

# BENJAMIN MARSHALL - THE ARCHITECT

May 5, 1874 - June 19, 1944



Mr. Marshall was born into a wealthy South Side family in 1874. As a boy, he loved animals and would often smuggle pets into school. Once, he even brought a pony to church. Doing things his own way came naturally, even if that way was a little unconventional and over the top. It has been said that he was simply charming enough, rich enough, and talented enough to carry it off.

While in high school, Marshall was impressed by the grand buildings of the Columbian Exposition. Those buildings inspired him to become an architect. Rather than waste time in musty academic studies, he apprenticed himself to a local design office, **Marble & Wilson**. Upon Marble's death, he became partner in the new firm **Wilson & Marshall** in 1895 (21 years of age). After 7 years, Marshall broke away to open his own firm in 1902. One of his early commissions was the Iroquois Theater in 1903. The theater was severely damaged by fire 5 weeks after opening, with a loss of 602 lives. While tragic, it had little effect on Marshall's career.

In 1905, Marshall teamed with Massachusetts Institute of Technology trained Charles Fox, forming **Marshall & Fox**. Fox had experience in building theaters and other large works. Marshall focused on the design element in the firm, while Fox served as the construction specialist and project manager. This relationship persisted for an incredible 21 years, only terminating upon Fox's death in 1926. It was this team that had a monumental impact on the Chicago skyline. In addition to converting an old landfill into some of the most sought after apartments on East Lake Shore Drive, they also designed such classic structures as the Drake Hotel, the Blackstone Hotel, Lake Shore National Bank, South Shore Country Club, Lake Shore National Bank, and the Edgewater Beach Hotel.

After Fox's death, Marshall continued practicing on his own until he retired in 1938, turning the operation over to his chief architect, Lewis Walton (who formed **Walton & Kegley**). Marshall died in 1944 in his Drake Hotel suite.

## MARSHALL'S LIFESTYLE AND MANSION

Marshall's lifestyle and architectural style share many similarities. Both have been described as having "flamboyant tastes and swashbuckling style." It has been said that he designed much of his personal wardrobe, which included elaborately ruffled shirts, flowing ties, and for the golf course, a large sombrero with built in ventilators. For transportation, he drove a custom white Packard convertible, arguably the most luxurious car of the time.

In 1921, Marshall built his mansion - perhaps a trophy to his architectural success - in Wilmette, Illinois. At a reported cost between \$500K and \$1M, the pink, Spanish style home was built on the waterfront. Entering the home from Sheridan Road, visitors were greeted by a salmon-colored frieze over the front door, depicting Burnham and fellow architectural giant Stanford White, among others. Marshall's own work studio had three huge windows with space for 45 draftsmen to work.

An absolute highlight of the home was a 50-foot-high, 75-by-100-foot tropical garden, complete with palm and banana trees. A lover of gadgets, Marshall designed the ceiling and windows to open at the push of a button to the outdoors in good weather. At least one table also rose from out of the floor into another room.

The home also featured special theme spaces in which Marshall stocked furnishings he collected from around the world. Most ornate was an \$80,000 Chinese temple room. Also included were Egyptian and Scandinavian rooms.

It all came crashing to an end when The Great Depression hit in the 1930s. Most new building stopped, putting architects out of work. Marshall was forced to sell the home. Department-store magnate Nathan Goldblatt bought the home for \$60,000 in 1936. Eventually Goldblatt moved on, the home was empty and eventually was offered for \$125,000 to the Village of Wilmette, which declined.

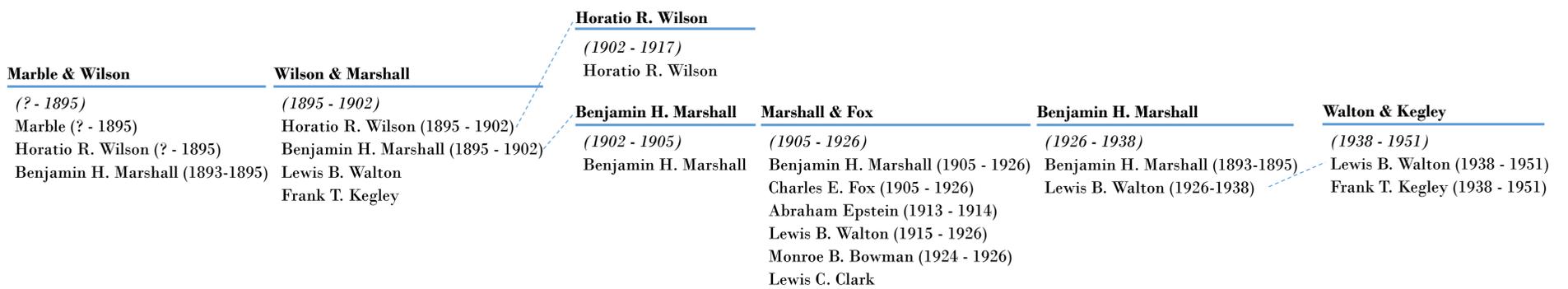
Historic-preservation philosophies were not the same as today, so demolition of a home not even 30 years old was scheduled in 1950. The wrecking ball almost met its match. One worker told a newspaper the work was "like demolishing a fort" - Marshall had built the structure so sturdily with construction techniques far ahead of its time.

