



**BIG SHOULDERS REALTY**

**CHICAGO**

**NEIGHBORHOOD**

**BIKE**

**TOURS**



**Portage Park  
Sunday March 30, 2008**

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# Portage Park Community Area #15



On Sunday March 30, 2008 a few of us gathered together at the main gate of Portage Park to tour the neighborhood via bicycle. The material you read here is drawn from what we discussed on the tour. The idea of our bike tours is to help everyone learn about an area, and that includes discussions of architecture and the history of the area, but that results in a rather disjointed telling, based on tour order.

In general, Portage Park is a stable residential community with businesses along many of its major streets. We are bordered by Belmont Cragin to the South, Jefferson Park and Forest Glen to the North, Irving Park to the East and Dunning and the suburb of Harwood Heights to the West.

The bulk of the housing stock are brick structures, and most are either brick walk-ups or bungalows, but there exist amongst these a number of ranches, cape cod, Tudors, American four squares, prairie and craftsman homes.

Portage Park is served by the CTA Blue Line at stops at Jefferson Park and Montrose Avenue and the Metra's Milwaukee District North Line at the Mayfair stop. It is also just West of the Kennedy Expressway. The area boasts three public libraries, numerous public parks, and is served by the Chicago Public Schools.

Portage Park's housing stock is primarily comprised of brick bungalows and flats.

# The Community Area cont.

Our tour is designed to help explain a bit more about the area, its history, and architecture. We focus on public spaces and buildings that are integral to the history of Portage Park, and not stopping directly at individual homes. However, our tour took us through the neighborhoods and streets filled with great examples of wonderful Chicago residential architecture.



Portage Park is a great neighborhood to explore by bike. The idea of our bike tours is to help Chicagoans get a little exercise while learning about the architecture and history of our great city.

*Maps and cover art by Ross Felten  
for Big Shoulders Realty*



# Portage Park – the Park

Portage Park derives its name from the area's former use as a Portage between two main rivers. What is presently Irving Park Road served as a portage for Native American tribes like the Pottawatomi, Chippewa, Kickapoo, and Ottawa Nations, and later by European explorers and trappers. They used this portage as a means of transferring from the Chicago to Des Plaines river. Two ridges, one where present-day Narraganset is and the other on present-day Cicero kept the area between a swampy marsh. The Native American tribes all but abandoned the area because they couldn't farm it, relinquishing their rights in an 1816 treaty.

The park's history dates back to 1912 when neighbors of the area formed the Portage Park District back when this area was still known as Jefferson. Today, much of the Northwest side of Chicago is still located in the township of Jefferson. (*More on this later.*) The Portage Park District commissioners condemned 40 acres to build the park. Initially, they sought to raise money for the park through taxes, but many residents objected, only to realize that development and building of the park was progressing without public funding through volunteerism. Much of the work was done by developers eager to sell homes adjacent and near the park.



Though not as stunning on a dreary late March ride, Portage Park hosts many weddings in the Spring and Summer.

# Portage Park – the Park Cont.

Originally the park featured a sand-bottomed lagoon, and a less substantial pool. The Olympic sized pool is one of only two in the Chicago Park system and diving platforms are unique to the Chicago parks. The new pools replaced the previous pond and lagoons and were built for Chicago to host the 1959 Pan American Games. It is also the pool where Mark Spitz set several world records at the 1972 U.S. Olympic swimming trials. The hillside on the east side of the park is the fill from the pool excavation



The Olympic Diving and Swimming Pools were built so Chicago could host the 1959 Pan American Games.



Prairie School architect and developer Clarence Hatzfield, built the Portage Park Field House (upper right photo) in 1922 and the Gymnasium (above) in 1928.

The park's field house was the first building in the park, erected in 1922. It was built by noted architect Clarence Hatzfield, who later built many of the homes in the historic Villa district, east of Portage Park in Albany Park. The Gymnasium was built 6 years later and in 1934 the Portage Park District was absorbed into the Chicago Park District. Shortly after this, the Works Progress Administration's public works program contributed to a since destroyed rock house, of which, the main gate and several outcroppings are surviving relics. Today the park is home to 6 tennis courts, 2 playgrounds, a bike path, 5 baseball fields and 2 football/soccer fields. It is also site to the new Portage Park Senior Satellite Center.

