

Martin House Fact Sheet

Meet the Martins



A wealthy Buffalo family is in the news again! They built a unique house here in Buffalo one hundred years ago that was the “talk of the town.” Now, news of that house is again appearing in newspapers, on television and on the internet.

Here’s the story so far:

A man named Darwin D. Martin (1865-1935) was born in Bouckville, New York. He was the youngest of five children and had a happy childhood until his mother died when he was six years old. The family was broken up when Darwin’s father moved to the Midwest to remarry, bringing Darwin and his brother with him.

Darwin was not very happy in his new home and in 1878, at the age of thirteen, he moved to the New York City area to work with his brother Frank who was selling soap for the Larkin Soap Company. Shortly afterward, Darwin moved to Buffalo and worked

at the Larkin Company headquarters from 7:30 in the morning to 6:00 in the evening, six days a week. He lived alone in a boarding house nearby.

In 1883, Darwin enrolled in a bookkeeping class at the YMCA. A year later, he was teaching the class.

Isabelle Reidpath (1869-1945) was a young girl living near the boarding house and Darwin began courting her in 1885. In 1889, Darwin and Isabelle married and moved into a home, which Darwin had built on Summit Avenue. The Martins had two children, Dorothy (1896-1980) and Darwin R. (1900-1979).

Darwin Martin rose through the ranks of the Larkin Soap Company; by 1902, he was a highly paid executive looking to build a finer house for his family. His brother, William, lived in Chicago and recommended to Darwin a young, innovative architect who could build a house that would be the "envy of every rich man in Buffalo," and "talked about all over the east." Martin invited this architect, Frank Lloyd Wright, to come to Buffalo to discuss a number of building projects. This was the beginning of a business relationship and friendship between the two men that lasted over thirty years.

From Wright's previous work, Darwin Martin picked the Walser house design which, after a few modifications by Wright, became the Barton House. It was the first part of the Martin complex to be built, and a sort of test case to see if architect and client could work together. In an effort to reunite his family, Darwin Martin provided this house for his sister, Delta Martin Barton, and her family.

The Barton House "test" was successful, and work began in 1904 on the main house for the Martin family. The large Martin House took over two years to complete. Despite Martin's notorious frugality, he allowed the budget for the house to increase over and over again. The house had nearly four hundred brilliant art glass windows, doors and skylights—all designed by Frank Lloyd Wright. He also designed custom furniture for most of the rooms. Beautiful gardens, trees and shrubs were planted in the surrounding landscape.

From the main Martin House, a hundred-foot pergola (semi-enclosed walkway) connected to a glass-roofed conservatory used for growing and viewing plants. Next to the conservatory, a carriage house for the Martins' carriage and team of horses had two floors, a basement and stable in the back. The front of the first floor soon became a garage as the Martins joined other well-to-do Buffalonians driving the first automobiles. The second floor was the home of the chauffeur and his family.

Life was good for many years for the Martin family in their spectacular home on Jewett Parkway. But sadly, Darwin Martin lost his fortune in the disastrous stock market crash

and subsequent economic depression of the early 1930s. The Martins could no longer afford to live in their large house. They tried very hard but couldn't find anyone to buy it. The Barton House and the gardener's cottage were sold to new owners. Darwin became ill and died in 1935. Two years later, his wife Isabelle left the house and went to live in a nearby apartment building, which her son had built in 1929. She also maintained Graycliff, her summer retreat designed by Wright, until she died in 1945.

The house so loved by both owner and architect was left empty and abandoned, unheated and unsecured, for the next sixteen years.

In 1954, an architect named Sebastian Tauriello bought the property and moved his family into the main house; but the carriage house, conservatory and pergola were too badly deteriorated to be saved. They were demolished and, in 1962, the land was sold to a developer who constructed three large apartment buildings between the main house and the Barton House.

In 1966, the University at Buffalo (UB) bought the Darwin Martin house as a residence for their president. Later years saw it used for offices and to house the growing archives of the University. With the construction of the new UB Amherst campus and the relocation of the archives and offices to that facility, the future of the Darwin Martin house was once again uncertain.

A campaign was begun to save the landmark home and property, with a partnership among the University at Buffalo, the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation, and the Martin House Restoration Corporation. In 2001, ownership of the home was transferred to the Martin House Restoration Corporation, a community-based group of concerned and energetic neighbors and friends of the historic complex.

Today, with major funding from all levels of government, foundations, corporations and many generous individuals, the beloved home of the Martins designed by Frank Lloyd Wright is being carefully and enthusiastically restored. The legacy of Frank Lloyd Wright in Buffalo is being preserved, and the Martin House is once again the talk of the town!