side.

In the northern room, which served as a living room and library, the north and west walls are lined with four-foot, six-inch-tall open bookcases. The focus of the east wall is its centered fireplace with its mantel a continuation of the bookcase top. The fireplace surround is composed of African rose marble. On both sides of this fireplace are bookcases enclosed with doors featuring ovals, circles, and other geometric shapes traced in leaded art glass. The fourth wall, containing the archway from the hall, has one section of bookcase with solid beaded paneled oak doors, terminating in a large square post, boldly decorated in carved acanthus leaves and linear gothic designs. At the meeting of the wall and the ceiling, flat, wide bands of quartersawn oak on both the wall and the ceiling take the place of a more complex crown or other molding.

---

<sup>1</sup> Robert A. Furhoff, "Investigation of Interior Finishes of the Charnley House, 1891, 1365 North Astor Street, March, 1987."

**CHARNLEY, JAMES, HOUSE**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

**Page 6**

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

In the dining room on the south end of the first floor, the major wood used is dark mahogany. This Tabasco mahogany, originally from Mexico, is thought to be a favorite wood of Sullivan's. The wood is carried around the room in broad, beaded paneling to a height of four feet, six inches. The fireplace, located in the bay that projects from the south end of the room, features a mantle with deeply cut acanthus foliage in oval shapes and with long seed pods. Selected sections of these patterns are framed in a circle and square. The fireplace surround is of a dark tone of African rose marble. The hearth is paved with a mosaic of square tiles from the Maw Company in a coordinating deep red.<sup>2</sup> Directly to the east of the dining room, a narrow butler's pantry contains cupboards, a small metal sink and a dumbwaiter leading to the basement kitchen pantry. A winding service stairway, illuminated by a small skylight, is located next to the pantry. This stair runs from the basement up to the third floor of the house, and is accessible at each level.

**Second Floor**

The most significant feature of the second floor is the grill of attenuated, square beaded spindles which screens the stairs to the third floor, forming the delicate east "wall" of the stairwell. The visible third floor spindled balustrade visually carries the grill upward. The balustrade of the other three sides of the stair light well at second floor level is created from panels of jig sawn geometric patterns and flat foliage, 30 inches tall. The stair itself, although not cantilevered, has the effect of being unattached to the grill; there is a space of about four inches between them. The horizontal rise and fall of the treads viewed through the vertical spindled screen creates a dramatically abstract effect. The skylight above was deliberately placed off-center of the light well by almost a foot to the east, allowing the light to filter between the stair and grill. Centered in the second floor front are double art glass doors leading to the loggia and decorated with leaded circles. On each side of the doors are window seats against the side walls, forming an inglenook.

Most of the doors on the second floor are of oak, with a beaded edge on the center panel. Also of oak are two-inch wide bands of trim on the walls of the stair hall on both the second and third floors. They mimic picture rails, but their function is purely visual, enhancing the horizontal character of the rooms and giving the illusion of a lower ceiling. These bands are repeated in the two second floor bedrooms, located at the north and south ends of the hall. Each of the two bedrooms has large double-hung windows (three in the south room and two in the north room), a large closet with built in drawers, and a casement window covered with a brick grill on the exterior of the loggia. Each has a fireplace with a mantle of assembled stock moldings available at a mill at the time of construction, perhaps purchased through James Charnley's own sources. The master bedroom, on the south end, also has a tall circular-patterned leaded glass door leading out onto the loggia. The birdseye maple fireplace in this master bedroom has a vertical mirror to its right side and horizontal shaped golden yellow tiles in its fireplace surround and hearth. This room also has a bathroom, which was remodeled in 1927 while the James B. Waller

---

<sup>2</sup> The Maw Company was the largest producer of architectural tile in England in the latter part of the nineteenth century.

**CHARNLEY, JAMES, HOUSE**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

**Page 7**

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

III family owned the property.<sup>3</sup> This bathroom has the only window on the east side of the house. In the north room, the walnut mantle of the corner fireplace has a surround of mauve tiles which are repeated in its hearth. The original bathroom in that bedroom is now a storeroom.

On the east walls of both the second and third floors are two large rectangular recesses, possibly used to hang works of art. There are also four frosted glass windows, one at each end of the central hall on the second and third floors, providing light from this central source to service areas.

