# The Langdon Street Historic District: A Walking Tour



# A Madison Heritage Publication

# The Langdon Street Historic District: A Walking Tour

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Cover photo: Halle and Sophia Steensland house, 150 Langdon Street in 1917. Meuer Introduction

The Langdon Street historic district is a rich tapestry of architecture and history. It began as a spacious residential neighborhood for some of Madison's most prominent nineteenth century families. It emerged in the twentieth century as the university student enclave it is today. The district's historic buildings reflect the many changes in the neighborhood as it grew and developed over the last 150 years. In 1986, the Langdon Street historic district was listed in the National Register of Historic Places, a recognition of the contribution this neighborhood makes to Madison's historical and architectural resources.

**Historical Background** 

Between 1836 and 1850, the Langdon Street historic district was part of a forested ridge of land north of the State Capitol. The ridge was thought to be too far away from Madison's fledgling downtown to be a practical area for homes, and the cold winds off Lake Mendota deterred home builders in an era before the widespread use of central heating.



Marston house in 1951. Photo by Dr. George E. Orsech, Madison Community Center Photographic Club. SHSW WHi(X3)42018

In 1851, Levi Vilas and J. T. Marston, reportedly Madison's most wealthy men, built the first mansion-sized homes in the area, on opposite corners of Langdon Street and N. Henry Street. At that time, the western part of Langdon Street was called Engel Street, after a territorial legislator who participated in the siting of the state capitol at Madison. Other prominent families moved to the Lake Mendota ridge and the area soon became known as "Big Bug Hill." Langdon Street, named for John Langdon, a signer of the U. S. Constitution, was one of the most prestigious addresses on the hill during the 1800s.



Vilas house, c. 1939. Photo by Harold Hone. SHSW WHi(W821)80

The University of Wisconsin, located west of Langdon Street, was an important factor in the growth of the district. During most of the nineteenth century, many faculty members lived along Langdon Street. But it was the growth of the university at the turn of the century that significantly changed the Langdon Street area. Between 1890 and 1900, faculty numbers tripled. The student population, which numbered only 539 in 1887, grew to over 3,000 by 1900. Nearby Langdon Street was a popular address for the new faculty members at the university, and, since the university only provided one residence hall at this time - Chadbourne Hall for women - students flocked to the Langdon Street area in search of living arrangements.

The large houses along Langdon Street were ideal as student rooming houses, and, as many of the prominent older families in the district left, the old houses were converted to this use. The spacious back lots of the old houses were replatted into small lots and new construction on Mendota Court, Lakelawn Place, and Howard Place at the turn of the century significantly increased the density of the neighborhood.

At the turn of the century, Langdon Street was still home to many wealthy Madison families. But it was also home to university faculty members and students and much of the new construction in the district at this time was for student apartment or rooming houses, or for fraternity or sorority houses. The rapidly increasing density of the neighborhood led Professor B. H. Meyer to complain to the <u>Wisconsin State Journal</u> in 1907 that "parts of Langdon Street . . . had been spoiled" and that houses were so close that one house often received "the drippings from the eaves of another."

During the 1910s and 1920s, fraternities and sororities engaged in a building boom which would physically change the neighborhood more radically than anything had before. During this time Greek activity was reaching its peak of popularity at Wisconsin, and each Greek chapter competed with others to be the best organization on campus in athletics, school spirit, and social activities. The groups, often with assistance from alumni members, built elaborate chapter houses designed by some of Madison's best architects. The designs were in the popular architectural styles of the era: colonial and Georgian revival, Mediterranean revival, and Tudor revival; styles known collectively as period revival. Period revival designs revived old architectural forms, and they were particularly decorative and impressive. These houses were built on any available vacant land in the district, as well as on the site of older houses they replaced. It was during this era that some of the fine older homes in the district were lost.

The period revival chapter houses and the remaining stately mansions in the district were an elaborate backdrop for Greek activities during the 1920s. As if they knew what the next twenty years would bring, the fraternities and sororities set a hectic pace as they enthusiastically supported university athletic teams, engaged in initiations and other traditional activities, and hosted both formal and informal social activities. The presence of Greeks along Langdon Street led to the neighborhood becoming known as Madison's "fraternity row."