# Portage Park sure does have lots of churches

Portage Park is home to many churches of various denominations. The movement of parishes to follow or join a particular congregation is key to the settling of the area. Here are a couple of nice architectural examples on the west side of Portage Park



**St. John of Rila the Wonderworker Church**  
5944 W Cullom Ave

This church is one of the most significant architectural treasures in Portage Park. Show in the top photo, the church was constructed in 1928 and was originally home to the Peace Lutheran Church, before being auctioned off to the congregation of St. John of Rila the Wonderworker. The Rectory in the bottom photo was the original church, built in 1923 in a completely different material and style.



**St. Mary of Providence Convent and school**  
4200 North Austin Avenue

The sisters of St. Mary of Providence are also referred to as Guanellians, There isn't much in the way of information about the architect or building on their website, but either way, this is a beautiful building.

# Dunham Park

## 4638 N. Melvina Avenue

Dunham Park plays host to Alderman Tom Allen's annual Basketball and Floor Hockey leagues, but also manages to serve as a neighborhood center for a variety of athletic and recreational activities.

The park is named after Robert Dunham who was first President of the Chicago Park District Board of Commissioners. In 1945 following the end of World War 2 the Park District set on a mission to create new neighborhood parks in every neighborhood in Chicago. The 14 acres of land that now makes up Dunham Park was condemned, but due in large part to objections from homeowners, the last of the structures existing on the site weren't fully razed until 1958. The layout and design of the park was completed in the early 1960s and the fieldhouse was built in 1976.

The area surrounding the park has typical Portage Park bungalows and two-flats, but also some unique variations and it also displays a large number of ranches and cape cods built during a wave of post-war population growth in the area.



# Some Portage Park Bungalows



# Eastern Portage Park

## **Big Shoulders Realty (our soon to be home)**

4750-52 N Milwaukee

Left and Center Pictures

Big Shoulders Realty currently exists in a small apartment above attorney Barb Demos' office. Soon we will be building a space within Barb Demos' office in an original 1920s Movie Palace. OK, more of a movie house, but nonetheless, a fantastic space. While technically in Jefferson Park, we made a small detour on our Portage Park bike tour to take a peak inside at the magnificent ceiling, fresco-tile paintings and plaster work that we hope to see brought back to glory.

## **St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church and School**

4939 W. Montrose Ave

Right Picture

This beautiful brick and limestone Church was built in 1928. The nearly 4,000 square foot structure is actually the second building built on the site. The adjacent rectory, which served as the Church itself until the larger church was built, precedes the larger building by 6 years.



# Portage Park Prairies

## Karl Stecher House On Pensacola

This home was built by Walter Burley Griffin, an important Prairie School architect who worked with Frank Lloyd Wright in his studio and home in Oak Park. This home was built in 1910 and represents a much more classic Craftsman style than many of his other designs.



## Prairie Homes Along Cullom, Pensacola, Lamon, Hutchinson and Lavergne

Many of the homes on the surrounding blocks at this Eastern edge of Portage Park have some stunning examples of other Prairie homes, particularly some nice American Four Squares. Most of these Prairie homes and Four Squares are either sided or stucco finish.



# Dickinson Park and Dickinson Tavern

## **Dickinson Park**

4101 N. Lavergne Ave

This smallish neighborhood park was developed after Chicago developer and descendant of Chester Dickinson, Arthur Dickinson and his wife Charlotte donated this small triangle of land near the site of the original Dickinson Tavern to the City of Chicago.



## **Site of Dickinson Tavern**

Belle Plaine and Milwaukee Ave.

In 1841, after the construction of Northwest Plank Road or North Plank Road, to help farmers in the Northwest transport their crops to markets in Chicago, a man named E.B. Sutherland constructed a red brick inn and tavern at the intersection of what is now Belle Plaine and Milwaukee Avenue, where it stood until 1929. In 1846, the tavern and inn was purchased by Chester Dickinson and became a principal meeting place for area residents. Some of its overnight guests include Washington Irving, for whom both Irving Park and Irving Park Road are named, and Abraham Lincoln. In 1850, the area became Jefferson Township with Dickinson as its first town supervisor. In 1889 the area was annexed by the City of Chicago in preparation for the city's hosting of the World's Columbian Exposition. The area is still part of Jefferson Township, but this community area of Portage Park was named so in 1912.

