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Abstract

Frank Lloyd Wright is held to be one of the greatest American architects, one who forever changed the norms of architecture with his genius. With such a prestigious reputation, it is difficult to imagine Wright bowing down to his client's wants and needs during the building of a home. But when I decided to analyze the relationship between Wright and his client Francis Wilde Little, I was surprised to find that Wright did just that. Wright not only bowed to Little's needs, he actively had to change multiple aspects of his plan to suit Little's desires. In this paper, I wish to sketch out the working relationship between Little and Wright and discuss the tensions that strained it, as well as the homes that came from this relationship that mark the beginning and ending of Wright's Prairie period.

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Frank Lloyd Wright is held to be one of the greatest American architects, one who forever changed the norms of architecture with his genius. With such a prestigious reputation, it is difficult to imagine Wright bowing down to his client's wants and needs during the building of a home. But when I decided to analyze the relationship between Wright and his client Francis Wilde Little, I was surprised to find that Wright did just that. Wright not only bowed to Little's needs, he actively had to change multiple aspects of his plan to suit Little's desires. In this paper, I wish to sketch out the working relationship between Little and Wright and discuss the tensions that strained it, as well as the homes that came from this relationship that mark the beginning and ending of Wright's Prairie period. I will openly admit that finding historical truth was much harder than I thought it would be. I was by no means able to read the nearly infinite number of primary and secondary sources on Wright, and, despite numerous searches, there are surely still sources out there on Little. I will also admit that I was denied access to letters from Little to Wright that could have changed the whole outcome of this paper, and the majority of the correspondence that I have between the two is Wright's letters to Little. In addition, these letters and documents are only a small part of the historical truth, because much of the contact between Wright and Little was likely undocumented in the form of telephone calls and conversations. In spite of these drawbacks, after reading a vast number of primary sources and lining up the facts, I still believe firmly that I was able to find a considerable measure of historical truth.

During the time that he would have conceivably met Little (anywhere from 1893 to 1901), Wright was already a "rising young architect in Chicago."¹ He started his own firm in 1893 but had previously worked as a draftsman in the firm of famed architect Louis Sullivan.² Wright's Prairie homes were gaining popularity with Chicagoans, who were getting tired of what Wright called the "expensive mummeries" architects made during this period.³ Wright was by all accounts an ostentatious individual, and he shocked the prim members of his Oak Park neighborhood, who were "white, Protestant, provincial, exclusive and prosperous."⁴ He rarely went to church and was known for "driving around town in the company of unidentified female companions" who were not his wife, Catherine Wright.⁵ He found it difficult to save money and was often in debt.⁶

1. Robert C. Twombly, *Frank Lloyd Wright: His Life and Architecture* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1979), 26.

2. Brendan Gill, *Many Masks: A Life of Frank Lloyd Wright* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1987), 75-98.

3. Frank Lloyd Wright, *An Autobiography* (San Francisco: Pomegranate, 2005), 80.

4. Twombly, *Frank Lloyd Wright*, 32.

5. *Ibid.*, 116.

6. Wright, *An Autobiography*, 110-118.

Francis Little, on the other hand, was a contrast to Wright in almost every aspect. In 1901, he was the Vice President and general manager of the Peoria Gas and Electric Company, and he was very successful financially.⁷ His wife, Mary Trimble Little, was the beautiful daughter of an Episcopalian clergyman.⁸ Despite the fact that he was a successful executive, Little was by no means a social man, and he states in one of his letters to Wright that he had “very few friends.”⁹ In the society columns of the *Peoria Herald Transcript* during the years the Littles lived in Peoria, it is of note that they rarely appear as having attended parties or given their own. However, it is entirely possible that the Littles entertained frequently and for whatever reason their events did not show up in the social column of the *Peoria Herald Transcript*.

It is a mystery as to how the Littles and Wright first became acquainted. One possibility is that they met through the Art Institute, as the Littles were members and Wright “lectured there frequently.”¹⁰ This is the only possibility offered by the two secondary sources concerning Little and Wright (*An Architect and his Client* and *Working With an Architect*). I believe there are a few other possibilities that are just as likely. It is equally possible that it could have been Mr. Little’s interest in collecting Japanese prints that brought them together. Wright at one time owned a large collection of Japanese prints, so it is conceivable they could have met through a dealer.¹¹ It also may have been something much more trivial. For example, Mr. and Mrs. Little could have bought a copy of the *Ladies Home Journal* in July of 1901 and loved Wright’s “A Home for a Prairie Town” article.¹² Despite not knowing how they met, we do know the Littles knew Wright by November of 1901, because the *Peoria Herald Transcript* announced that the Littles were going to “erect a modern dwelling at Moss and Malvern Ave.”¹³

It is probable that Little manifested his will and whims over Wright’s plans, despite the fact that there are not as many written letters concerning this home as there are with the Littles’ summer home. For example, the Peoria house contains an attic and a basement, both of which are extremely rare in Wright’s Prairie homes.¹⁴ These elements were both against Wright’s organic prairie philosophy, and he details his loathing of them while he is describing what makes a

7. *Men of Illinois* (Chicago: Halliday Witherspoon, 1902), 74.

