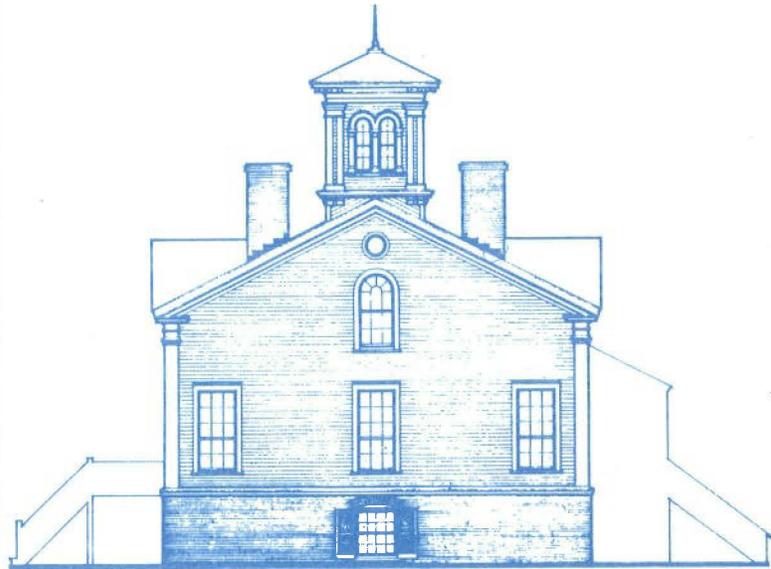
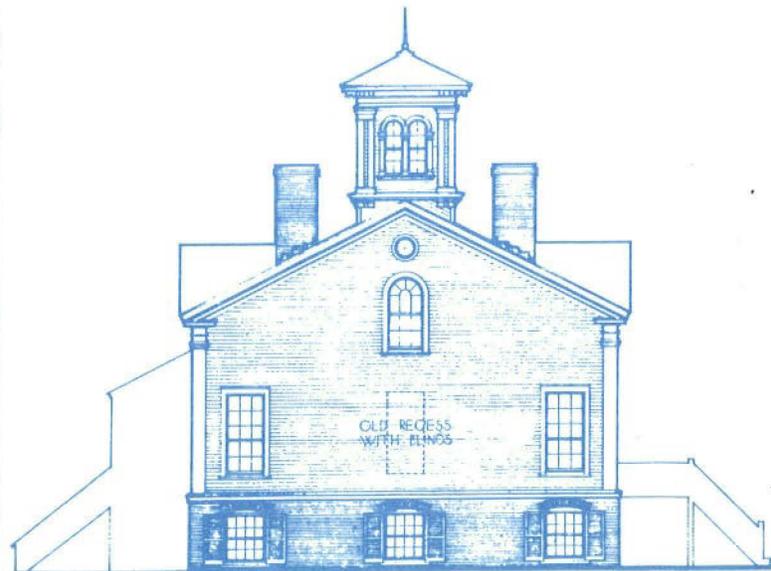


# Clarke House

Chicago's Oldest Building



Commission on Chicago Landmarks  
Prairie Avenue House Museums



(Cover) These drawings were prepared by the Historic American Buildings Survey in 1935.

*The Commission on Chicago Landmarks, whose nine members are appointed by the Mayor, was established in 1968 by city ordinance. It is responsible for recommending to the City Council that individual buildings, sites objects, or entire districts be designated as Chicago Landmarks, which protects them by law.*

*The Commission makes its recommendations to the City Council after an extensive study of the background and significance of the proposed landmark. This brochure is a synopsis of the various materials that were compiled as part of that research.*