**Third Floor**

At the third floor, the main stair hall's oak balustrade is 30 inches tall. Its spindles have concave recessed panels on each side toward their bottoms. Their tapered tops help pull the eye up. At the third floor the baseboard on the east wall of the house becomes a two-foot wide band of quartersawn oak lining the wall, visually separating the wall between the second and third floors. The linen closet is centered at the front of the house on the third floor. It has two small casement windows and five built-in drawers on each side.

The large bedroom on the north end of the third floor includes an oak corner fireplace with burgundy terra cotta tiles on the surround and hearth, and four small square casement windows. It originally had an attached bathroom to the east, now a storeroom. On the south end of the house a single large room has been created from two original servant's bedrooms. The original bath, to the east, is also used as a storeroom. The service stair can be accessed from a small hall outside the room.

**Basement**

The basement is reached by the winding stairway that runs from outside the servant's bedrooms on the third floor down to this lowest level. At the south end of the basement a swinging door with frosted glass panel in the top half with two sidelights made the entrance from the basement hall to the original kitchen brighter. The original long gray soapstone sink is still in place along with the black sheet metal stove hood that is trimmed with Eastlake leaf trim. On the east side of the kitchen is a serving pantry that connected with the butler's pantry above it on the first floor by means of a dumb waiter, still in place. This pantry was remodeled as a service kitchen during the 1980s. The kitchen is illuminated by one large double-hung window that opens onto the courtyard, four small high casement windows on the street, and a small high double casement window in the pantry. A door to the right of the stove hood leads to the small outdoor service courtyard.

To the front of the basement, under the southern first floor alcove was originally a food storage space, now a bathroom incorporating an earlier sink. Under the front entry stair is a wine cellar complete with an early wine rack. Under the northern first floor alcove is an entrance to an underground concrete vault, built under the front sidewalk of the house for coal delivery and

---

<sup>3</sup> The Waller family made extensive improvements to the house in 1927, installing several bathrooms, adding a wing on south end of house which contained an expanded kitchen, two porches, and additions to bedrooms. The majority of these improvements were removed by Skidmore, Owings and Merrill during their 1987-1988 renovation of the house, which was meant to bring the property back to its original configuration. Three of the bathrooms were left intact.

**CHARNLEY, JAMES, HOUSE**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

**Page 8**National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

---

storage. The large square room at the north end of the basement was a laundry room, now storage. It is illuminated by eight small high casement windows, four in each street facade. Three radiators hang from the ceiling of the basement, one each in the kitchen and laundry room, and one in the hall. While the heat from the radiators rises primarily to the first floor through large patterned decorative brass registers in the floor of the first level, some ambient heat also was available from them in the basement level, a resourceful method of supplementing heat in the winter. Originally the basement floor was wood, which had badly deteriorated by the 1980s. As part of the 1987-1988 restoration by Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, a concrete slab was poured for the basement floor, over which was laid beige and white checkerboard tiles.



**CHARNLEY, JAMES, HOUSE**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

**Page 9**

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

**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): Expressing Cultural Values: Architecture

Areas of Significance: Architecture

Period(s) of Significance: 1891-1892

Significant Dates: 1891-1892

Significant Person(s): N/A

Cultural Affiliation: N/A

Architect/Builder: Wright, Frank Lloyd  
Sullivan, Louis (Adler & Sullivan)Historic Context: XVI. Architecture  
P. Prairie

**CHARNLEY, JAMES, HOUSE**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

**Page 10**

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

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

The Charnley house has been widely recognized for over half a century as an important work nationally and internationally in the history of modernism in architecture. It is one of the few major residential commissions realized by Louis Sullivan, who enjoyed national prominence for several decades during his career and is now considered among the most important architects to have practiced in the United States. The house is also a benchmark in the early development of Frank Lloyd Wright, who as a draftsman and designer in Sullivan's office contributed significantly to the design. Along with the Winslow house in River Forest, Illinois (1893), the Charnley house embodies departures from convention that would make Wright's work the most radical form of avant-garde modernism in the U.S. and Europe alike by the early twentieth century and pivotal to transforming the fundamental nature of architecture over the decades that followed. Finally, the house is an unusually intact survivor of an elite urban dwelling of the late nineteenth century, one of the few extant residences by Sullivan to remain close to its original condition, and perhaps the only surviving example of a design to which both Sullivan and Wright made substantial contributions.<sup>1</sup>