Kappa Kappa Gamma house, 601 N. Henry Street in 1930. This unusual Dutch South African colonial house was built in 1929 for the University of Wisconsin's first sorority, founded in 1875. Meuer

The Great Depression and World War II interrupted the activities of some Greek chapters. A number of groups disbanded, and some groups lost their large houses to creditors. The war years and the postwar era of the older student-veteran also slowed Greek activity. But the 1950's brought a revived interest in Greek student life.

Between 1950 and 1980, the Langdon Street historic district physically changed again as many of the district's most historic homes were demolished for modern apartment buildings and rooming houses for an ever increasing number of university students. And the expanding university demolished a large number of historic houses in the district for the construction of Lowell Hall. Some Greek chapters replaced historic homes with new chapter houses as well.

Today, the Langdon Street historic district is still widely known as Madison's fraternity row. And, as a whole, the fraternities and sororities that still occupy their older chapter houses have maintained them and take pride in their historic buildings. It is somewhat ironic that these fraternities and sororities, some of whom were the urban renewers of the 1920s, are now among the preservationists in the neighborhood today.



The Lucien Hanks house on Langdon Street in 1925. The Hanks house was demolished in 1966. University of Wisconsin Archives photograph. SHSW WHi(X3)28636

There are 89 buildings in this district which contribute to the neighborhood's history and architecture. Unfortunately, it is not possible in this publication to describe every building. The structures which are described are those that might ordinarily be missed in a casual walk through the area, or that represent a particularly interesting architectural design or work of an architect, or that have an interesting history.

# **The Walking Tour**

The walking tour is designed so that you can create your own path through the district. The buildings are listed from east to west, but they can be viewed in any order using the map in the center of the booklet. The wide sidewalks and 1920s style lampposts, along with the view of Lake Mendota, the State Capitol, and the University of Wisconsin, should make an enjoyable tour. For your own safety, it is advisable to remain on public walkways. Also, please remember that most of the buildings are private property, and while many residents may enjoy talking with you about their homes, please respect the privacy of residents in the district.



Morgan house in 1920. Meuer



Davies house in 1986

# 10 Langdon Street 1900, 1925 Charles, Sophia, and Henry Morgan house Claude & Starck, original architects

Claude & Starck, Madison's most noted Prairie School architects, designed the original house shown in the photo. The steep hipped roof, flared, wide eaves, dormers, second story bays, and a stylized star-shaped second story window are important elements of the progressive design of the original house, executed shortly before the emergence of the Prairie School. In 1925, the house was expanded to the rear and was given a brick veneer. In the early 1970s, the house was abandoned and the building became a virtual ruin. In 1981, just in time to save the structure from the wrecking ball, developers rehabilitated the building into apartments.

Charles E. Morgan, a pioneer dry goods merchant in Madison, lived in the house between 1900 and his death in 1904. His son, attorney Henry Morgan, occupied the house from 1900 until 1920. After 1921, the house was a sorority house, home to several fraternities, and a student housing cooperative until 1972.

### 29 Langdon Street John and Olive Davies house

1874

The Davies house is one of only a few nineteenth century Italianate houses left in the district. The paired brackets under the wide roof eaves and the tall, narrow windows are common details of the Italianate style. The stucco siding, clay tile roof, and ornate porches were probably added during the early twentieth century.

John and Olive Davies had the house built for them in 1874, six years after Davies came to the University of Wisconsin to teach natural history, chemistry, astronomy, and physics. In 1878 he was appointed professor of physics and was an early Wisconsin faculty member who pursued individual specialty research and teaching. The Davies family was one of many prominent faculty families who lived in the district in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.



Brown house, front entrance, in 1986



City Boathouse, c. 1898. SHSW WHi(X31)272



Bunn house in 1925. Meuer

# 28 Langdon Street Frank and Mary Brown house

The history of this house illustrates the transition of many large homes in this district from single-family residences to student housing. Frank G. Brown was a businessman and financier in 1905. He managed his father's extensive real estate and lending concerns and helped found the French Battery Company, now Ray-O-Vac, one of Madison's most successful industries. In 1920, Frank Brown died, and his wife continued to live in the house until 1927. In that year, Alpha Phi sorority moved into the house and have occupied it ever since.

