

Martin House Complex

Fact Sheet

The Martin Family and their Home □

Darwin 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 and brought Darwin and his brother with him.

Darwin was not very happy in new home and in 1878, at the age of thirteen, he moved to New York City to work with his brother Frank who was selling soap for the Larkin Soap Company. Soon, Darwin moved to Buffalo and worked at the Larkin Company headquarters from 7:00 AM to 6:00 PM, 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. Having left grammar school at an early age, Darwin was largely autodidactic (self-taught), reading voraciously in his spare time.

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 that Darwin had built on Summit Avenue in the Parkside neighborhood. The Martins had two children, Dorothy (1896-1980) and Darwin R. (1900-1979).

Darwin Martin's star at the Larkin Soap Company was rising higher and higher and by 1902, he was a highly paid executive and was looking to build a finer house. His brother, William, lived in Chicago and recommended to Darwin a young, innovative architect who could build a house that would "be the talk of the town". Martin contacted Frank Lloyd Wright and invited him to come to Buffalo for a visit. This was the beginning of a business relationship and friendship between the two men that lasted over thirty years.

In an effort to reunite his scattered family, Darwin Martin desired to build a house for his sister, Delta Martin Barton, and her family as part of the Martin

estate. From Wright's previous work, Martin picked the Walser house design, which, after a few modifications by Wright, became the Barton House. This was the first part of the complex to be built and a test case to see if architect and client could work well together.

The Barton House project was successful and in 1904, work was begun on the main house of the complex, the home for the Martin family. This larger, finer house took over two years to finish. Despite Martin's notorious frugality, he allowed almost unlimited funds for the project. It had brilliant art glass windows everywhere—nearly 400 pieces in the entire complex. There were beautiful gardens all over the grounds and custom-designed furnishings for many of the rooms.

A glass-topped conservatory used for growing and viewing plants was built to the north of the main Martin house, and a hundred foot walkway, called a pergola, connected the two buildings.

The carriage house for the horses and carriages had two main floors, with a stable in the back. The second floor incorporated an apartment for the chauffeur and his family. The front of the first floor soon became a garage as the Martins joined the ranks of the well-to-do Buffalonians who drove the first automobiles.

The Martin family enjoyed their spectacular home on Jewett Parkway for many years. Sadly, however, the Martins lost their fortune in the disastrous stock market crash and subsequent economic depression of the early 1930s. The family could no longer afford to live in such a large complex. Try as they did, the Martins could not find a buyer for the main Martin house, although 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.

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

In 1954, an architect named Sebastian Tauriello bought the property and moved his family into the main house; the carriage house, conservatory and pergola were too badly damaged to be saved. In 1962, the land was sold to a developer and these three outbuildings were demolished. Three large, two-story apartment buildings were constructed between the main house and the Barton House.

In 1966, the University at Buffalo bought the Darwin Martin house as a residence for their president. Later years saw it used for offices and to house the University Archives.

In the 1990s, a campaign was begun to save the landmark home and property, through a partnership between the State University of New York at Buffalo, the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation, and the Martin House Restoration Corporation (MHRC), a community-based group of concerned and energetic neighbors and friends of the project. In 2001, ownership of the home was transferred to the MHRC.

Today, with major funding from state, county and federal government, and a number of foundations, corporations and generous individual donors, the beloved home of the Martins and masterwork 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 complex is reclaiming its place as a community treasure.

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