The Charnley house is important to the history of American architecture and also to the history of modern Western architecture as a pivotal work in the transition from the self-conscious search for new forms of expression that characterized many efforts in design during the nineteenth century to the more fundamental breaks with the past championed by avant-garde modernists beginning in the early twentieth century. The exterior design at once evokes the archaism cultivated in neoclassical architecture nearly a hundred years before and an ambient newness that rendered it a near anomaly at the time of realization.

The strong symmetrical composition, clear hierarchy of parts, simplicity of detail, and prevailing sense of mass and solidity can all be understood within the context of French academic principles of design, then emerging as a dominant influence in American architecture. In this respect, the exterior is akin to contemporary residences that loosely and abstractly interpreted motifs of the Italian Renaissance. Examples of this kind were designed by McKim, Mead & White as early as 1882 (Phoenix House, New York). A number of architects in major cities used a similar approach by the early 1890s.

However, the Charley house differs from the overwhelming majority of such examples in its stringent avoidance of overt historical references. The second-story loggia is the most historicizing part, yet both its central placement and naturalistic relief ornament avoid specific precedent. The basic form of the house, too, evokes traditional building patterns of the Mediterranean basin, but in an even less-specific way. This generalizing of the past, combined with the bold, elemental simplicity of its details and the rigorous order of its composition make the house distantly analogous to the work of such radical neoclassicists as Claude-Nicolas Ledoux at the turn of the nineteenth century. Evidence has yet to be found, however, that either Sullivan or Wright was aware of such work or indeed what sources they may have used for inspiration.

---

<sup>1</sup>The Ann Halsted House, Chicago (1883) and the Bradley House, Madison, WI (1908-1910), both designed by Louis Sullivan, also survive.

**CHARNLEY, JAMES, HOUSE**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

**Page 11**

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

Whatever conceptual springboard may exist, the pursuit of a new, abstract language stands paramount in the effect. A use of materials that emphasizes planar surface, a manipulation of form and detail alike that emphasizes basic geometric relationships, a vigorous rejection of moldings and other minor elements then considered by most architects to be essential to a well developed design -- all these facets indicate a pointed search for a method of design that significantly departed from existing ones. Even the low-slung form of the house signals a defiance of normative urban practices. The results suggest a process antithetical to a mere paring away of embellishment. The many subtleties of the composition, including the delicate tension between horizontal and vertical thrusts, the richness with which materials are expressed, and the intricacy of the few decorative details that are employed bespeak the quest for a new order that is far from minimalist.

While the basic plan of the house -- a central circulation area with one major room to either side at each level -- draws from patterns widely employed in the U.S. over the previous century, its application to the crowded urban environment of the late nineteenth century is unusual. Generally, such wide-fronted city houses with central entrances extended two or three rooms deep. Houses on narrow lots, even corner ones such as this, tended to have the entrance placed at the narrow end, adhering to long, linear room arrangements common to attached dwellings. The house designed by H. M. Hansen in 1885 nearby at 36 East Schiller Street affords a good illustration of the practice. Sullivan, and no doubt Wright, shared a concern with many architects of the period in revising the plan of city houses to make them seem more commodious. The solution here was nonetheless unusual. Just as with its form, the internal arrangement of rooms stands in near singular defiance of the constraints inherent to modern urban building.

Equally unusual is the way in which space is manipulated. On the two principal floors, horizontal and vertical movements alike are set at right angles to the major rooms. Combined with the three-story atrium that separated the stairs from the passageways, this arrangement makes the interior seem unusually light and open for one of the period. The effect is also one of grand gesture, where most of the space appears to be given over to movement. In this way, the interior suggests the beginnings of a search for a new method of developing volume that resists traditional confines. The degree to which Sullivan and Wright consciously embarked on these paths when they were designing the house can probably never be documented. However, Wright seems to have been aware of how much his role in the scheme was a catalyst for his later endeavors when he described it years later as "the beginning of modern architecture."<sup>2</sup>

