United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service  

National Register of Historic Places  
Inventory—Nomination Form  

See instructions in How to Complete National Register Forms  
Type all entries—complete applicable sections  

1. Name  

historic American System-Built Homes - Burnham Street District  

and/or common  

2. Location  

street & number Various - See Inventory Item 7  

not for publication  

city, town Milwaukee  

vicinity of  

state Wisconsin  

code 55  

county Milwaukee 53215  

code 079  

3. Classification  

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4. Owner of Property  

name Multiple Ownership  

street & number  

city, town  

city, town Milwaukee  

vicinity of  

state Wisconsin  

code 53233  

5. Location of Legal Description  

courthouse, registry of deeds, etc. Milwaukee County Courthouse  

street & number 901 North Ninth Street  

city, town Milwaukee  

state Wisconsin  

code 53706  

6. Representation in Existing Surveys  

title Wisconsin Inventory of Historic Places  

has this property been determined eligible? X yes  

date 1979  

federal | state | county | local  

depository for survey records State Historical Society of Wisconsin  

city, town Madison  

state Wisconsin  

code 53706
7. Description

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Describe the present and original (if known) physical appearance

General Description:

This grouping is composed of six buildings dominating the northside of the 2700 block of West Burnham Street, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, from South Layton Boulevard to 28th Street. There are four two-family duplex buildings, one symmetrically reversed in plan to the others; and two single family cottages of small and moderate size, all requiring minimum land space.

The character of the neighborhood in which they are located is a middle working class residential area, and their original placement in the community was intended to demonstrate the viability of a construction system known as American Homes. At the time of construction the surrounding lands were celery fields in a new subdivision.

All the structures bear the same close relationship to the Prairie principles developed by Wright. The scale of the project, limited by the city lot size, is small in relationship to the grand scale of other works of the architect.

According to Wright, the house of moderate cost was one of his greatest challenges.

The site and placement of construction, often considered critical by Wright in his concept of structural relationship to the natural surroundings, was not a matter of the architect's concern, rather was designated by the builder. It was Wright's feeling that if all homes in all their 'bewildering variety' were conceived by organic principles and put in one place, they would be compatible or harmonious to each other. (1) But as the Bogk house is an anomaly to its neighborhood, so are these. The American System-Built Home models were a radical concept when built and continue to be so today when contrasted with the surrounding modest Milwaukee bungaloid elements of the neighborhood.

These homes are representative of Wright's late Prairie period and all share similar construction techniques in plaster and wood. Cottage A and two of the duplex apartments have been altered with the addition of exterior siding. Other minor alterations not detracting from their original design have been made.

Building permit information:

Carpenter: Charles Koth
Mason: State Concrete Block Company
Construction dates: November 1915 to July 1916

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(1) Robert C. Twombly, Frank Lloyd Wright, His Life and His Architecture (John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1979)
The six structures have the following similarities in construction:

- Constructed originally in plaster and wood.
- Basements were built of 10 inch concrete blocks.
- Studs ran from foundation to roof on 24 inch centers.
- The walls, both exterior and interior, were lathed (approx) 1 by 4 with key slots to receive rough plaster, and finished in trowled stucco or interior plaster.
- Structures begin at ground level marked by a cement water table.
- Unplaned wood trim over stucco or plaster.
- Walls, conceived as screens, emphasized by bands of casement windows.
- Common treatment of roof and kitchen ventilation.
- Low ceilings
- Open, free flowing living area.
- Simple tin geometric lighting fixtures.

Built-in wardrobes, kitchen cabinets, living room book shelves, dining tables and benches; all furniture was scaled to the American Model selected by the client.

The front and back porches have been enclosed, either at time of construction or shortly after.

Inventory:

Cottage 'A'
1835 South Layton Boulevard

Original Owner: City Real Estate Company
Present Owners: Gerald P. and Janice A. Budnik
Classification: Pivotal

Cottage A is a single story medium sized prairie bungalow of stucco and wood re-sided with precast coral stone in 1956. The low pitched hipped tile roof (originally asphalt) and extended overhanging eaves of the main portion of the house rise higher than the lateral porch wing. At the axis of this intersecting roof plane is a prominent rectangular fireplace acting as an integral structural feature.