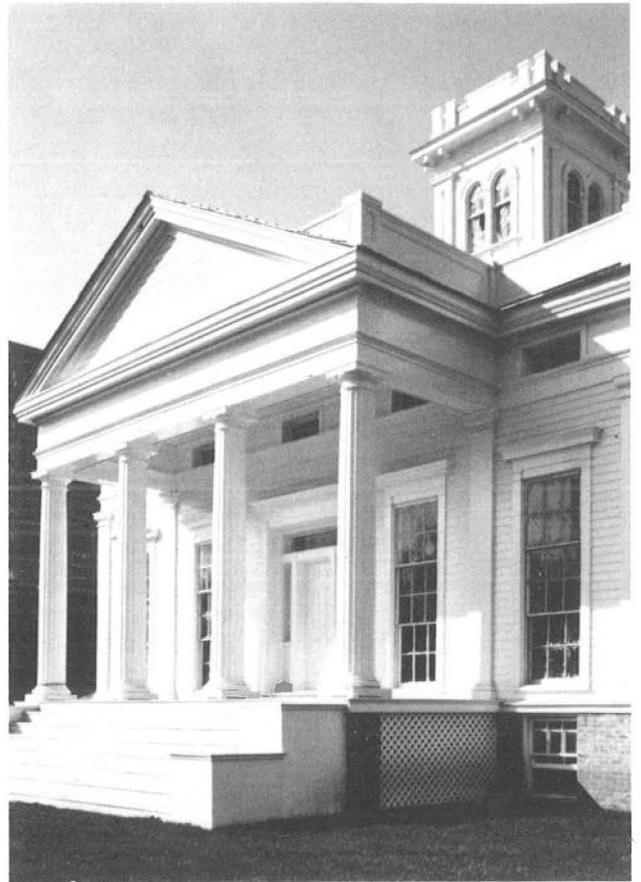
*The Clarke House was designated as a Chicago Landmark on October 4, 1970.*

*Staff for 1983 publication*

Marion Knoblauch Franc, *research*  
Elaine Harrington, *research and writing*  
Joan Pomaranc and Roy Forrey, *editors*  
Harriet Leitzow, *production assistant*

*Staff for 1996 revision*

Michael Soet, *revision editor*  
Bunny Selig and Jane Lord, *editorial consultants*



(Bob Thall, photographer)

## Clarke House

1827 South Indiana Avenue  
Chicago, Illinois 60616



**Prairie Avenue  
House Museums**

Prairie Avenue House Museums (PAHM) is a non-profit organization incorporated in 1994 to administer the Clarke House Museum, the Glessner House Museum, and the surrounding Prairie Avenue Historic District in conjunction with the City of Chicago and The National Society of The Colonial Dames of America in The State of Illinois. PAHM's mission is to explore urban life and design in this historic Chicago neighborhood. PAHM offers a wide array of tours, educational programs, special events, lectures, and exhibits. For more information, please call (312) 326-1480.

The Clarke House, frequently called the Widow Clarke House or the Henry B. Clarke House, is Chicago's oldest surviving building. It was built in 1836, only a few years after the departure of the

Native Americans indigenous to the Chicago area, and at a time when Chicago was preparing for incorporation as a city. The long life of this Greek Revival house thus encompasses almost the entire history of the city, from its beginnings to the present.

The house was constructed for Henry Brown Clarke and Caroline Palmer Clarke. Mr. Clarke, a merchant from Utica, New York, migrated to Chicago in 1835, having heard of the prairie town's economic promise from his brother-in-law, Charles Walker. Engaged in the shipment of guns, boots, and leather, Mr. Walker had come to Chicago earlier that same year, not only to seek his fortune, but to buy land and settle in "the West." Mrs. Clarke and two of her three young children soon followed her husband to Chicago.

In June of 1835, Mr. Clarke bought twenty acres of land and acquired an interest in the remainder of a quarter-section of land along the south shore of Lake Michigan, reportedly for the price of \$10,000. The smaller tract was bordered by the lake on the east and by what are today State Street on the west, 16th Street on the north, and 17th Street on the south. For the site of his family's new residence, Mr. Clarke chose a section of land on what is now Michigan Avenue in the vicinity of 1700 south. To the west stretched the nearly limitless prairie, with its tall grasses and plentiful game. One and a half miles south of its nearest neighbor, the Clarke House could only be reached via an old American Indian path (today's Michigan Avenue) that ran in front of the new home's west entrance.