1905

1878-79

This house is an early version of the colonial revival style. Its main features are an unusual front intersecting gable roofline, a cornice with dentils, and returned eaves. The gracious entry porch is decorated with round columns with Roman Ionic capitals and a cornice topped by a balustrade. At the rear of the house is a large porch overlooking the back lot which slopes down to Lake Mendota.

At the foot of N. Carroll Street behind this house is the site of the old municipal boathouse. Frank Lloyd Wright, then an unknown architect in Chicago, designed the boathouse in 1893. Wright's design was the winner of a competition sponsored by the Madison Improvement Association. The twin-towered boathouse was Wright's first design in Madison and was, unfortunately, torn down in 1928.

# 104 Langdon Street Romanzo and Sarah Bunn house David R. Jones, architect

David R. Jones, a Madison architect between 1872 and 1885, designed this French Second Empire house for Judge Romanzo Bunn and his family. As shown in the photo, the house has lost much of its towers, but still has the mansard roof which is the leading characteristic of the style. Other details include modillions under the wide eaves of the house and a similarly decorated brick belt course running between the first and second stories. A classically-appointed veranda, partially restored in 1985, was probably a later addition to the house.

Romanzo Bunn had a long and prestigious law career in western Wisconsin. In 1877 he was appointed U. S. district court judge and came to Madison at that time. Bunn served the federal court until 1905. He and his family lived in this house throughout Judge Bunn's years on the bench.



Delta Gamma House in 1986



Chi Omega house in 1986



Suhr house, 1914, Meuer Photoart House photo. SHSW WHi(M491)27

### 103 Langdon Street Delta Gamma sorority house Frank Riley, architect

Frank Riley, a prolific and talented Madison architect, designed this sorority house in a version of the colonial revival style, one of the most popular of the period revival styles. The house, built of native sandstone, resembles a large Pennsylvania farmhouse and is unlike any other colonial revival design in the district.

The Delta Gamma sorority was founded in 1881, one of the earliest sororities established at the University of Wisconsin.

### 115 Langdon Street Chi Omega sorority house Frank Riley, architect

In the Chi Omega sorority house, Frank Riley created an unusual design in order to give the sorority a unique identity in the district. The tall, elegant red brick chapter house features decorative Dutch parapeted gables on end walls and dormers. Other outstanding elements of the design include brick corner quoins, stone trim over windows, doors, and gables, and the two massive chimneys on the east facade of the building.

The Chi Omega sorority was founded in 1902. The chapter built their first house in the district at 615 N. Henry Street.

### 121 Langdon Street Suhr house John Nader, architect

The Suhr house was home to two generations of the Suhr family, one of the most prominent German immigrant families in the city. John J. Suhr Sr. came to Madison around 1857. He worked in the State Bank until 1871 when he founded the German-American Bank. Suhr incorporated the bank in 1885. During World War I the family changed the bank's name to the American Exchange Bank. John J. Suhr Jr. directed the bank during much of the twentieth century and lived in this home until his death in 1957.

Local architect and engineer John Nader designed this house in the French Second Empire style. The mansard roof is the major characteristic of this style. The Suhr house also has elegant details such as the iron cresting on the entrance tower, stone window trim, stained glass, and fancy woodwork on the bays.

ison

1925-26

1886

1926



Kappa Sigma house, interior in 1925. Meuer



Winslow house, c. 1896-1900. SHSW WHi(X3)28638

#### 124 Langdon Street Kappa Sigma fraternity house Frank Riley, architect

The Kappa Sigma fraternity house is probably Frank Riley's best Georgian revival design in the district. Its outstanding details include a pedimented entry pavilion decorated with a Doric lintel and columns, eight-over-eight windows, and on the lakefront side, a two-story veranda. In this design, particularly, Riley illustrated the fine sense of proportion he put into all his designs. The original interior, as shown in the photo, was classically elegant.

1923-24

The Kappa Sigma fraternity was founded in 1898 at Wisconsin, and this fine house has been the chapter's home since it was built. A major fire damaged this house in 1983, but the exterior was quickly rebuilt to Riley's original design.

