

NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK NOMINATION

NPS Form 10-900

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

OMB No. 1024-0018

DAY, DR. FISK HOLBROOK, HOUSE

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United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

1. NAME OF PROPERTY

Historic Name: DAY, DR. FISK HOLBROOK, HOUSE

Other Name/Site Number: SUNNYHILL HOME

2. LOCATION

Street & Number: 8000 West Milwaukee Avenue

Not for publication: N/A

City/Town: Wauwatosa

Vicinity: N/A

State: WI

County: Milwaukee

Code: 079

Zip Code: 53213

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
0 Total

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

Name of Related Multiple Property Listing: N/A

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**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

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**6. FUNCTION OR USE**

Historic: Domestic

Sub: single dwelling

Current: Domestic

Sub: single dwelling

**7. DESCRIPTION**

ARCHITECTURAL CLASSIFICATION:

Late Victorian: Gothic/Italianate/Second Empire

MATERIALS:

Foundation: STONE: limestone (dolomite)

Walls: BRICK

Roof: SHINGLE (cedar)

Other:

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**Describe Present and Historic Physical Appearance.**

The Dr. Fisk Holbrook Day House (Sunnyhill Home) is an outstanding example of Victorian eclectic architecture. Having survived decades of neglect, vandalism, and disrepair, the house has been recently renovated by its present owners. Alterations made over the last 50 years have been corrected and both the interior and exterior of the house have been carefully restored to their former glory and now appear much as they did when Dr. Day lived there. The original interior floor plan has been largely reestablished, and the original woodwork and flooring, including parquetwork, have been restored. Notable interior features include marble fireplaces, pocket doors, and a spiral staircase.

Dating from 1874, this stately two and one-half story home is the only true mansion ever built in Wauwatosa, the oldest suburb of Milwaukee. It is a fine example of Victorian eclectic architecture, reflecting Italianate, Gothic and Second Empire styles.<sup>1</sup> The house is constructed of local Cream City brick, for which the Milwaukee area is famous, and set on an ashlar foundation of rough-dressed Wauwatosa building-stone that was quarried nearby. The mansard roof on the main portion of the house is capped by a low-pitched pyramid with two gables at the front (south) side of the house and one on the east. A jerkin-headed dormer is present on the east side also. Three bays, each one recessed slightly more than the last from east to west, compose the front of the house. The easternmost bay is distinguished by prominent half-octagon bay windows on both the first and the second stories. The east and west bays and front of the tower have elaborate stick-style gables with pine scroll-cut ornamental bargeboards. The windows have segmental arches and engaged columns with scroll-cut ornament. The tower is part of the middle bay. It rises one story above the roof over the front entrance, has an interior divided into five levels with a window on each, a straight-sided mansard roof with a flat-topped deck with cast iron cresting, a gable with ornamental bargeboard at the front, three jerkin-headed dormers around the sides and a balcony on the third story. All of the gables and dormers on the house are decorated by scroll-sawn pine pseudo-timberwork and ornamental bargeboards with pendants. The roof is covered with multi-colored, sawn, cedar shingles laid in a geometric pattern with two bands of diamond shapes. Massive limestone stairs lead to the front entrance inside the restored stick-style front porch.

In addition to the house, the original 8.67 acre lot once held a barn (the stone foundation of which remains), two grass tennis courts, and vegetable and flower gardens. A dilapidated garage built after the period of significance but noted in the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form has since been demolished. The land was subsequently subdivided, but the house still sits on the largest residential lot in the village of Wauwatosa. Set far back from the street and atop an imposing hill, the home retains the impressive appearance of an estate. It has been aptly described as “a Currier and Ives print, a little piece of America sitting on a hilltop.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> H. Russell Zimmermann. 1980. Sunnyhill Home. National Register of Historic Places Registration Form. This is the source for most of the architectural description.

<sup>2</sup> Florence Rust. *The Milwaukee Sentinel*, November 5, 1979.