Wright associated the house with outdoors by bands of outswinging or casement windows under the broad protective roof, enabling the viewer to see the ceiling extend outward beyond the walls. The bands of windows were edged in wood at the sill line delineating form. To gain further horizontality, Wright extended the entrance with vertical trellises at the side creating a sense that Cottage 'A' was part of the landscape.
The interior ceilings are brought down over onto the walls by way of horizontal broad bands of rough plaster above the windowtops and carried into the ceiling design figure, also creating an expanded feeling to the rooms. As in the case of corner window freedom which increases the sense of interior space, there is a freeflow of space between dining and family activity areas. There is a cabinet wall separating the kitchen from the living room. The two bedrooms and bath flow from the living room.

The structural ornamentations were removed in the 1950's, however the rectilinear planter at the edge of the entrance remains. Other planned ornamentation not evident now, were geometric patterns of stained glass on some of the windows.

A 16 by 14 foot storage shed was built in 1977.

Cottage 'B'
2714 West Burnham Street

Original Owner: City Real Estate Company
Present Owners: Norman and Elsie Gabrielsen
Classification: Pivotal

Cottage B is modest in scale and cubistic in form and finished in rough cast stucco. Its severe simplicity is a product of its honesty. Though reversed in orientation, easily done with Wright's designs, the house is virtually unchanged since construction.

The entrance is hidden and tucked into the plan in a very logical and protected manner. The enclosed porch is contained by a low stucco wall edged in wood with a lower level garden wall in front. The porch is enclosed with casement windows. It has a flat roof with raised inner hall ceiling with corner lights, a refinement to the plans on file with the City of Milwaukee.

Casement windows extend across the living room wall facing south; the east wall is a series of smaller casement windows. The secondary rooms have the same window type in bands, singly, and/or clustered at the corners with a continuous horizontal moulding at the sill line emphasizing structure. Other applied ornamentation is wood fascia board at the eave line and above the projecting water table platform.

The house is without external downspouts. The flat roof slopes to a central internal drain in the chimney. There is no provision for peripheral gutters at the eaves. Fresh air openings beneath the soffit of the eaves circulate and ventilate the spaces beneath the roof exhausting through the chimney. A similar ventilating grill is in the kitchen.
Wright’s central fireplace partitions the freely expanded hall from the living room. The brick is a vibrant purple with organic variegated roughness of texture. There is a stone rail across the facing of the chimneypiece, currently covered by non-descript tiles; and above, is a removable wood grill made of vertical square slats.

A cabinet wall in the living room functioned as a dividing wall. The kitchen has clustered utilities and built-in cabinets. Vertical square slats serve as a screen to the kitchen and define, rather than contain, the dining area where simple geometric dining benches and table are decorated with spindle end accents. The built-ins create a scaled ‘naturally grown interior’ effecting the freedom and repose associated with Wright’s work.

The extant American B-1 lithographs are a part of the Chicago Historical Society collection depicting exterior and interior floor plans of this model.

The two bedrooms and bath are approached from the central raised hall.

**Two-Family Flat ‘C’**

2720-22 West Burnham Street  
Original Owner: City Real Estate Company  
Present Owners: David A. and Jillayne Arena  
Classification: Pivotal

2724-26 West Burnham Street  
Original Owner: City Real Estate Company  
Present Owners: Glenn E. and Sharon A. Stollenwerk  
Classification: Pivotal

2728-30 West Burnham Street  
Original Owner: City Real Estate Company  
Present Owner: Kathy Kropidowski, P.O. Box 17134  
Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53217  
Classification: Pivotal

2730-34 West Burnham Street  
Original Owner: City Real Estate Company  
Present Owner: Helen Noe, 1140 South 28th Street  
Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53215  
Classification: Pivotal
The duplexes exhibit greater geometric abstraction than earlier Prairie houses. They have a semi-cubist facade broken by an overhanging deck like roof repeated in the cantelivered wooden porch balconies and flower box projections. There is a geometric interplay between verticals and horizontals. Parallel lines and right angles are emphasized by the trim. The buildings are compact and tightly organized and exhibit inconspicuous entryways.

The tripartite front vertical windows are subdivided by wooden muntins placed above a flowerbox stylobate at ground level. At the second level is a suspended rectangular flowerbox. The windows are created by juxta­posing strong structural mullions with horizontal lintels. Side windows are arranged in horizontal ribbons placed directly under the roof soffit. The continuous sill line is wrapped around the corner delineating structural form in an ornamental manner. The building is supported by a continuous wall membrane with floors supported from within; a system of construction known as balloon frame.