# 131 Langdon Street 1894, 1925, 1943 John and Agnes Winslow house

This former Queen Anne style house was the home to State Supreme Court justice John B. Winslow and his family until 1920. A New York State native, Winslow came to Racine, Wisconsin in 1856. He received his formal education and legal training in Racine, and in 1883 he was elected judge of the first judicial district. He was appointed to the Supreme Court in 1891.

Winslow's term on the state's highest court coincided with the early years of the progressive movement in Wisconsin. This era was a time of governmental and political reform. Winslow's court was a progressive era instrument of reform. He is credited with helping lay the foundation for legal reform in the state by advocating flexibility in the law to meet changing societal needs. Historians consider Winslow's career an outstanding one. He helped give the state a national reputation for improved government in the twentieth century.



Houses shaded and numbered are described in the walking tour. Map produced by Richard Haviza, Janesville, Wisconsin

14

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Steensland house, detail of window in 1986



Chi Psi house in 1917. Meuer

### 150 Langdon Street 1892, moved c. 1927 Halle and Sophia Steensland house Gordon & Paunack, architects

Before it was moved, the Steensland house fronted Langdon Street and was one of a group of Queen Anne houses on this block (see front cover). Its original tower and stylish veranda no longer grace the house, but the elliptically arched window with stained glass transom is one of many details still remaining.

Halle Steensland was a Norwegian immigrant who became one of the most noted leaders of the Scandinavian community in Madison. He came to the city in 1855 and operated several businesses. But his best known activity began in 1872, when he was appointed vice-counsel in Wisconsin for Norway and Sweden, a position he held until 1905. The Steensland home was a showplace, but in 1896 the family moved to a new and similar red brick house at 315 N. Carroll Street (now the Bethel Parish Shoppe).

# 150 Iota Court Chi Psi fraternity house

1911-12

Iota Court was named for the chapter of Chi Psi fraternity which occupies this house. The stone house was the second chapter house built especially for Chi Psi. The group built their first house in 1892 on Mendota Court (demolished in the 1920s). Chi Psi also has the distinction of being the first known fraternity to establish a chapter house at Wisconsin, which they did around 1883 at a rented house at 602 N. Frances Street (extant).

Built of irregularly coursed, rough finished local sandstone, the Chi Psi house has the parapeted gables and grouped casement windows of one variation of the Thdor revival style. Viewed from the shores of Lake Mendota, as in the photo, the building rises almost castle-like from the steep embankment along the lakeshore. The high quality of stonework greatly enhances the house, and its solid appearance suits its longtime occupants, the Chi Psi fraternity.



Johnson house in 1919. Meuer



Stanley Hanks bungalows in 1914. Meuer



18 Alpha Gamma Delta house c. 1925. Meuer

#### 626 N. Henry Street Dean John and Phoebe Johnson house Claude & Starck, architects

Madison's best known Prairie School architects, Claude and Starck, designed this tan brick house for Engineering Dean John B. Johnson and his wife, Phoebe. Dean Johnson died in the same year this house was built, but Phoebe Johnson lived here until 1916.

This design was an important transitional work for Claude and Starck. It has a Queen Anne form with classical details, but there is a strong horizontality to the design which suggests the influence of the Prairie style. The modernistic porch posts are decorated with Sullivanesque terra cotta panels that are clearly seen in the photo. The porch design and abstracted Palladian type dormer are similar to details used by Chicago's progressive Prairie style architect, George W. Maher.

### 211-219 Lakelawn Place Stanley Hanks bungalows

1914

1924

These almost identical small bungalows have details which make them both individually similar and different. Note on the historic photo that each bungalow originally had a different dormer shape and porch detail, but that they are all one and one-half story houses of the same plan.

Stanley Hanks was a locally prominent attorney and realtor, and the son of Lucien Hanks. He probably constructed these houses as an investment, possibly for faculty members or other university employees. They are unusual in this area of large Greek chapter houses.

# 220 Lakelawn Place Alpha Gamma Delta sorority house Balch & Lippert, architects

Madison architects Harold Balch and Grover Lippert, who practiced together during the 1920's, designed this elegant Georgian revival sorority house. This design differs from other Georgian revival houses that emphasized classically-decorated projecting entry pavilions. It is larger than other Georgian revival designs and features projecting symmetrical wings, a parapet roof defined by a prominent cornice, stone corner quoins, arched windows with keystones, and elaborate third story front facade window hoods.