#### *The Construction and Style of the Clarke House*

The Clarkes apparently knew what they wanted in their dwelling. In a letter to a relative back East, Mrs. Clarke wrote of the "good" houses that would soon be built in Chicago:

The buildings are now mostly small and look as though they had been put up as quickly as possible, many of them are what they call here Ballon [sic] houses, that is built of boards entirely—not a stick of timber in them, except the sills...

The "balloon" house to which Mrs. Clarke referred was in fact one of Chicago's major contributions to architecture. A balloon frame was built of lightweight two-by-four or two-by-six wooden boards fastened together with machine-made, inexpensive wire nails that were then becoming widely available for the first time. This type of framing system, which looked so flimsy to early observers that they thought it would blow away like a balloon, could be built more quickly and cheaply than a traditional hand-shaped timber frame. The technique swept the country and continues to be the dominant method of building wooden frame structures today.

The Clarkes, however, decided to build a large, heavy, timber frame structure. They modeled the house in the Greek Revival style, resembling many of the "good" houses in upstate New York where the Clarkes had lived before moving to Chicago. The Greek Revival style flourished in America from about 1820 to 1860, appearing first in cities on the Eastern seaboard and then spreading gradually west as the young nation expanded. The words of writer James McConkey about another Greek Revival house apply also to the Clarke House: "...a dream of order and balance and proportion set down in a rude wilderness to represent the original owner's sense of himself and what he could achieve, as well as a spiritual attitude that justified his striving." Encouraged by the idea that their own governmental ideals resembled those of ancient Greece, Americans saw the Greek Revival style as an expression of their developing national character.

Prior to the emergence of the Greek Revival as the style of choice, American architecture had been based largely on Western European styles, which themselves derived primarily from classical Roman antecedents. Both the Georgian and Federal styles, which prevailed from the early eighteenth century through the early nineteenth, were based on these models. By the 1820s, Americans were looking to other sources for inspiration. Beginning in the second half of the eighteenth century, accurate knowledge of the differences between Roman and Greek forms emerged, primarily as a result of archeological explorations. *The Antiquities of Athens*, published in England in 1762, contained engraved illustrations of classical Greek buildings and had an important effect by encouraging the use of Greek architectural elements. Joined to this new understanding of antiquity was the sympathetic American response to the Greek Revolution of the early 1820s. There was a natural identification with this war of independence from the

**Four stately columns mark the east entrance to the house.**  
(Bob Thall, photographer)



Turks, and relief funds were sent from American towns to Greece. These two influences fused into a desire to emulate the Greek traditional forms, and classical Greek decorative elements were thus used to create a distinctively American style.

The original classical Greek buildings were constructed of cut stone blocks: rectangular ones for walls, and round, stacked drums of stone for columns. In America, Greek Revival structures were often made of wood and brick. A columned portico, or porch, topped by a triangular roof shape, or pediment, was the most prominent feature of both the classical temple and its wooden American counterpart. Nineteenth-century visitors to America marveled at the white "Greek" temples that appeared in the cities and dotted the countryside. When Alexis de Tocqueville, a French philosopher, traveled to America in 1831, he remarked on "a number of little white marble palaces, some of them in classical architectural style." Upon closer examination he found they were all of whitewashed brick with columns of painted wood. These wood and brick Greek Revival buildings were elegant in an understated way.

The Clarke House was probably built by a local carpenter using readily available pattern books or builders' guides. Such publications provided floor plans for Greek Revival and other styles of houses, drawings of moldings, staircases, and additional details, as well as practical suggestions on the use of wood, stone, and other materials. With such guidance at hand, a skilled carpenter could produce a fashionable, well-designed home. A.T. Andreas, in the first volume of his *History of Chicago* (1884), wrote that the Clarke House was built by John Campbell Rye, a carpenter. Nothing further is known of Rye, but he may have been the John C. Rue listed among carpenters working in Chicago in 1839 in the book *Industrial Chicago: The Building Interests*, published in 1891. The house the Clarks built, however, is far from a stereotypical pattern book house.