The front entrance is located at the side of the front located living room in both the first and second level flats. The living room may be exited to a central corridor leading rearwards past a bedroom, a bath to a rear bedroom, or directly to the dining area and through to the kitchen, a rear interior stairway and the back porch. The original construction plans demarked the dining area and kitchen by a square slat divider. The rear sleeping porch, originally intended to be open, have been closed in all flats. The plan of first and second floors are nearly identical except for front window boxes at the second floor and the side band windows are extended forward.

The typical interior modification was removal of the slatted divider between kitchen and dining area.

Alterations and additions:

2720-22 West Burnham - Exterior resided with wooden clapboard and cedar shingles with a composition roof shingle. The interior of the property was renovated to convert use from two family to a single family unit (1984) with bedrooms upstairs and two fireplaces.

2724-26 West Burnham - Aluminum sided (1980).

2728-30 West Burnham - Change duplex to three apartments. Second floor: one two room apartment rear and three room apartment in front. Provided additional kitchen and remodeled partition between rear living room and proposed bedroom. Alter interior rear stairwell (1946).

2732-34 West Burnham - No alterations or additions on file or visable on inspection.
8. Significance

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**Specific dates** Nov. 1915 - July 1916  Builder/Architect Frank Lloyd Wright

**Statement of Significance (in one paragraph)**

The American System-Built Homes - Burnham Street District are a singular group of six dwellings representative of a special interest work of world recognized master architect, Frank Lloyd Wright, and evidence the visual characteristics of his late Prairie period. As designed, specifically for low cost housing from factory produced material, these buildings are the original demonstration models of Wright's American System-Built Homes project.

**Historical Development**

Land Ownership: The homes were built on part of the old Comstock celery farm, a tract bounded by Lapham Street, West Burnham Street, South Layton Boulevard and South 31st Street.

The Comstock family acquired the land in 1848 and farmed there until it was subdivided in 1914 into city lots. Specifically, Carl Comstock Koeffler, a minor grandson of Leander Comstock through his father as guardian, sold the land to the Maryland Hotel Company established by Arthur L. Richards. Two months later it was transferred to City Real Estate Company, also organized by Arthur L. Richards. This company was established along with The Richards Company and the Knickerbocker Mill & Lumber Company to market the American System-Built Homes project world-wide.

City Real Estate Company first owned and leased these homes subject to mortgage by Security Loan & Building Association who finally was able to sell to individual owners in the early 1920's.

Promoter: Arthur L. Richards was born in Milwaukee 1877 and grandson of an early settler, Daniel Hamilton Richards who established the city's first newspaper in 1836. Arthur Richards was active in real estate and construction in the early years of this century including both residential and hotels. He was involved in the formation of the Lake Geneva Hotel Company in 1911 and engaged Frank Lloyd Wright as architect in November of that year.

All the Wright projects (some built) in Milwaukee between 1911 and 1917 were for friends and business associates of Richards, and include: Abram Howry Esbenshade House, 1911; Edward Schroeder, 1911; William J. Kellogg, 1913; Charlie Toy Restaurant, 1915; Munkwitz Apartments, 1917; and F. C. Bogk, 1917.
9. Major Bibliographical References

See Continuation Sheet

10. Geographical Data

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Quadrangle name Milwaukee, Wis
Quadrangle scale 1:24000

UTM References

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Verbal boundary description and justification

See Boundary Justification/Description, Item 8

List all states and counties for properties overlapping state or county boundaries

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11. Form Prepared By

name/title Shirley du Fresne McArthur, preservation consultant
organization North Point Historical Society date January 15, 1985
street & number Post Office Box 557 telephone 414-271-2395
city or town Milwaukee state Wisconsin 53201

12. State Historic Preservation Officer Certification

The evaluated significance of this property within the state is:

X national ___ state ___ local

As the designated State Historic Preservation Officer for the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (Public Law 89-665), I hereby nominate this property for inclusion in the National Register and certify that it has been evaluated according to the criteria and procedures set forth by the National Park Service.

