

Charles Wacker: Chicago leader and Lincoln Park West Resident

Chicago advocate Charles Wacker resided on Lincoln Park West for about 25 years. Born in 1856 in Chicago, Wacker was the only child of Katerina and Frederick Wacker, a brewer who emigrated from Wurtemberg, Germany in about 1851. In 1870 the family moved to 714 Franklin (today's 1838 Lincoln Park West) which burned during the 1871 Fire. The Wackers rebuilt a fanciful, Swiss-chalet style home and went to Europe from 1876-1879. Charles studied in Stuttgart and Geneva. Upon return the family settled back in their home which they owned during their years abroad. Charles remained there until 1897 when he began to build a residence on State Parkway.

Joining his father in the Wacker & Birk Brewing and Malting Co., Charles became its president in 1884. In 1893 Charles, age 37, was appointed the youngest director of the Columbian Expo.

Described as gregarious, Charles was a leader not just at the Fair and in the brewery, but he was Director of the Illinois Merchant Trust Co. and the Chicago Heights Land Association. He volunteered with the Relief and Aid Society and even presided over a German singing society. Perhaps he harmonized with beer mug in one hand and songbook in the other.

But as chair of the Chicago Plan Commission for 17 years, Wacker left his biggest mark on Chicago. Mayor Busse appointed him in 1909 to head 328 commissioners who were tasked to execute the famed 1909 Chicago Plan authored by Dan Burnham and Ed Bennett. The plan which included numerous proposals to make Chicago beautiful, is still viewed as the most significant U.S. urban planning document written. Ideas included a wider Michigan Ave, a double-level Wacker Drive, and increased lakefront parkland.

Charles and his colleagues worked indefatigably to earn public support. They produced the *Wacker's Manual of the Plan of Chicago*, a shorter, cheaper-to-print version of the Plan. They offered lantern slide shows in many languages. Wacker and two others gave an estimated 500 talks to 150,000 listeners in seven years! Chicago's 8th graders were required to study the Plan.

An imperfect document, the Plan failed to address housing and other working man's needs. Some portions were not approved, but between 1902-1931 over 80 bond issues passed for its funding. Chicago grew beautiful.

In appreciation of his work, City Council renamed S. Water Street Wacker Drive in 1926. Charles was too ill to attend the dedication. Author Rudolf Hofmeister wrote, "of Chicago's German element, Charles Wacker, without a doubt, has done the most for the development of the city." This year is the 110th anniversary of the Chicago Plan. When driving speedily along Lower Wacker with slower traffic above, Chicagoans nod "Danke" to a former Lincoln Park West resident for his tireless efforts to improve Chicago.

Diane Gonzalez 2/2/19 for OTTA newsletter