### *The House the Clarks Built*

For their own home, the Clarks apparently considered the balloon frame unsubstantial and temporary, and so they built a timber frame house, the kind Mrs. Clarke considered a "good" house. The Clarke House thus demonstrates the survival of traditional construction techniques in which logs, roughly squared, are firmly held together by mortise and tenon joints: the tenon, or tongue, of one timber is fitted into a matching slot, or mortise, in the other, both laboriously cut to fit. Wooden pegs are driven into the joints to prevent slippage. Thus built, the Clarke House has withstood time, two fires, and two moves.

The strong frame is covered on the exterior by horizontal clapboards. The interior surfaces are finished with hand-split lath and plaster. To make the lath, a long thin section of a log was split repeatedly at either end and fastened to the wall. Each separate lath could then be pulled down, in the manner of an



**As the only early image of the house, this 1850s daguerreotype (a process that makes a reverse image of the subject) was very important in the restoration of the exterior.**

(Courtesy of the Chicago Historical Society)

accordion, and nailed to the vertical wall studs. The result, when filled with a rough coat of plaster and then a smooth finish coat, was strong and enduring. Visitors to the house today can see the original construction system through an open panel in the wall of an upstairs bedroom.

In its general proportions, mass, floor plan, ornament, and detailing, the Clarke House is in the American Greek Revival tradition. As in the ancient Greek temple, the facade is commanded by a large portico supported by tall columns and a well proportioned pediment. The Clarke House columns appear to have been modeled from a simple Roman Doric prototype, rather than from Greek precedents. A parapet or low ornamental railing defines the edge of the roof. The house is crowned by an unusual and somewhat Italianate lantern and finial. The lantern was added to the house in the 1850s, probably in an attempt to update the house in the latest fashion.

The symmetry and openness of the house are underscored by the placement and design of the door and window openings. The front door is tall, important, and welcoming with its transom and sidelights divided by delicate mullions. On either side of the door are two windows, reaching from the floor almost to the ceiling, and seeming to invite stepping from window to portico. Their sashes are triple-hung, with six panes of glass in each sash. Corner pilasters and ornamental cornices above the door and windows increase the feeling of grandeur. The north and south sides of the house are dramatized by three first-floor windows with six-over-six sashes and by a handsome arched window at the middle of the second floor. On the south side of the house, the central first-floor exterior window is positioned only for symmetry; it is not cut through to the interior and serves only as an element of design. All the windows have shutters that not only contribute to the overall design but were also

part of a highly effective 1830s cooling system.

As in most Greek Revival houses, there is a wide central hall. With its graceful walnut-railed staircase and wallpaper printed to resemble cut stone, the hall provided elegant entries to the house from the east and the west. Because of the openness of the hall, it was badly damaged in 1977 by a fire that swept up from the basement furnace, shortly before the house was moved to its present location. The woodwork was deeply charred and might have been wholly destroyed had it not been for the multiple layers of paint that protected the wood. Other rooms, particularly those at the northeast corner, also suffered serious damage.

On the south side of the hall is a spacious double parlor that can be divided into two rooms by sliding doors. The east room of this double parlor, with its high ceiling, long windows, and deeply carved woodwork, served as the family's parlor; the identical west room was used as a dining room. Completed in the 1850s, the finishes and ornamentation in these rooms are more elaborate than in any other part of the house. The fireplace surrounds and mantels in both rooms are finished in a hand-grained black and white imitation marble, based on paint analysis undertaken during restoration.

**Shortly before the Clarke House was to be moved to its present location, a fire badly damaged the interior of the structure. The hallway and stairs, where the damage was particularly severe, were protected from complete destruction by many layers of paint.**

(Courtesy of the Department of Public Works, City of Chicago)



The most exacting research, sometimes through as many as twenty-seven layers of paint, revealed a rich original color scheme. Two sections of the parlor ceiling, divided by a band of beading, were painted two shades of gold. Stronger colors were used on the band of ornament at the top of the walls and on the ceiling medallion from which an elaborate brass chandelier was suspended. The floral elements of the medallion were painted in intense but muted shades of blue, green, pink, gray, and brown, highlighted with touches of gold and encircled by gold leaves.