State Historic Preservation Officer signature

For NPS use only

Keeper of the National Register

Attest:                 date

Chief of Registration
The ASBH were completed July 5, 1916(1) from plans drawn in the Wright studio between 1911 and 1914. Following their completion, Wright formalized the relationship with Arthur L. Richards to be the world manufacturer-distributor to sell the American System-Built Homes through a dealer organization of businessmen.(2) Wright’s concept and plan of the American System did not contain the criteria of his direct personal involvement in each residence that was built. Related to the ASBH are a series of lectures, statements and writings by Wright that show the development of his interest in creating a system of building and selling standardized homes.

The chronological record of the subject structures has been at question in many writings. Wright started to work on low cost housing shortly after the turn of the century. Demonstration houses for E. C. Waller, Chicago, Illinois were planned in 1908, though never built.(3) By 1911, Wright’s studio started working on a number of plans for different models of residential homes for the American System.

Antonin Raymond, a draftsman who joined Wright in 1912, wrote of the work done at Taliesin during the years 1915 and 1916:

‘The work he (Wright) performed on paper was tremendous, but actual building for clients was very scarce... We worked on a prefabricated scheme for small residences, which was a predecessor of so many projects done by others in later years. Although the work accomplished on this problem was prodigious, it never amounted to anything serious as far as actual execution was concerned. Wright visualized the component parts of the structure to be delivered on the job site, some precut and some prefabricated. The module was three feet, an idea apparently originating from his experiences and observations on one of his tours to Japan. Two-by-fours, inch planks, stucco and plaster were the basic materials. The prefabricated scheme shows Wright in the amazing capacity of combining the characteristics of a true artist with those of a shrewd businessman.

Several models were actually designed and I was kept busy drawing pages for the catalog, which was actually produced by a woodcut process from Japan... (4)

Wright’s conclusive statement regarding ASBH was made before a group of Chicago businessmen in a 1916 lecture after completion of the Burnham Street structures.
The idea back of the American System has been in my head for years... They are developed according to a principle. They grow from the inside out, just as trees or flowers grow. They have that integrity... I don't want any mistakes about this new 'System'. These buildings are not in any sense the ready cut buildings we have all heard of where a little package of material is sold to be stuck together in any fashion. The American System-Built House is not a ready cut house, but a house built by an organization, systematized in such a way that the result is guaranteed the fellow that buys the house...

A copy of a promotional letter directed to prospective dealers to represent American System-Built Homes is part of a collection of similar papers held at the Chicago Historical Society. The letter indicated that the concept of the ASBH was intended to have local dealers handle the sales of the homes from demonstration units to be built, and that local contractors and builders were to actually construct the homes. The Richards Company was in effect franchising the operation, providing prints and designs of Wright, and some materials. The important implication was that Wright himself would not provide supervision any case.

The recognition by Wright of these homes is evidenced by a contract between Wright and Arthur L. Richards, making the Richards Company the world-manufacturer-distributor of the 'Standardized System Built' buildings. This agreement was prepared in November, 1916 and executed by Wright in June, 1917 following the completion of the Burnham Street homes.

**Architectural Significance**

These three design models of the ASBH are a unique group of buildings, representative of a special interest and work of Architect Frank Lloyd Wright and are the original homes constructed as demonstration models for American Homes prior to offering the system to builders in the Midwest through The Richards Company. They remain intact with the integrity of the original design evidencing the visual characteristics of Wright's late Prairie period.

They are examples of a system of home construction and style intended for a city dweller and the homes reflect the 'spirit of democracy' or open plan; including natural materials; human proportions in scale; and construction techniques appropriate to the machines employed.

Support for recognition and protection of American System-Built Homes was provided by Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer, Director of Archives, The Frank Lloyd Wright Memorial Foundation prior to the demolition of the later
Munkwitz Flats, Milwaukee, Wisconsin (1917-1973) in a letter to the Wisconsin State Consulting Committee for Historic Preservation (now the Historic Preservation Division, State Historical Society of Wisconsin) he said, 'From the point of view of their (the Munkwitz Flats) importance not only in the life-work of Frank Lloyd Wright, but also because of their pioneering aspect in the history of American architecture, it would be a tragedy to see them lost.' (7)

Similarly, Henry Russell Hitchcock wrote to the Wisconsin State Consulting Committee for Historic Preservation on the same matter. (8)

Donald G. Kalec, Director of The Frank Lloyd Wright Home and Studio Foundation, Oak Park, Illinois, writes, 'I certainly agree that all the Ready Cut (American System-Built Homes) houses should be listed on the National Register. They represent a unique venture in which an outstanding American architect focused his design talents on what was, for a time, 'mass produced' housing. That such a high level of design was achieved using standard materials and fabrication techniques was (and is) a lesson to be preserved.' (9)

Comparison of the American System-Built Homes Burnham Street to other Wright buildings of similar scale is possible by both the periods of construction and the architectural integrity of the homes, though others may not be part of the ASBH project. The architecture of Wright's late Prairie period is noted for a scale more compatible with the city lot, and with small windows affording privacy to the urban dweller.

