

## ELMHURST HISTORY HIGHLIGHT: The Wilder Mansion

For more than 150 years, an elegant mansion has stood as a residence and cultural center in Elmhurst. The story of the Wilder Mansion and its surrounding grounds begins circa 1868, when businessman Seth Wadhams established an estate in [Cottage Hill](#), which he called White Birch. At the time, the rural town's proximity to the city by railway made it a popular spot for wealthy Chicagoans to establish country cottages and estates. At White Birch, Wadhams built an Italianate-style manor house and planted dozens of trees on land that had previously been a flat prairie. After the [Great Chicago Fire](#) in 1871, Wadhams had a finial from the destroyed Cook County Courthouse placed on his estate, where it remains to the present day.

After Wadhams passed away in 1888, the estate was inherited by Chicago clothing merchant Henry W. King, who had previously owned the original [Hill Cottage Tavern](#) as a summer home. After King's death, his son Francis and his new wife Louisa moved into White Birch and made extensive renovations to both the house and grounds. A second wing was added to the building and the estate's gardens were greatly expanded. Louisa King would go on to become an established author on horticulture and a national voice in organizing garden clubs across the country.

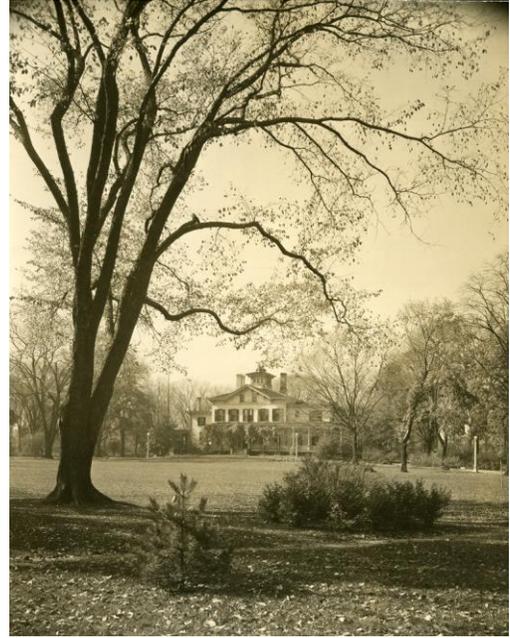


*White Birch, home of Seth and Elizabeth Wadhams, circa 1880, M80.62.1*

The King family moved from White Birch in 1902, and in 1905 the estate was purchased by T.E. Wilder, who had made his fortune in the tanning industry. Wilder renamed the estate Lancaster Lodge, and added a large stable designed by noted architect [Walter Burley Griffin](#) on the grounds just south of Elmhurst University. Wilder died in 1919, and his descendants desired the property to be passed to the City of Elmhurst as a memorial to the family patriarch. As a result of this will, the Elmhurst Park District was established in June 1920 and immediately entered negotiations with the family to acquire the estate. A deal was struck in late 1921, and the grounds became Wilder Park, the first public park in Elmhurst. A further deal concerning the Wilder property was made between the new park district and the Elmhurst Public Library, which had been located in a room at the [Glos Commercial Block](#) at 101 S.

York Street since its founding in 1916. The Wilder Mansion was sold to the library, which established itself on the first floor of the estate house in August 1922.

With the Elmhurst Park District headquartered in the park, and the library located in the old mansion, the former Wilder property was established as the cultural heart of Elmhurst. A lily pond and landscaped walkways were installed in the park in the 1920s and 1930s, and a conservatory was built alongside the existing greenhouse in 1924, which still stands today, providing year-round public access to beautiful horticulture. The library grew rapidly to fill the mansion, and benefited from a major expansion in 1936, giving the building a neoclassical façade that remains in place through the present day. As the city underwent dramatic growth in the postwar era, the library underwent a second major expansion in 1965. At this time, the Wilder Mansion also became home to the [Elmhurst Historical Museum](#), which occupied a room on the second floor until moving to the [Glos Mansion](#) in 1975.



*The Elmhurst Public Library in Wilder Park, circa 1928, M2012.1.26*

Even after this expansion, the library collections grew steadily throughout the rest of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and it was decided that a new building was required to properly serve Elmhurst patrons. The library constructed a state-of-the-art facility on the north side of Wilder Park, and the mansion was vacated. The new Elmhurst Public Library opened its doors in 2003. As stipulated in an intergovernmental agreement made in 1994, the mansion was returned to the Elmhurst Park District, which worked to restore the building to its 19<sup>th</sup>-century grandeur. The 1965 expansion was removed and demolished, but the 1936 façade was maintained. After years of restoration and strategic planning deliberations, the mansion reopened as an Elmhurst Park District event space in 2008.

The Wilder Mansion is one of the few buildings left from the earliest days of the community, and though it has changed with the times, it remains at the center of Elmhurst's history.

*By Daniel Lund, Elmhurst History Museum Staff, November 2021*