# Some Portage Park Brick Flats



# Portage Park Theatre and the Era of Movie Palaces

4050 N Milwaukee Ave

Up and down Milwaukee Avenue, formerly known as North Plank Road, there were a number of movie palaces. These movie palaces were popular in the 1920s and one of the most impressive in the area was the Portage Park Theatre which opened in 1920, making it one of the oldest theaters in Chicago. The elaborate architecture was done in a Beaux Arts style, though several remodels during the ages added Art Deco elements, and a number of since removed features.



Surviving decades of changes in style, number of screens, owners and various remodels, the Portage Park Theatre, an original Movie Palace from 1920, was recently largely restored and reopened.

The Big Shoulders Office that is being planned and restored is another example of this type of Movie Palace, though not as large or elaborate as the Portage Park Theater, or other Chicago Movie Palaces like the Chicago, the Oriental, the Congress or the Biograph. It was at the time unique that a building would be built entirely to show movies, as most theaters at the time were multi-purpose or converted vaudeville theaters.

While the Portage Park Theatre went through a number of different manifestations over the years, it was recently repaired and restored and reopened as a 1,300 seat single-screen theater and hosts a variety of cinema events as well as concerts and plays. It is especially nice that they also took the time to restore the old pipe organ, which is used extensively by the Silent Film Society of Chicago during its screenings.

# Six Corners

## Intersection of Milwaukee, Cicero and Irving Park Road.

Six Corners is so named because of the intersection of three major streets, namely Cicero, Irving Park and Milwaukee Avenue, but originally, it was the meeting of two major Native American Trails. Originally named North Plank Road, Milwaukee Avenue was a 2-1/2 cent per mile toll road. The present LaSalle Bank is the site of the original Town Hall built in 1862.

The area represents one of two major shopping districts in the area. It is the site of several historically significant buildings still standing and used today, including the Art Deco Sears building, the Klee Brothers Building and the People's Gas Irving Park Neighborhood Store, a designated Chicago Landmark built by George Elmslie, an assistant to Louis Sullivan, and Herman von Hoist. Elmslie built several neighborhood store buildings for People's Energy in the 1920s, which they used as a method to promote various new technologies enabling household gas appliances.

The entire area was a bustling district built-up by area developers such as Koester, Zander, and Schorsh, who also built many of the residential buildings in the west side of Chicago and in Portage Park in particular. At a time, six corners was the largest shopping district in Chicago outside of the Loop.

Some of the more interesting businesses in the area are City Newsstand at 4018 N Cicero which has some of the most outlandish magazine titles available across every conceivable subject, Fantasy Costume, which claims to be the most complete adult costume shop in the US, and the Portage Theater.



Top: People's Gas Irving Park Neighborhood Store;  
Middle: Art Deco Sears building;  
Bottom: Klee Brothers Building

# Southern bit of Portage Park

## Chopin Park

3420 N Long Ave

Top photo

Chopin Park was created in 1930 by the Old Portage Park District, which also created the namesake Portage Park prior to being incorporated into the Chicago Parks District in 1934. The Park District purchased more than 8 acres to create the park you see today. The Georgian Revival Fieldhouse features a 300 seat assembly hall. Today the Park features a wide variety of sports leagues, fields, a playground, preschool and a number of recreational activities. The park is named for Polish composer Frederick Chopin, in recognition of the Polish heritage of many of the areas residents.



## St. Ladislaus

5345 W. Roscoe St

Bottom Photo

While St. Ladislaus' massive and architecturally significant church building wasn't actually completed until 1955, the parish was formed in 1914 and contributed greatly to growth of Portage Park by bringing many Polish immigrants into the area to attend services and live near their church. This Romanesque Brick structure was designed by Leo Strelka and has a massive stained glass rose window as its greatest feature. It floods the interior of the church with brilliant colors and lights.



# Belmont-Central District

## Intersection of Belmont and Central Avenues

This represents the end of our tour and the other major shopping district in the neighborhood. All four corners feature buildings with elaborate terra-cotta work and masonry. The immediate area is the connection between Portage Park and Belmont Cragin and offers a variety of fantastic locally-owned businesses mixed in with established national chains.

Some of the world's best pieorgis can be had at Alexandra Foods and what I still consider the best grocer in the city is A & G Fresh Market just west of Belmont Central.

Thanks everyone for joining us and hopefully we will see some of you next month for the Logan Square bike tour. We will meet in front of the The Illinois Centennial Monument in Logan Square at the intersection of Milwaukee, Kedzie and Logan Boulevard on Sunday April 27, 2008 at 1:00 PM.