Wright also later claimed authorship of the design in its entirety, but recent comparative analysis indicates Sullivan played a major role in its conception. Sullivan's renown, of course, stems primarily from his commercial buildings and from the originality of his applied ornament. While residential commissions formed a good part of the firm's early work, once he was well-established Sullivan did few houses and their designs seem to have commanded little, if any, of his attention. The Charnley house was exceptional, however, probably in large part due to the friendship between architect and client. The Charnley's social prominence as well as the site's prestigious location -- in contrast to the middle-class neighborhoods on the city's South Side where most of his previous residences were located -- may also have entered the equation. The scheme in all likelihood from submissions by the firm was published in the major architectural

---

<sup>2</sup> Frank Lloyd Wright, *An Autobiography*, second edition (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1943).

**CHARNLEY, JAMES, HOUSE**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

**Page 12**

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

journals of the day -- *American Architect and Building News*, *Architectural Record*, and *Inland Architect*. This suggests Sullivan considered it an important work.

The Charnley house was designed near the peak of Sullivan's career in terms of quantitative success. Completion of the Auditorium placed the firm among the Nation's leaders in the design of tall commercial buildings as well as of theaters. Adler & Sullivan was now receiving commissions for major business blocks from many parts of the country, transforming this practice into one of a very few that were truly national at that time. The residence also was designed at a pivotal point in Sullivan's development as an architect of exceptional ability. For several years his stylistic independence had been growing through the creation of bold masses and planar wall surfaces supporting little or no ornament in a vein inspired by the work of H. H. Richardson. Arguably, the Auditorium represents the culmination of this phase. His approach began to change in 1890, fusing the elemental simplicity of previous work with a more classicizing rectilinearity and an intricate play of naturalistic ornament, shedding Richardsonian motifs in the process. The Wainwright Building (1890-1892) in St. Louis stands among the most prominent examples of this shift at its inception. The Charnley house exemplifies the transformation as well, while balancing the unrelieved planar masses characteristic to previous work with some of the decorative indulgences of the new. Perhaps most important, it looked as new for a house as the Wainwright did for an office building. Sullivan may well have considered it an emblem of his hard-won progress.

For Wright, the Charnley house was important, too, not just because he was involved in its design, and not just because it manifested a maturation in his mentor's style, but also because Sullivan was focusing on a building type with which he, Wright, was familiar and for which he had the most opportunities to design at that stage of his career. Here were lessons that could be directly applied to his own work. The design stands quite apart from anything he himself had done before. Here, for the first time in a building of domestic scale, Wright could see how the order of classicism could become a basis for a creative, non-historicizing departure. The approach was soon broadened in his own work, mostly significantly at the Winslow house, and it became an essential foundation for the synthesis he would achieve around 1900 between the academic and picturesque as well as non-western traditions. Wright's role in this scheme was more than that of a student. He may well have selected the materials and developed the unorthodox composition enframing the entrance and its flanking windows. Wright, too, may have been responsible for designing the stairwell and he can be readily credited with many interior details. The process of absorbing Sullivan's principles was accentuated by his own extensive participation. While for Sullivan the Charnley house was a sign of maturity, for Wright it was a springboard for exploration at the start of his career.

Among Sullivan's residential works, the Charnley house ranks among the very few that survive intact and the only surviving one of substantial significance realized before the turn of the century. Wright's early work has a much greater survival rate. Nevertheless, the Charnley house is virtually unique as an intact example of a scheme in which both architects appear to have been so involved. The building is also a relatively rare example of an elite city house of the late nineteenth century that stands in almost its original condition. Careful restorations of recent years have left the house as a document of its era, not just in the major and family spaces, but in the service ones as well. From basement kitchen to third-floor servants' quarters, the house imparts a vivid sense of a world seldom experienced today save through period illustrations

**CHARNLEY, JAMES, HOUSE**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

**Page 13**

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

The Charnley house is located in the Gold Coast neighborhood of Chicago in the Astor Street Historic District. The neighborhood borders Lake Michigan and lies less than two miles north of the Loop, Chicago's business district. The neighborhood was developed beginning in the 1880s, its mansions commissioned by wealthy industrialists, such as Potter Palmer, who made the neighborhood one of the most fashionable in the city, a stature it has maintained to the present. By the early 1890s, much of the area had been developed, and land values had become so high that the majority of new dwellings occupied comparatively modest parcels. Most were built as attached houses, giving the area a distinctly urban character.