The structures that most closely relate to the Burnham Street homes would be others actually built by The Richards Company or an ASBH dealer in the period.

In Milwaukee, the demolished Munkwitz Flats (1917) were ASBH projects (Model J-521). (10) In Wilmette, Illinois, there are two residences built as ASBH demonstration homes. One of these is a copy of Cottage A (330 Gregory Street) and Cottage A is also duplicated at 231 Prospect Avenue, Lake Bluff, Illinois, and as the Steven Hunt House, Algoma Avenue, Oshkosh, Wisconsin. The process of research in the Midwest has led to the discovery of a Wright ASBH in Illinois, probably the last built. This model was the cover feature in The Richards Company promotional material, American Homes.

The semi-cubistic facade, overhanging slab roof and cantilevered porch balconies of Two Family Flat C were also qualities exhibited in the Emil Bach residence (Chicago, 1915); Lute F. Kissam (Ravine Bluffs development of Sherman Booth, Glencoe, 1915) and O. B. Balch (Oak Park, 1911).
There are two known variations of Cottage B on paper. Working drawings resembling the modest structure are currently a part of the Frank Lloyd Wright Home and Studio Foundation; and the American Model B-1 lithographs are in the Chicago Historical Society collection.

Several prairie homes in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin may be considered derivative to the ASBH. They were constructed in the 1917 to 1919 period by companies related to either Arthur L. Richards or architect Williamson. The ASBH project was terminated prior to their construction, however there is indication that some may have been built from modified ASBH plans in their hands at the conclusion of the project and others from Wright’s fireproof house plans. Until all the working drawings for the ASBH at Taliesin have been cataloged and comparative research accomplished, the identification of the Wauwatosa houses can only be inferred from limited information and documentation available.

Boundary Justification/Description

There is a strong, almost shocking, visual boundary identification of the district with the unmistakable hand of Wright. The uniform set back of the distinctive buildings with their ribbon windows and horizontal lines contrast sharply with their neighbors.

The nominated area is bounded on the west by 28th Street, running north to the rear of the lots of the duplexes. The northerly boundary extends east along the rear lot lines of the duplexes, thence south to the rear lot line of Cottage B, east along the rear or north lot lines of Cottage ‘B’ and Cottage ‘A’ to Layton Boulevard, thence south along the curb line to Burnham Street, and thence west along the curb line to the beginning at 28th Street, being .4960 acres in extent. The properties are situated in the Leander Comstock Subdivision, Block 1, Lots 6,7,8 and 9, in the N.E.1/4, Sec. 1, T.6N,R.21E.

Archaeological Potential

The district is on part of the prior Comstock Celery farm, a bog of peat soil. It is highly doubtful that any potential pre-historic sites remain here. By the year 1914 the highest and best use for the land made it too valuable for the farming. The only known excavations of the land took place after the area was subdivided and basements were dug for the ASBH buildings.
Footnotes

(1) Department of Building Inspection and Safety Engineering Municipal Building Room 1025, 841 N. Broadway, Milwaukee, Wisconsin


(3) 'Ausgeführte Bauten und Entwürfe von Frank Lloyd Wright', Berlin: Ernst Wasmuth, 1910.


(5) *The Western Architect*, September 1910, vol 24 p. 121-123

(6) Letter to Shirley McArthur from Pfeiffer dated June 4, 1982

(7) Letter to James Morton Smith from Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer dated May 9, 1972


(10) Richards Manuscript Collection, North Point Historical Society.
9, Major Bibliographical References


Department of Building Inspection and Safety Engineering, Municipal Building, Room 1008, 841 North Broadway, Milwaukee.


Wright, Frank Lloyd. 'The American System of Housebuilding.' *Western Architect* XXIV (September 1916), pp. 121-123


‘In the Cause of Architecture.’ *Architectural Record* XXIII (March 1908), pp. 155-221. (March 1908), pp. 155-221.