On the second floor are six bedrooms, the middle room on either side of the hall being distinguished by a tall arched window. The lantern (commonly referred to as a cupola) above the second floor hall is yet another element in the cooling system of the house. Its open windows, combined with the cross ventilation achieved on the first floor, kept most of the house cool and comfortable even on the hottest summer days. The lantern also brought sunlight into the otherwise dark upper floor hallway.



**Careful research aided in the restoration of the house, which is decorated in several styles from the period 1836-1860.** (Hedrich-Blessing, photographers)

### *The Clarke Family*

After the Clarkes arrived in Chicago in 1835, Mr. Clarke not only acquired the land he wanted, but also became a partner in the wholesale hardware firm of Jones, King and Company. The firm dealt in construction, farming, and trapping implements that were in great demand in the rapidly growing city of Chicago and throughout the Midwest.

When the Clarkes settled in Chicago, it was still a small frontier town. In a letter to her sister-in-law, Mrs. Clarke wrote: "I am far better pleased with Chicago than I expected. The situation is, I think, very pleasant and the town is laid out handsomely. When the streets come to be built up with good houses... it will be very pleasant indeed."

Enough people to build future "good" houses

were arriving in Chicago. The influx of European-Americans started in 1833 when the departure of Native Americans opened the area to new settlement. At that time, the population was 350 people; by 1837, the year Chicago was incorporated as a city, the population had already risen to 4,000. Some of the necessary services for a developing community were becoming available. "Good tasting" water was brought in from the lake and sold by the barrel for a price Mrs. Clarke considered negligible "in Chicago's way of doing business."

In the fast-rising Chicago economy, Mr. Clarke had also become a director of the city's first bank, the Illinois State Bank, which had opened in 1834 at the corner of LaSalle and South Water streets. His brother-in-law, Charles Walker, started shipping wheat from Chicago to New York and, it was said, was well on his way to becoming one of the city's first millionaires. The expansive years of the early 1830s ended in the Panic of 1837, when almost overnight the Illinois State Bank failed and Jones, King and Company foundered. As a result, the Clarkes did not have the money necessary to finish decorating the interior of their new house.

During these hard times at the end of the 1830s, Mr. Clarke turned to farming, dairying, and hunting. Alice L. Barnard, a teacher who lived with the Clarkes, wrote to a friend that the unfurnished south parlors were hung with "half a dozen deer, hundreds of snipe, plover and quail, and dozens of prairie chickens and ducks." The game was used by the family and also sold. The first city directory in Chicago, published in 1844, listed Clarke as "farmer, lake shore below Michigan Avenue." Economic conditions improved during the 1840s. Mr. Clarke served as city clerk from 1846 to 1848 for a salary of \$600 and fees. During the 1840s the Clarke family continued to grow, and by 1849, there were six Clarke children living (three had died in infancy): James, Mary, Robert, Caroline, Edward and Cyrus. In 1849, however, the

**In contrast to the wide front portico, the rear west porch is much simpler in design.**

(Bob Thall, photographer)



**In 1935, the Historic American Buildings Survey, a project of the federal government, recorded the house in photographs and measured drawings. Much of the detailing was gone, including the original front portico, which had been removed when the house was moved in 1872.**

(Historic American Buildings Survey photograph)

Clarkes again suffered hardship that affected the entire city. After a severe winter, spring flooding apparently contaminated the city's drinking water. Cholera broke out in epidemic proportions, killing nearly three percent of the city's population. Henry Clarke, then 47 years old, contracted the disease and died the same day, July 23, 1849.

By the 1850s, the city was beginning to spread southward close to the once-remote Clarke property. The State Street stagecoach made daily trips to the city limits at 22nd Street. Mrs. Clarke then subdivided and certified "Clarke's Addition to Chicago." The twenty Clarke acres were divided into four blocks and the blocks subdivided into lots that were sold, except for a plot of three acres on which the house stood. The Clarke family retained its financial position, and in the years before the Civil War, the lantern was added to the house. Michigan Avenue was opened all the way to the Clarke House, and a favorite Sunday excursion for Chicagoans was a carriage ride to see what had come to be called the Widow Clarke mansion.