James Charnley, a successful lumberman originally from Pennsylvania, came to Chicago in 1866 and established a business with his brother, Charles, and brother-in-law, Lester Bradner. Bradner, Charnley & Co. included a sawmill, which produced heavy timber for commercial and industrial construction, and also a large lumberyard.<sup>3</sup> In 1871 Charnley married Helen Douglas, daughter of John M. Douglas, the president of the Illinois Central Railroad. The couple lived in several locations, most of them in or near the Gold Coast, which was the neighborhood favored by their families. In 1877 Charnley withdrew from Bradner, Charnley & Co. to found another lumber company with his father-in-law, who had just retired from the Illinois Central.<sup>4</sup> The business was very successful, and in 1882 the Charnleys commissioned a large residence from the then new architectural firm of Burnham & Root on an expansive site at the northwest corner of Lake Shore Drive and Division Street. Boasting capacious porches on the two main levels, this great timber-frame structure suggested a country house planned for seasonal use more than one close to the urban core. With full eastern exposure to Lake Michigan, the configuration was far from practical during the severe winter months.

The Charnleys probably had met Louis Sullivan through business connections. Sullivan's brother, Albert, was a rising star at the Illinois Central. John Douglas would certainly have known him, and may have introduced him to his daughter and son-in-law. Albert in turn may have introduced them to his brother. In later years, Adler & Sullivan designed several stations for the Illinois Central, including that in New Orleans (1891).

The Charnleys encountered their friend Louis Sullivan in New Orleans in 1890. Sullivan had traveled there seeking to recover from the rigors of completing the immense Auditorium Building, constructed between 1887 and 1889. The bond between Sullivan and the Charnleys had grown sufficiently strong that when the former found New Orleans ill-suited for recuperation, the three traveled together to Ocean Springs, Mississippi, a small gulf coast community just east of Biloxi. Both parties found the lush setting ideal. Before they returned to Chicago, the Charnleys and Sullivan purchased adjacent parcels of oceanfront property. The architect agreed to prepare plans for winter cottages for himself and for the Charnleys.

Frank Lloyd Wright, who was hired by the Adler & Sullivan office in 1887 to assist with the Auditorium, was also assigned to work on the Ocean Springs cottages. He later claimed to have

---

<sup>3</sup>George Hotchkiss, *Industrial Chicago: The Lumber Interests* (Chicago: Goodspeed Publishing Co, 1894), 452. The company was one of the first to introduce the heavier varieties of timber and large joists, which contributed largely to their success.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

**CHARNLEY, JAMES, HOUSE**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

**Page 14**

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

designed them on his own, but it is more likely that Sullivan made preliminary sketches for his draftsman to develop into final designs, a conventional division of labor in an architectural office. The cottages were built in 1890 or 1891.<sup>5</sup>

The friendship, nurtured on the Gulf Coast, made Sullivan the logical choice for architect when the Charnleys decided to build a new residence that was less extravagant to maintain, more compact, and more in keeping with the ever denser urban environment of the Gold Coast. Several factors may have influenced the decision to build anew at a reduced scale. The Charnley's only child, Douglas, would have been about 18 years old and soon would be going off to Yale. By that time, Charnley's partnership with his father-in-law had ended, as John Douglas had retired for good in 1884.<sup>6</sup> Although his lumber company continued to operate, his business interests were no longer in Chicago, but in Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Mississippi.<sup>7</sup>

In the summer of 1890 the Charnleys bought a piece of property of substantial dimensions, but much smaller than the land they then occupied at Lake Shore Drive and Division. Extending 84 feet on Astor Street and 125 feet on Schiller, the parcel cost \$27,500. By the end of 1892 Charnley had sold the eastern-most portion of this land, reserving a lot of 84 feet by 35 feet for the site of his own residence. Projected to cost \$25,000, the house was to consume most of the remaining lot. Plans were completed by June 1891, construction began the next month, and exterior work was completed by that November. By May 1892, the Charnley's occupied the house.<sup>8</sup>