The Baha'i Temple now owns the site. The only reminder of the grand Marshall home is its wrought-iron entrance gates.



## ARCHITECTURAL GENEALOGY

A Deeper Look at how Benjamin Marshall Influenced Chicago Architecture



## VERY SHORT LIST OF NOTABLE PROJECTS

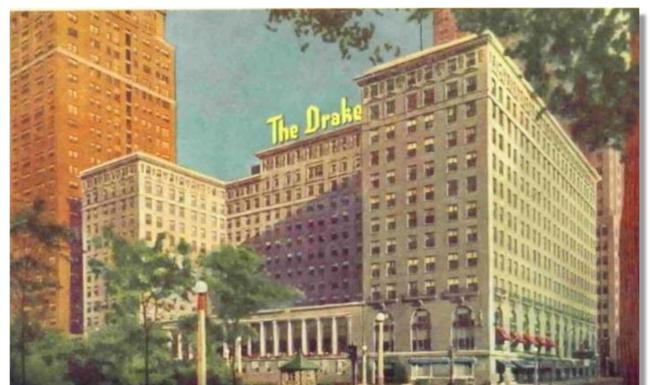


One of Marshall's early solo works, after the break apart of Wilson & Marshall, was the Iroquois Theater. One of the most ornate theaters in Chicago when it was opened, it was actually designed to be fireproof. Marshall researched previous structural fires and made every effort ensure the facility would not succumb to a similar fate.

On 30 December 1903 at 3:20 pm, after the theater had been open for only 5 weeks, fire erupted during a performance of Mr. Bluebeard. A spark descended from an overhead light, which caught a portion of the fabric curtain on fire. The audience thought it was part of the performance, thus did not move towards the exits. As it continued to spread, panic ensued in the audience. A stage hand opened a rear stage door in an attempt to escape, which led to a rush of air into the theater, causing a large fireball to envelop the balcony. All injuries and deaths occurred within the first 15 minutes of the fire. The fire department extinguished the blaze within 30 minutes. 602 people died in the fire - many of whom were suffocated, vice burned.

The investigation found a number of issues in the facility that led to the fast spreading blaze. The asbestos fireproof curtain was found to be made of cotton and other combustibles. Two vents, intended to filter out smoke were incomplete, and thus were boarded shut to protect the interior from rain and snow. A fire alarm system was not installed. Sprinklers were deemed to costly and unsightly, thus were not installed. Doors were padlocked from the outside of the theater to keep out non-paying customers which impeded evacuation. Exit lights were turned off to reduce audience distractions. Many of the 25 exit doors opened to the inside, instead of the outside.

Marshall's designs were never called into question during the investigation. It was found that the theater owners, in their rush to open the facility, had failed to fully complete construction of all building elements. City inspectors were found to have been given free tickets to overlook certain fire code violations. There were no convictions of wrong doing by any involved.



The Drake Hotel was opened on 31 December 1920. Marshall did not accept a monetary fee for the design, instead he was named as part owner upon completion. After he sold his mansion in Wilmette in 1936, he moved into a suite on the 44th floor of the Drake. He died in the suite in 1944.



Celebrating classic French design, the plans for the 1550 North State building were actually labeled in French. Each of the 12 floors housed a single apartment of 9,000 square feet split into 15 rooms. Kitchen ranges had 3 broilers, 2 gas and 1 charcoal so that "steak and fish need never to be prepared on the same broiler." Marshall lived in this building between 1911-1921, only leaving to move into his newly finished Wilmette home.