In 1860, Mrs. Clarke traveled to Buffalo, New York, probably to visit her late husband's youngest brother, Cyrus. While there, Mrs. Clarke died, and her body was returned to Chicago for burial. When Graceland Cemetery opened later that year, both Henry and Caroline Clarke and their eldest son James, who had died in 1856, were reburied in a Clarke family plot. The Clarkes' youngest child, Cyrus, was only twelve years old when his mother died. Mary, the oldest of the surviving children, and her husband Frank B. Williams moved into the Clarke House to care for Cyrus and the other children.

By the Civil War years of the 1860s, the pioneer era in Chicago had ended. The village had grown into a city of more than 100,000 people. The Clarke children continued to live in the house their parents had built until 1872, when it was sold.

### *Other Owners of the Clarke House*

John Chrimes, a tailor, and his wife Lydia purchased the Clarke House in 1872. The previous year, the Great Fire of 1871 had begun west of the Clarke House and spread northeast through the downtown area. The Clarke House thus escaped destruction. Fearful of another fire, and wanting to get an ailing child out to the purer air of the country, the Chrimeses had the Clarke House moved twenty-eight blocks south and one block west to 4526 South Wabash Avenue. In the move, the original pillared front portico was removed.

Three generations of the Chrimes family occupied the house from 1872 to 1941. The Chrimes daughter Mary married William H. Walter, and during their residence took great interest in its history. The two Walters daughters, Lydia and Laura, both graduates of the University of Chicago and teachers in Chicago public schools, in turn appreciated the historic significance of their 1836 house. When they no longer needed as much space, they urged the City of Chicago to acquire it. These efforts were unsuccessful. Bishop Louis Henry Ford and the St. Paul Church of God in Christ offered to buy the house in 1941, and the Chrimeses' granddaughters accepted.

The bishop and his congregation built a church on land adjoining the house, using the Clarke House at various times for offices, schoolrooms, social events, and their parsonage. Well aware of the history of the house, the congregation made every effort to maintain it in good condition. Eventually, the church needed the land for other purposes. The City of Chicago, under the leadership of Mayor Richard J. Daley and through the office of First Deputy Commissioner of Public Works Elizabeth McLean, initiated negotiations to purchase the house in 1972. By

**In 1941, the Clarke House became the property of St. Paul Church of God in Christ. The church used the building for a parsonage, church affairs, and meeting rooms. The photograph, probably taken in 1951, shows the work done by the congregation to maintain the house.**

(Courtesy of the Chicago Historical Society)



1977 the City owned its oldest structure. The decision to save the house was influenced by the availability of an appropriate site for its relocation. With grants from the State of Illinois Open Space and Land Acquisition Act for historic and urban areas in 1974 and 1975, the City had purchased a plot of land near the original Clarke property for a Prairie Avenue Historic District, along Prairie Avenue between 18th and Cullerton streets. The Clarke House could be relocated to the east side of Indiana Avenue between 1800 and 1900 south, approximately one block south and one block east of its original site, and it could face east toward the lake as it had in 1836.

### *The Restoration of the Clarke House*

Thorough architectural and historical studies of the house were ordered, as well as procedures for its relocation. There was no way to move the house to its new site without encountering the elevated train (the "El") structure which had not existed at the time of the move south in 1872. The City Architect and architectural consultant Wilbert R. Hasbrouck studied ways of surmounting the obstacle of the El. Among the possibilities considered and rejected were slicing the house into sections, an airlift by helicopter, an overnight removal and replacement of an El span over one street, and an excavation that would allow the house to move under the El tracks.

The decision was made to lift the 120-ton structure over the El. The house was picked up and transported on wheeled dollies to the point where the El crosses 44th Street between Calumet and Prairie avenues. There the house was slowly jacked up twenty-seven feet on wooden cribs until it stood slightly above the El tracks. At exactly one minute

**Moving the Clarke House from 4526 South Wabash Avenue to 1827 South Indiana Avenue required lifting the house over the tracks of the elevated train at 44th Street between Calumet and Prairie avenues.**

(Courtesy of the Department of Public Works, City of Chicago)



after midnight on Sunday, December 4, 1977, when El traffic was at a minimum, all train service on the line was halted. Temporary rails were laid across the tracks, cables were attached to the house, and trucks on the street below pulled the house slowly across the tracks. Despite the very cold weather, about 2,000 people gathered to watch as the house moved over the tracks and onto another set of cribs on the east side of the El. Soon the trains were running past the house once more.