The couple lived in their new house for ten years, and then kept it as a rental property from 1902 until 1911. James Charnley retired in 1902 and moved with his wife to Camden, South Carolina, where he died three years later. The last tenant of the Chicago house, Redmond D. Stephens, purchased it in 1911 and resided there until 1918. The Waller family tenure of the house was the longest, a period of 51 years from 1918 to 1969 and included two generations. James B. Waller, Jr., purchased the house in 1918, and his son James III inherited the house in 1920 after his father's death. The younger Waller was alderman of this, the 43<sup>rd</sup>, ward from 1931-1933 and from 1943-1945, and a distinguished progressive Republican. Waller died in 1949, and his widow continued to live in the house until 1969.<sup>9</sup>

After several subsequent owners, the house was purchased in 1979 by Lowell Wohlfeil, who used it as a residence with his partner Larry Duvall, a docent with the Chicago Architecture Foundation. During this period selected restoration projects were undertaken by architect John

---

<sup>5</sup>Mary Wallace Crocker, *Historic Architecture in Mississippi* (Jackson: University and College Press of Mississippi, 1973), 98.

<sup>6</sup> Sprague. When John Douglas retired, Charnley renamed his lumber company the James Charnley Lumber Company; then, in 1889, he shortened it to the James Charnley Co.

<sup>7</sup>*Industrial Chicago: The Lumber Interests*, 453.

<sup>8</sup>Sprague

<sup>9</sup>Commission on Chicago Historical and Architectural Landmarks, "Charnely House Summary of Information," 1972, 5-7.

**CHARNLEY, JAMES, HOUSE**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

**Page 15**

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

Vinci with assistance from Timothy Samuelson, now of the Commission on Chicago Landmarks.

The house was purchased in 1986 by the architectural firm of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (SOM), which undertook large-scale restoration of the house directed by architect John Eifler. A 1927 addition to the south side of the house, added by the Waller family, was removed, and the house was returned to its original configuration. Color analysis was performed by Robert Furhoff and original painted plaster colors were returned to the house. SOM used the house as the headquarters for its newly formed Chicago Institute for Architecture and Urbanism, but thereafter decided to put the property up for sale.

After standing vacant for about three years, the building was rented in 1994 to Seymour H. Persky, a philanthropist and architectural and decorative arts collector, who sought to safeguard its future. That December he offered the property to the Society of Architectural Historians (SAH), a not-for-profit organization, for use as its offices. After the SAH agreed to accept the proposal and move from Philadelphia to Chicago, Persky purchased the house for \$1,650,000 for the SAH, with the deed work completed on 11 April 1995. The SAH relocated that summer and opened the house to the public for guided tours in May 1996. The SAH is the largest and oldest scholarly organization specifically devoted to the study of the history of the built environment, and was formed in 1940. Its current membership of some 4000 individuals and institutions is comprised of historians, professional designers, preservationists, interested lay people, museums, and libraries.

**CHARNLEY, JAMES, HOUSE**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

**Page 16**

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

---

**9. MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES****Unpublished Materials**

Commission on Chicago Historical and Architectural Landmarks, "Charnley House Summary of Information," Report, May 1972.

"Death of James Charnley," unidentified newspaper clipping, 12 February, 1905, in Harpel Scrapbook, Chicago Historical Society Library.

Harrington, Elaine. "Charnley-Persky House Tour" and "Charnley-Persky House Historic Background," Society of Architectural Historians Docent Training Materials, 1995, revised February 1997.

Homolka, Larry. "James Charnley House," Historic American Building Survey, No. Ill-1009, August 1983.

Manson, Grant Carpenter. "Notes on James Charnley House," Grant Manson Collection, c. 1939, Oak Park Public Library, Oak, Ill.

National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form for Charnley House. Prepared by Susan Benjamin, 1969.

Purcell, William Gray. Letter to George Grant Elmslie, with annotations by Elmslie, undated (ca. 1946), Research Center, Frank Lloyd Wright Home and Studio, Oak Park, Ill.

Sprague, Paul E., "The Charnley House," unpublished ms., ca. 1989.