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

The Fisk Holbrook Day House is important in the history of the science of geology and in social history of the United States for what it reveals about the lifestyle of amateur naturalists who played a key role in the progress of nineteenth-century American science. These amateur naturalists assembled large collections of natural history specimens and made detailed scientific observations on a local scale. They were pleased to supply the information and collections to professional scientists who were few in number at the time and unable to travel easily to the many, often remote, areas represented by the naturalists. In this way, the naturalists provided most of the specimens and field work necessary for the pioneer scientific exploration and study of the natural environment in this country. Many of these naturalists were affluent, respected members of the local community with the financial means, leisure time, and education that allowed them to undertake their natural history pursuits. Dr. Day, a highly regarded physician, was such a person. He assembled a large and outstanding collection of Silurian-age fossils especially from the site of the first ancient reef recognized in North America. Day's fossil collection, considered the best from southeastern Wisconsin, now forms an important part of the paleontology collection in the Museum of Comparative Zoology at Harvard University. Day's home exemplifies the typical lifestyle led by one of these amateur naturalists. It complements a nearby National Historic Landmark (the Thomas A. Greene Memorial Museum and Collection) that depicts an amateur's natural history "cabinet," which was assembled by Day's friend and colleague Thomas Greene. Like the Greene Museum, the Fisk Holbrook Day House is of national significance because it represents an important facet of the amateur naturalist's life, which enabled him to make such important contributions to American science.

**History**

Fisk Holbrook Day was born at Richmond, New York, on March 11, 1826, to Lydia Lovell Holbrook Day and the Reverend Warren Day,<sup>1</sup> a Presbyterian and later Congregational minister, and a close friend of Daniel Webster.<sup>2</sup> He received his early education in the local academies in Ithaca and Geneva, New York, and went on to attend Jefferson Medical College in Philadelphia where he had to work his way through school. Following his graduation in 1849, Day practiced medicine for a few years in Rushville and Warsaw, New York. In 1854, Day, his mother, and recently-retired father moved to Wauwatosa, Wisconsin. Day remained in Wauwatosa for nearly 40 years and at one time was considered its most prominent citizen.

Arriving only a few years after Wisconsin had attained statehood, Dr. Day practiced medicine as a pioneer country doctor. At first, he built a small frame cottage (The Bird's

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<sup>1</sup> *Who's Who in America, 1903-1905*, p. 37.

<sup>2</sup> H. Russell Zimmermann. 1987. *Magnificent Milwaukee: Architectural treasures 1850-1920*. Milwaukee Public Museum, 270 pp.

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Nest), which would become his parents' home.<sup>3</sup> Shortly afterward, he designed a larger Gothic-style brick home (Evergreen Hall), where he lived with his wife Frances A. Williams after their marriage in 1858. (Both the Bird's Nest and Evergreen Hall have been razed). Sunnyhill Home was erected around 1874. His private practice thrived and, by 1864, Day had been appointed Milwaukee County Physician. In 1876, Day was appointed the Superintendent of the County Hospital, the first time that position had been held by a physician. These appointments, which he held for 20 years, entailed making daily rounds of the Milwaukee County hospital, poor farm and insane asylum, and fighting with the County Board of Supervisors to improve the plight of the patients.<sup>4</sup> As part of his reforms, for the first time doctors served as permanent staff members in the hospital, treatment and housing conditions of the insane were improved, and a system of county insane asylums was established throughout Wisconsin.

Besides his medical duties, Day was a member of numerous medical and scientific societies, including the Lyceum of Natural History of New York, the American Association for the Advancement of Science, the Chicago Academy of Science, the Wisconsin Academy of Science, Arts and Letters, and the Wisconsin Archaeological Society, and he served as President of the State Medical Society of Wisconsin.<sup>5</sup> His membership in these numerous societies attests to his many and varied interests, including archaeology, botany, architecture and astronomy, but above all, Day was most especially devoted to geology and paleontology.

Not only did Day collect fossils in the nearby stone quarries in Wauwatosa and Milwaukee, but he traveled to quarries and outcrops through Waukesha and Racine counties as well. Like many other amateur naturalists of the day, in addition to collecting personally, he paid quarry men to set fossils aside as they loaded their rock carts by hand.<sup>6</sup> Day's fossil collection grew steadily in volume and reputation, so much so, that a "Cabinet Room" with towering wood and glass display cases was included in the plan when Sunnyhill was constructed.<sup>7</sup> Amateur naturalists, local scientific societies, and professional paleontologists from the eastern United States came to view and study his collection. By 1880, Day had amassed in his home the finest collection of Silurian-age fossils ever made in southeastern Wisconsin. He was once offered the then-extravagant sum of \$100 for a particular specimen of trilobite (which was later named *Bumastus dayi* in his honor by Percy Raymond in 1916).<sup>8</sup>

Day's paleontologic interests may have originated with his father, who had collected fossils

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ralph E. Aderman. 1987. *Trading Post to Metropolis: Milwaukee County's First 150 Years*. Milwaukee County Historical Society, 419 pp.

<sup>5</sup> *Who's Who in America, 1903-1905*, p. 371.

<sup>6</sup> D.G. Mikulic. 1983. Milwaukee's Gentlemen Paleontologists. *Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters* 71 (1): 5-20.