In the bitterly cold weather, the hydraulic equipment that would have lowered the house froze. When the weather finally moderated on December 18, the house was lowered and moved to the Prairie Avenue Historic District and placed on the excavation prepared for it. The foundation was then built up to fit the idiosyncracies of a very old structure.

The Clarke House was to be not only the embodiment of Chicago's past and a historical record in itself, but also a public museum. Steel reinforcements were added to floors and to the staircase. Air conditioning and security equipment were concealed in walls and fireplace flues. An elevator was added in former closet space. The basement was designed to include offices, restrooms, and a museum gallery. Daniel Majewski, Assistant City Architect, was in charge of all phases of the restoration of the Clarke House.

All of the original Clarke family furnishings had long since disappeared. The National Society of The Colonial Dames of America in The State of Illinois undertook the refurnishing of the house as part of the organization's national historic houses program. Furniture of the target restoration period of 1836-1860 was purchased by the organization. Robert A. Furhoff, consultant to the NSCDA and to the City of Chicago, studied the evidence of original paint colors and wallpapers, bits of which were found under the woodwork. His research made possible an accurate recreation of the interiors as they appeared between 1836 when Clarke House was built, and 1860 when Caroline Clarke died.

The Chicago Architecture Foundation (CAF), another key supporter of the restoration project, administered tours and public programs at the Clarke House and Glessner House museums from 1982 until 1994. Since then, Chicago's two premier house museums have been under the direction of the Prairie Avenue House Museums (PAHM), a nonprofit organization founded solely to preserve and interpret the Clarke House Museum, the Glessner House Museum, and the surrounding Prairie Avenue Historic District.

The Clarke House, Chicago's last remaining Greek Revival structure, provides a unique link to an era when the city was just a small frontier town. It marks the beginning of Chicago architecture and history.

*An unusual combination of private and public organizations joined with the City to save and restore the Clarke House. Support came from Chicago Community Trust and other foundations, from federal and state agencies, from The National Society of The Colonial Dames of America in The State of Illinois, and from the Chicago Architecture Foundation.*

*The project was directed by the Chicago Architecture Foundation's Prairie Avenue Historic District Committee, headed by Ruth Moore Garbe. Other members of the committee were:*

*representing the Chicago Architecture Foundation –*

*Rory Shanley Brown  
Mary Carr  
Cathleen Concannon  
Michael S. Corbett  
Marian A. Despres  
Benjamin Weese  
Ralph Youngren*

*representing The National Society of The Colonial Dames of America in The State of Illinois –*

*Bertha Alling Brown  
Elizabeth Shorey Graettinger  
Marjorie Banks Grannis  
Ginny Hulbert Hoyle  
Elizabeth Kepler Sivage*

*representing the City of Chicago –*

*Daniel Majewski  
William M. McLenahan  
Stephen Roman*

*and descendants of original Prairie Avenue residents –*

*Barbara Coleman Donnelley  
Thomas Keith  
Barry Sears*



**CITY OF CHICAGO**

Richard M. Daley, Mayor

**COMMISSION ON CHICAGO LANDMARKS**

Peter C. B. Bynoe, Chairman

Joseph A. Gonzalez, Vice Chairman

Thomas E. Gray, Secretary

John W. Baird

Kein L. Burton

Marian Despres

Albert M. Friedman

Valerie B. Jarrett

Seymour Persky

Chicago Department of Planning and Development  
320 N. Clark St., Room 516, Chicago, IL 60610  
312-744-3200; 744-2958 (TDD)

This brochure is underwritten by  
The National Society of The Colonial  
Dames of America in The State of Illinois.

First Printed 1983  
Revised 1996