

Historical Bicycle Tour of Wilmette

Route Notes

September 1, 2008

1 - Community Recreation Center

Wilmette's recorded history starts in 1674 when Father Marquette's expedition beached their canoes and spent the night on the shores of present day Wilmette.

The town is named for Antoine Ouilmette, one of the four original settlers of Chicago. Ouilmette was a French-Canadian fur trader who settled by the Chicago River in 1790. By 1829, he and his part-Indian wife Archange had moved their family to a cabin on the shore of Lake Michigan near the foot of what is now Lake Avenue. In 1829, two square miles of land were granted to Archange and her children under the Treaty of Prairie du Chien. The land grant was bounded by Lake Michigan on the east, what is now Ridge Road on the west, Elmwood Avenue on the north, and Central Street in Evanston on the south.

After the Chicago fire of 1871, the population increased to the 300 people required for incorporation and Wilmette was incorporated on September 19, 1872.

The area west of Ridge Road, where the Community Recreation Center is located, was settled by German farmers in the 1840s and was then incorporated as the Village of Gross Point in 1874. Gross Point was dissolved in 1919 and partly annexed to Wilmette in 1924. The remainder of Gross Point was annexed in 1926.

2 - Wilmette Junior High / Mikaelian Education Center / Regina Dominican High School

The first Wilmette public school opened in 1871, before the village was formally incorporated. Wilmette now has four public and three private elementary schools, one middle school, the junior high, and two private high schools, including Regina Dominican High School, a Catholic girls' school founded in 1958. The Education Resource Center on the west side of the road was renamed for our former superintendent of schools, Sam Mikaelian, in recognition of his long tenure with the Wilmette Public School District.

3 - History in the Making – Prairie Preserve

The north side of Kenilworth Avenue features a prairie preserve on what had been a wasteland of weeds and trash only ten years ago. Local residents formed the Friends of Thornwood Park, and with the help of local schools and organizations have transformed the area into one of the area's largest prairie gardens, featuring 45 different species of prairie plants.

4 - Wilmette's Oldest Tree

At the alley behind 1941 Birchwood (on 20th street) stands the oldest tree in the village, a 250-year-old white oak. It was planted prior to European settlement, and is one of the few natural remains of Wilmette before it became Wilmette. The village has over 16,000 parkway trees

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5 - 1925 Birchwood Avenue

By 1845, Antoine Ouilmette's children sold the family reservation (from the lake through Gross Point Village) – one of the buyers was Simon Schwall, who built a house on the Village Green in 1843. It was later moved to its current location.

6 - Gross Point Village Hall (Wilmette Historical Society building)

The area west of Ridge was originally populated mostly by German immigrants, pickle packers working in the nation's largest pickle-packing industry in the 1850's and 1860's.

Gross Point Village was incorporated in 1874, and was dissolved in 1919 and partly annexed to Wilmette in 1924. The remainder of Gross Point was annexed in 1926. The name Gross Point is German, and refers to the large bend in Lake Michigan north of Northwestern University.

After a series of owners, the Gross Point Village Hall now houses the Wilmette Historical Museum, which collects, preserves and presents the history of the people of Wilmette from the earliest Native Americans to the present inhabitants. The museum houses a research library, and artifact, fine art and costume collections.

Across the street is the Wilmette Police Department, which began in 1904 with one officer.

Ridge Road is actually a ridge – it traces the separation between the Great Lakes and Mississippi watersheds.

7 – Fifteenth Street and Washington Avenue

Of the 87 miles of roads in Wilmette, 15 miles are brick streets, originally built with fired clay bricks from the late 1800's. In addition to preserving its brick streets, the Village has been restoring brick streets that had been paved over with asphalt. Both the sections of Fifteenth Street and Washington Avenue are examples of the beautifully restored streets. About 80% of the original bricks used for the streets were reused.

8 - 625 Park Avenue

With a population of 1500 people by 1890, Wilmette needed a Village Hall. In 1910, the second Village Hall was built at its present location, and the original hall was purchased for \$1500 by A. C. Wolff and moved to 625 Park Avenue as a private home.

9 - 1136 Greenleaf Avenue

A bronze tablet (on the wall of the Landmark building to the right of the door) commemorates the site of the Andrew T. Sherman residence, where John G. Westerfield was elected the first village president on November 8, 1872.

10 - Linden Avenue CTA Station

In 1922, the Wilmette Plan commission published its report recommending ways to alleviate the congestion caused by the material explosion of the 1920's boom years, as well as the changing needs of the village when it was considering annexing Gross Point Village. The CTA station was completed in 1925, connecting Chicago and the North Shore.

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11 - Indian Trail Tree Marker

10th Street and Greenwood Avenue - The marker on the northeast corner (about 10 feet from the stop sign) is dedicated to the Indian Trail Tree, a marker used by the native Pottawatami, Ottawa, and Chippawa to point to the direction the trail took.

12 - Trinity United Methodist Church

The congregation is the oldest in Wilmette, and was founded in 1874. The current Gothic Revival building dates from 1930, and achieved notoriety as the "Home Alone" church with the release of the 1990 movie of the same name.

13 - Chicago and Northwestern Depot

Built in 1873, the original C & NW depot was replaced in 1896 with a depot, adding plumbing and electricity to the building. In 1975, the depot was moved to 1135 Wilmette Avenue to make way for the new Village Hall. It is in the National Registry of Historic Places.

14 - Old Glenview Road

Old Glenview Road was originally an Indian trail, connecting Lake Michigan to the west.

15 - 2722 Old Glenview Road

This area is the site of an old Indian (possibly Pottawatamie) chipping ground, and a number of Indian arrowheads and other relics have been found in this area.

Other historical sites not included in this tour

Stebbin's Tavern

Stebbin's Tavern, at the southwest corner of Sheridan and Linden, was built in the 1840's, and was originally home of Joel Stebbins. Stebbins built the house after living in the original cabin of Antoine Ouilmette. The tavern was home to Alexander McDaniel, the first postmaster and village treasurer of Willmette, who in 1853 rented the house from Joel Stebbins.

Bahai' Temple

Gillson Park / Sanitary Canal

In 1893-94, Wilmette built its first water distribution system and a sewer system which emptied into Lake Michigan near Forest Avenue. The whole shape of the lakefront changed in 1908-1910, when the Chicago Sanitary District built the North Shore Channel and Wilmette Harbor. The outlet from Wilmette sewers was then diverted from Lake Michigan to the channel in 1914. The landfill created by the construction of the channel was subsequently developed into Gillson Park.

Gillson Park Road

This is the last remaining stretch of the original Green Bay Trail. The trail was the main north-south artery used by Indians from Fort Howard in Green Bay, Wisconsin to Chicago. It was used as a mail route when weather on the lake was rough, and the trip took one month.

Michigan Avenue and Gillson Park

The original cabin of Antoine Ouilmette was built here in 1829. It was home to Joel Stebbins in 1840, and in 1857 John Gedney Westerfield, Wilmette's first president purchase the land and preserved the cabin. It was torn down in 1865 because of erosion of the lake shore.