Alpha Gamma Delta has been a sorority at the University of Wisconsin since 1905.



Old Kappa Alpha Theta house in 1925. Meuer



Jastrow house in 1986

#### 237 Lakelawn Place 1924-25 Old Kappa Alpha Theta sorority house Law & Law, architects

This old sorority house is a white stucco version of the Mediterranean revival style, one of the popular period revival architectural styles. The symmetrical composition, arched openings, decorative grillwork balconies and French doors give the house a delicate and graceful appearance. James and Edward Law were partners in one of Madison's most prolific architectural firms, and the Law brothers, later with Ellis Potter, designed numerous Greek chapter houses in this district. This is one of their most distinctive designs.

Kappa Alpha Theta sorority, founded in 1890, occupied this building until 1965. In that year they moved to the old Acacia fraternity house at 108 Langdon Street, where they are currently located.

#### 237 Langdon Street 1891, 1907 Joseph and Rachel Jastrow house

There is probably no house in the district quite as unique as the Jastrow house. The house was built in 1891 as a two-story Queen Anne structure. In 1907 the Jastrows converted the first two stories into apartments and added a third story plus attic for an apartment for themselves. The third story was designed in the prairie style and the interior has Craftsman influences. But more intriguing is what is behind the arched dormer windows projecting from the roof. Jastrow had an interest in North African culture, and in the attic he built a dark and romantic Moorish study. It has a stained glass skylight, carved wall panels of ivory and exotic woods, decorative wall coverings, and wrought-iron light fixtures.

Joseph Jastrow came to the University of Wisconsin as a scholar and researcher in the field of psychology, particularly experimental psychology. Rachel Jastrow was a leader in women's causes in Madison. Today's local Hadassah chapter is named in her honor.



Sloan-Ogilvie house in 1986



Villa Maria in 1926. Meuer



22 Old Delta Gamma house in 1919. Meuer

#### 234 Langdon Street Sloan-Ogilvie house David R. Jones, architect

Sitting among the concentration of twentieth century construction in this part of the district, the Sloan-Ogilvie house is an Italianate design from the nineteenth century. The square form of the main block is probably one of the most common details of the style, as is the low-pitched hipped roof and the tall, narrow windows decorated with sandstone lintels. David R. Jones, Madison's most prolific architect of the 1870s, designed the house.

Susan and Robert Ogilvie owned this house until 1907. Robert Ogilvie owned a dry goods store. The house changed hands numerous times until 1925, when it became the Sigma Kappa sorority house. Sigma Kappa occupied it until the 1950s.

# 615 Howard Place Villa Maria Frank Riley, architect

Not all buildings constructed after 1900 in the district were fraternity or sorority houses. Capitalizing on the housing needs of students, builders constructed large and small rooming houses and apartment buildings for the non-Greek affiliated student. The Villa Maria is a most impressive example.

In this design, Madison architect Frank Riley illustrated his ability to create a special design for a client. The style is Spanish colonial revival, a rare style in Wisconsin, seemingly more at home in Florida or the southwest. Yet the tall, stucco walls, with the irregularly sized and placed windows, the iron grillwork, and stone arched entrance, give this building an attractive appearance, even in winter.

# 250 Langdon Street Old Delta Gamma sorority house James O. Gordon, architect

This is the first period revival house built for Delta Gamma sorority (their second and current home is at 103 Langdon Street). The oldest sorority at the university, Delta Gamma was founded in 1881. This old house is the best example in the district of the half-timber version of the Tudor revival style. The details of the house are typically Tudor, including a brick first floor and a pseudohalf-timber second story. The steeply pitched gables of the house are also prominent elements of the style.

1875-76

1925-26



Turner house in 1925. Meuer



Delta Upsilon house c. 1920. Meuer

# 629 N. Frances Street 1893 Mae and Frederick Jackson Turner house

This house was the home of nationally prominent historian and scholar Frederick Jackson Turner and his family. The siding hides many of the original details of the house, as seen in the historic photo, but it was Turner's home when he was just reaching the heights of his brilliant career.