**Manuscript Collections**

Collections on the Charnley House located at Commission on Chicago Historical and Architectural Landmarks; Chicago Historical Society; Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, Chicago Office; Oak Park Public Library; and Research Center of the Frank Lloyd Wright Home and Studio, Oak Park, Illinois.

**Published Sources**

*The Astor Street District.* Chicago: Commission on Chicago Historical and Architectural Landmarks, 1976.

Benevolo, Leonardo. *History of Modern Architecture.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971.

Blake, Peter. *Frank Lloyd Wright: Architecture and Space.* Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1980.

Boles, Daralice D. "From House to Headquarters." *Progressive Architecture* 70 (April 1989), 76-81.



**CHARNLEY, JAMES, HOUSE**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

**Page 17**

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

Brooks, H. Allen. *The Prairie School: Frank Lloyd Wright and His Midwest Contemporaries*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1972.

Bush-Brown, Albert. *Louis Sullivan*. New York: George Barziller, 1960.

*Chicago Landmarks*, Chicago: Commission on Chicago Historical and Architectural Landmarks, 1978.

Clark, Emily and Patrick Ashley. "The Merchant Prince of Cornville," *Chicago History*, Vol. XXI: 3 (December 1992), 10-13.

Connely, Willard. *Louis Sullivan as he Lived: The Shaping of American Architecture, A Biography*. New York: Horizon Press, 1960.

Crocker, Mary Wallace. *Historic Architecture in Mississippi*. Jackson: University and College Press of Mississippi, 1973.

de Wit, Wim, ed. *Louis Sullivan: The Function of Ornament*. New York: W.W. Norton for the Saint Louis Art Museum, 1986.

"Designer's Showcase: Frank Lloyd Wright's Charnley House, Chicago," *Interior Design* 46 (November 1975), 118- 119.

Drury, John. *Old Chicago Houses*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1941.

Elia, Mario Manieri. *Louis Henry Sullivan*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996.

Elmslie, George Grant. "Letter to Frank Lloyd Wright, June 12, 1936," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 20: 3 (October 1961), 140-142.

Etlin, Richard A. *Frank Lloyd Wright and Le Corbusier: The Romantic Legacy*. New York: Manchester University Press, 1994.

Frei, Hans. *Louis Henry Sullivan*. Zurich: Artemis Verlag, 1992.

Gill, Brendan. *Many Masks: A Life of Frank Lloyd Wright*. New York: Ballantine, 1988.

*Guide to the Jackfield Tile Museum*. England: The Ironbridge Gorge Museum Trust Ltd. And Jarrold Publishing, 1995.

Hanks, David A. *The Decorative Designs of Frank Lloyd Wright*. New York: E.F. Dutton, 1979.

Hartley, Mary. *James B. Waller and Pioneering in the Wilderness of Politics*. Chicago: Lakeside Press, 1931.

Hitchcock, Henry Russell. *Architecture, Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*. New York:

**CHARNLEY, JAMES, HOUSE**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

**Page 18**

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

Penguin Books, 1977.

\_\_\_\_\_. *In the Nature of Materials: The Buildings of Frank Lloyd Wright, 1887-1941*. New York: Sloan and Pearce, 1942.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Frank Lloyd Wright and the Academic Tradition." *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*. London: Warburg Institute, University of London, 1940.

Hoffman, Donald. *Understanding Frank Lloyd Wright's Architecture*. New York: Dover, 1995.

Hotchkiss, George W. *Industrial Chicago: The Lumber Interests*. Chicago: Goodspeed Publishing Company, 1894.

"House of James Charnley, Esq., Astor Street, Chicago, Illinois," *American Architect and Building News* 38 (31 December 1892), 1888.

Levine, Neil. *The Architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996.

Mayer, Harold M. and Richard C. Wade. *Chicago: Growth of a Metropolis*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1969.

Manson, Grant Carpenter. *Frank Lloyd Wright to 1910: The First Golden Age*. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1958.

McCarter, Robert, ed. *Frank Lloyd Wright: A Primer on Architectural Principles*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1991.

Michels, Eileen. "The Early Drawings of Frank Lloyd Wright Reconsidered." *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 30: 4 (December 1971), 294-303.