<sup>7</sup> Zimmermann. *Magnificent Milwaukee*.

<sup>8</sup> Mikulic. 1983. Milwaukee's Gentlemen Paleontologists.

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many years before in New York. There, Reverend Day made the acquaintance of James Hall, the preeminent nineteenth-century American paleontologist, who visited the Day home and corresponded with the Reverend during the 1840s. By the 1860s, the younger Day had begun to receive national recognition as a dedicated amateur paleontologist, and Hall traveled to Wauwatosa to study his fossil collection.<sup>9</sup> Hall even illustrated certain of Day's fossils, some of which are now in the American Museum of Natural History collection, in paleontologic publications, making them some of the earliest described fossils from Wisconsin. Many of Day's specimens were collected at the nearby Schoonmaker Quarry in Wauwatosa, where in 1862, James Hall recognized the first fossil reef in North America.<sup>10</sup> Day supplied specimens and information to other professional geologists, including Fielding B. Meek (Smithsonian Institution), Charles Doolittle Walcott (future Director of the U.S. Geological Survey and Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution), E.O. Ulrich (later of the U.S. Geological Survey) Samuel Calvin (University of Iowa), Edward Drinker Cope (world renown vertebrate paleontologist from Philadelphia), A.W. Vogdes (San Diego Natural History Society), Nathan Shaler (Harvard University) and Thomas C. Chamberlin (at various times State Geologist of Wisconsin, President of the University of Wisconsin, and Founder and Head of the Geology Department of the University of Chicago). In addition to his interactions with professional scientists, Day corresponded and exchanged specimens with amateur naturalists around the country. Although never formally trained in the subject, Day had accumulated ample knowledge and possessed the necessary dedication and self-confidence to publish a scientific paper on Milwaukee area geology in 1877.<sup>11</sup> He began another paper on trilobites, but it was never completed. He also gave lectures and wrote papers in other fields of natural history as well.

Fisk and Frances Day raised four daughters (Sarah, Margaret, Minnie, and Florence) at Sunnyhill Home, instilling their love of culture and nature in the girls. All four went on to distinguish themselves in art, music, and writing. Their daughters also benefitted from the visits of prominent scientific figures of the day. For example, Day family tradition still recalls Alexander Agassiz's visit to Sunnyhill Home in 1880 to examine the doctor's fossil collection; Florence, who was a little girl fondly remembered sitting on the famous professor's knee. In 1881, Agassiz, a Harvard professor and son of the famous naturalist Louis Agassiz, purchased the bulk of Day's fossil collection and donated it to the Museum of Comparative Zoology at Harvard, where it formed an important part of the paleontology collection. Although more than four tons of fossils were then shipped to Harvard (an event reported in the Wauwatosa newspaper), Day still retained a collection of more than 5000 fossils in his home. In 1884, however, he sold much of his remaining collection to his friend and fellow amateur naturalist Thomas Greene of Milwaukee. These fossils are part of the Thomas A. Greene

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<sup>9</sup> Mikulic. 1979. The paleoecology of trilobites with a section on the Silurian stratigraphy of southeastern Wisconsin. Oregon State University, 864 pp.

<sup>10</sup> Mikulic. 1979. The paleoecology of Silurian trilobites with a section on the Silurian stratigraphy of southeastern Wisconsin. Ph.D. thesis (Geology), Oregon State University, Corvallis, 864 pp.

<sup>11</sup> F.H. Day. 1876-77. On fauna of the Niagara and Upper Silurian rocks as exhibited in Milwaukee County, Wisconsin, and in counties contiguous thereto. *Transactions of the Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters* 4: 113-125.



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Memorial Museum and Collection (located on the campus of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee) which was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1993.<sup>12</sup>

Sunnyhill Home was designed not only to accommodate Dr. Day's gigantic fossil collection. In addition, it housed 1000 artifacts collected from local Indian mounds, historical documents, works of art, and minerals and other natural history specimens from around the world. Day, whose interest in astronomy was probably fostered by neighbor Robert Faries, builder of the first telescope in Wisconsin, also used the impressive five-story tower as an observatory for his own two telescopes.<sup>13</sup>

In 1889, Day's wife died and by 1893, Dr. Day retired from his medical practice. He decided to move to Lansing, Michigan, to live near his daughter Minnie and her husband John Busch. One of his daughters recalled that the doctor carefully packed his remaining fossils for the move, while neglecting the many fine household furnishings.<sup>14</sup> Dr. Day died of Brights disease in Lansing on May 31, 1903.<sup>15</sup> His body was returned to Wauwatosa for burial in the Pioneer Cemetery next to his wife. He left behind a collection of almost 10,000 fossils. His daughters, who turned down offers from Harvard, the University of Chicago, and other institutions, eventually sold the collection to the University of Michigan because they wanted the collection to remain intact. The fossils, however, have since been incorporated into the rest of the university's collection.