A Wisconsin native, Turner attended the University of Wisconsin as a student and studied under William Allen, one of the most noted of Wisconsin's nineteenth century scholars. In 1893, coinciding with the construction date of this house, Turner delivered a landmark address to the American Historical Association on the significance of the frontier in American history. His fresh approach to historical research and analysis as shown in this paper created for him and his university a national reputation for innovative research in the social sciences.

Turner was also a member of an elite group of faculty who influenced the administration and growth of the university. Several of these faculty members lived in the N. Frances Street vicinity, and were dubbed the "Frances Street Cabal" because of their expression of similar interests in the growth of the university and because of the power they wielded. Turner's is the only house left from the cabal, which also included the homes of Charles Van Hise and Charles Slichter.

# 640 N. Frances Street Delta Upsilon fraternity house Jennings & Kronenberg, architects

The three shaped parapet gables at the roofline of both the front and rear facades of this house are the most interesting feature of this handsome Tudor revival design. Jennings and Kronenberg was a short-lived architectural team (1905-1907) and both partners had individually distinguished careers as well. J.T.W. Jennings was the supervising architect at the University of Wisconsin between 1899 and 1905.

Ferdinand Kronenberg was a prolific architect in Madison who designed both residences and commercial and public buildings.

Delta Upsilon was established at the university in 1885. The chapter prides itself in being a "nonsecret" fraternity, with no secret handshakes, ceremonies or mottos. Their chapter house here, which they still occupy, was one of the earliest period revival houses built in the district.

25



Sigma Alpha Epsilon house in 1986



Old Delta Tau Delta house, bay window on lake facade in 1986



Beta Theta Pi house in 1925. SHSW WHi(X3)42048

627 N. Lake Street Sigma Alpha Epsilon fraternity house Law, Law, & Potter, architects

616 Mendota Court		1911
Old Delta	Tau Delta fraternity	

1925

1925

622 Mendota Court Beta Theta Pi fraternity house Law & Law, architects

This streetscape of fraternity houses illustrates the variety of twentieth century period revival architecture which exists in this district. All buildings replaced older houses on the site of Gorham's Mill (1853-1860), a pioneer sawmill, and the Madison Manufacturing Company (1860-1890), an agricultural implement factory.

Of special interest are the two houses designed by Law, Law & Potter. The Sigma Alpha Epsilon fraternity house is a traditional colonial revival design, while the Beta Theta Pi fraternity house is a fine Mediterranean revival design. Law & Law (later Law, Law & Potter) designed many houses in this district and all over Madison. They were one of Madison's most prolific architectural firms of the early twentieth century. Sigma Alpha Epsilon was founded in 1903, and they have occupied their lakefront house ever since. Beta Theta Pi was a pioneer fraternity, established in 1873. They were also the second fraternity at the university to establish a chapter house, at 614 Langdon Street (extant), in 1889. Their current house is on the site of a previous chapter house, demolished for this building.

Delta Tau Delta was established in 1881 as a temperance fraternity; and in 1892 they and Chi Psi were the first fraternities to build houses expressly for a fraternity chapter. In 1911, this unusual stone house was built for them, on or near the site of their 1892 house. The stone house is an unusual interpretation of the colonial revival style. It features a mansard roof, a row of projecting dormers, and classical details. The fraternity occupied this house until the 1950s.



Old Alpha Omicron Pi house in 1986

#### 636 Langdon Street 1928 Old Alpha Omicron Pi sorority house Law, Law & Potter, architects

This imposing former sorority house sits like a walled French chateau, guarding a main entrance to the district. Law, Law, and Potter, a noted architectural firm in Madison, designed this building. Its outstanding details include a steeply pitched hipped roof, tiny hipped roof dormers, half-timbered tower, stone corner quoins, and an ogee-arched hoodmold over the tower entrance. The unusual design is a good example of Law, Law, and Potter's ability to design individually interesting buildings for their clients. Before the addition of Ellis Potter to the firm, brothers James and Edward Law designed both individually and with each other.

Alpha Omicron Pi was founded at the University of Wisconsin in 1917. They occupied this building until the 1940's. Historic photographs came from the Iconography Collection of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin (noted as SHSW with negative number under each photograph), and the Meuer Photoart House collection at the University of Wisconsin Archives (noted as Meuer under each photograph). All photographs are used with permission.

Back cover photo: Delta Upsilon house, 640 N. Frances Street in 1917. Meuer