Morgan, Keith. "The Charnley-Persky House: Architectural History and the Society." *Journal of the Society of Architectal Historians* 54: 3 (September 1995), 276-277.

Morrison, Hugh. *Louis Sullivan: Prophet of Modern Architecture*. New York: Norton, 1963.

O'Gorman, James F. *Three American Architects: Richardson, Sullivan, and Wright, 1865-1915*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991.

Pfeiffer, Bruce Brooks, ed. *Frank Lloyd Wright's Collected Writings*. New York: Rizzoli, 1992.

\_\_\_\_\_ and Yukio Futagawa. *Frank Lloyd Wright Monograph 1887-1901*. Tokyo: A.D.A Edita, 1986.

"Residence for Mr. James Charnley." *Inland Architect and News Record* 18 (August 1891), plate.

**CHARNLEY, JAMES, HOUSE**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

**Page 19**

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

Riley, Terrence, ed., with Peter Reed. *Frank Lloyd Wright, Architect*. New York: Harry N. Abrams for the Museum of Modern Art, 1994.

Saliga, Pauline, ed. *Fragments of Chicago's Past: The Collection of Architectural Fragments of the Art Institute of Chicago*. Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago, 1990.

"SAH Honors Seymour H. Persky." *Newsletter*, Society of Architectural Historians, 39: 4 (December 1995), 5-6.

Sanderson, Arlene, ed. *Wright Sites: A Guide to Frank Lloyd Wright Public Places*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1995.

Schultze, Franz and Kevin Harrington, eds. *Chicago's Famous Buildings: A Photographic Guide to the City's Architectural Landmarks and Other Notable Buildings*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993.

Scully, Vincent, Jr. *Frank Lloyd Wright*. New York: George Braziller, 1960.

Secrest, Meryl. *Frank Lloyd Wright: A Biography*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992.

"Seymour H. Persky Gives James Charnley House to Society as National Headquarters." *Newsletter*, Society of Architectural Historians, 39: 2 (April 1995), 2-3.

Smith, Norris Kelly. *Frank Lloyd Wright: A Study in Architectural Content*. New York: Prentice-Hall, 1966.

Storrer, William Allin. *The Frank Lloyd Wright Companion*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993.

Sullivan, Louis H. *Kindergarten Chats and Other Writings*. New York: Wittenborn, Schultz, 1947.

\_\_\_\_\_. *The Autobiography of an Idea*. Washington, D.C.: American Institute of Architects, 1924.

Twombly, Robert. *Frank Lloyd Wright: His Life and Architecture*. New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1979.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Louis Sullivan: His Life and Work*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986.

Wright, Frank Lloyd. *An Autobiography*. New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1943.

Zukowsky, John, ed. *Chicago Architecture, 1872-1922: Birth of a Metropolis*. Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago, 1987.

**CHARNLEY, JAMES, HOUSE**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

- 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: # Ill-1009
- 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):

**CHARNLEY, JAMES, HOUSE**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

**10. GEOGRAPHICAL DATA**

Acreage of Property: .08

UTM References:	Zone	Easting	Northing
	A	16	447960
			4639500

**Verbal Boundary Description:**

The West 26.10 feet of Lot 35 in Astor’s Addition to Chicago in the North Fractional Quarter of Section 3, Township 39 North, Range 14, East of the Third Principal meridian, in Cook County, Illinois.

The East 11.40 feet of the West 37.50 feet of Lot 35 in Astor’s Addition to Chicago in the North Fractional Quarter of Section 3, Township 39 North, Range 14, East of the Third Principal Meridian (except that part lying above an inclined plan having an elevation of 32.85 feet at the west boundary of the land and descending in an even slope to an elevation of 28.85 feet on the East line of said Land being in relation to Chicago City datum)in Cook County, Illinois.

**Boundary Justification:**

The nominated property includes the entire parcel historically associated with the Charnley house.

**CHARNLEY, JAMES, HOUSE**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

---

**11. FORM PREPARED BY**

Name/Title: Society of Architectural Historians

Elaine Harrington  
Richard Longstreth  
Pauline Saliga  
Elizabeth Sippel  
Paul Sprague

Address: 1365 North Astor St, Chicago, IL 60610-2144

Telephone: (312) 573-1365

Date: September 10, 1997