Dr. Fisk Holbrook Day was the archetypal amateur naturalist, of the sort who played such an important role in nineteenth-century American science. Unlike that of his colleague Thomas Greene, Day's fossil collection no longer exists as an intact entity representative of his scientific contributions, even though it forms the key element in three university paleontological collections. Perhaps more important, however, Day's home survives as an outstanding example of the lifestyle led by an amateur naturalist of the period. Collecting specimens for one's natural history "cabinet" was a popular and socially acceptable past-time during the Victorian era. This was especially true for the more genteel members of society and the emerging middle class which emulated them. Generally, these amateur naturalists were fairly affluent, giving them the leisure time and discretionary income necessary to pursue an interest in natural history, which required a considerable expenditure of energy and funds. Commonly these amateur naturalists were educated in some profession such as medicine, law, or engineering, but they were self-taught in natural history, primarily because it was difficult to obtain advanced training in many disciplines such as geology. Furthermore, it was essential that they were able to support their natural history interests by another means because employment as a professional scientist was a rarity during much of the nineteenth century. In addition to the social level they enjoyed because of their financial security, individuals who pursued intellectual interests such as natural history generally

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<sup>12</sup> J. Kluessendorf and D.G. Mikulic. 1993. Thomas A. Greene Memorial Museum and Collection. National Historic Landmark Nomination.

<sup>13</sup> Zimmermann. 1987. *Magnificent Milwaukee*.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> *Lansing (Michigan) Daily Journal*, June 1, 1903.

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possessed respected character traits such as intelligence and motivation. Moreover, their collections commonly attracted the interest of the few professional scientists on the national scene and the amateur naturalists corresponded with or were even visited by, these eminent men. Together, these factors ensured that amateur naturalists often were pillars of society, earning them the respect and admiration of the local community.

Remarkably, the house that Dr. Fisk Holbrook Day called "Sunnyhill Home" endures as a representative of the social standing, lifestyle, and community stature enjoyed by many typical nineteenth-century amateur naturalists. In 1895, the house and one-fourth of the original estate land was purchased by Abe S. Austin. Austin sold off some of the property and converted the house into a multi-family residence and office for his coal company.<sup>16</sup> By the early 1930s the house had fallen into disrepair, was abandoned, and much of the interior had been vandalized. Abe Austin Jr. moved back into the house in 1945 and remained there until his death in 1979. A few years before Austin's death, the entertainer Liberace, who had grown up in nearby West Allis, wanted to purchase the home for a personal museum, but was unsuccessful.<sup>17</sup> Florence Rust of Milwaukee purchased the home in 1979 with the goal of restoring it,<sup>18</sup> but she was unable to attain the necessary funds. That same year the home was dedicated as a Wauwatosa landmark<sup>19</sup> and the next year it was placed on the National Register of Historic Places.<sup>20</sup> The present owner has accomplished a truly stunning restoration of the Day home, returning it to its nineteenth-century grandeur. The house once again reflects the lifestyle of Dr. Day and that of many other amateur naturalists of the period, a lifestyle that allowed them to contribute so much to nineteenth-century American science.

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<sup>16</sup> Dorothy Kinkaid. 1980. Restoring the Austin mansion. *The Milwaukee Sentinel*, February 2, 1980.

<sup>17</sup> Maggie Menard. 1978. Liberace ends offer to buy Tosa mansion. *The Milwaukee Sentinel*, August 3, 1978.

<sup>18</sup> Kinkaid. Restoring the Austin mansion.

<sup>19</sup> H. Russell Zimmermann. 1979. Dedication of the historical marker plaque on the Fisk Holbrook Day residence. Wauwatosa Landmark Commission, 16 pp.

<sup>20</sup> Zimmermann. Sunnyhill Home.

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**9. MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES**

Mikulic, D. G. 1983. Milwaukee's Gentlemen Paleontologists. *Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters* 71 (1): 5-20.

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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**

Acreage of Property: 1.62

UTM References:	Zone	Easting	Northing
	16	417520	4767000

Verbal Boundary Description:

The east 223 feet of lot 3 in Day's subdivision, being a part of SE1/4, Section 21, T. 7 N., R. 14 E., excepting the south 33 feet for street purposes.

Boundary Justification:

The boundaries include the area that has historically been associated with the property that retains integrity.

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**11. FORM PREPARED BY**

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Date: September 25, 1994