8. *Portrait and Biographical Record of Lee County, Illinois* (Chicago: Biographical Publishing, 1892), 462.

9. Francis Wilde Little to Frank Lloyd Wright, May 28, 1910, *Little Letters*, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, CA.

10. Morrison Heckscher and Elizabeth G. Miller, *An Architect and his Client: Frank Lloyd Wright and Francis W. Little* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art: 1973), n.p.

11. *Working With an Architect: The Littles and Frank Lloyd Wright* (n.p.: The Domino Center for Architecture & Design, 1989), 3.

12. Twombly, *Frank Lloyd Wright*, 52-53.

13. “Construction News,” *Peoria Herald Transcript*, November 30, 1901.

14. William Allin Storrer, *The Frank Lloyd Wright Companion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 66-67.

prairie home in his autobiography: "Get rid of the attic...get rid of the unwholesome basement, yes absolutely—in any house built on the prairie."¹⁵ In addition, there are many closets in the home, including two in the reception hall, two in the basement, and two in the master bedroom. Since Wright was notorious for not putting closets in his homes, it is very likely that Little insisted upon these closets.¹⁶

Strangely, the Littles lived in their new home after it was completed in 1903 for less than six months before they moved out, and in 1904 they sold their home to a Robert Clarke.¹⁷ What could have been the cause of such a short period living in their new home? While it is possible, it is highly unlikely that they were dissatisfied with the home, because they re-hired Wright to build their summer home in Wayzata, Minnesota. One of my sources, *An Architect and His Client*, argues that the Littles moved to Minnesota because of Mr. Little's health issues.¹⁸ While this is a possibility, it seems a little absurd that the climate in Minnesota would be a better climate for health than Illinois. I believe that it has more to do with Mr. Little's business than with his health. In 1904, the Peoria Gas and Electric Company was in court under accusations of being a monopoly. This was because the Peoria Gas and Electric Company had secured "an injunction restraining the city [of Peoria] from making any effort to enforce its provisions" because the city had passed a "75 cent maximum rate gas ordinance."¹⁹ Mr. Little was the spokesperson for the company, and he stated that the "gas company will stand pat; we have the upper hand now and always shall have it" and also that the company was being "unfairly treated" by the city. This case was eventually sent to the U.S. Supreme Court; Mr. Little surely found it prudent to leave the city.²⁰ This was because Mr. Little would be very unpopular if his company won the case, because all of Peoria would have their gas rates raised as the company so desired. Whatever the reason, the Littles moved to Minnesota, and after the case was settled, Little became vice-president of the Minnesota Trust Company.²¹

Since the court case was settled in 1906 in favor of the Peoria Gas Company, this may have had something to do with the Littles being able to afford to build a much larger house than their former Peoria home.²² Mr. Little purchased land and built a small cottage on the shore of Lake Minnetonka. He must have hired Wright to design their home because, in April of 1908, Wright sent a letter to Little stating that he would "gladly come up" to visit them and go over their

15. Wright, *An Autobiography*, 141.

16. Storrer, *Wright Companion*, 67.

17. Ibid.

18. Hecksher and Miller, *An Architect and his Client*, n.p.

19. *Peoria Herald Transcript*, November 9, 1907.

20. *Peoria Herald Transcript*, Friday, January 19, 1906.

21. *Working With an Architect*, 4.

22. Charles Henry Butler, *United States Reports* (New York: The Banks Law Publishing, 1906), 200:48.

plans.²³ However, the Littles seem to have been dissatisfied with Wright's first designs. Wright wrote to Mrs. Little in September of 1908 stating that he would be able to pop up for a few days due to Mr. and Mrs. Little's "dissatisfaction" with the designs, and that he "disliked to think" of the Littles "being badly cut up" in their "building schemes."²⁴ It is interesting to note that this letter is written to Mrs. Little and not Mr. Little. As I mentioned before, I was denied access to the five Little letters from the Metropolitan Museum, but I spoke with a historian who had seen them. His impression of them was that Wright was rather smitten with Mrs. Little.²⁵ This could have added an entirely different angle to the building of the Little homes; perhaps Mrs. Little was the one who pushed for their homes to be built by Wright. But, during this time, Wright was already involved in an affair that led him to leave his firm, his family, and also the building of the Littles' summer home on the lake.

In fall of 1909, Wright fled with his lover Mamah Borthwick Cheney (who was the wife of one of his clients) to Germany to publish a monograph of all of his work.²⁶ This news shocked Chicago and "it broke into print Sunday, November 7, on the front page of every Chicago newspaper."²⁷ The building of the Littles' home was put on hold for two more years, and the next correspondence between the two is from Little to Wright in 1910. In a rare glimpse of what Little was like, the letter suggests that Little was domineering and very condescending. In this letter, Little describes two plans (labeled plan "a" and plan "B") he had created to help get Wright back on his feet – many of Wright's former clients did not wish to be associated with such a scandalous man.²⁸ Little declares that "there is nothing more for [Wright] in domestic architecture" and states that he should devote himself to building either (a) bank buildings or (B) fireproof concrete office buildings.²⁹ It is interesting to note that Little discusses getting a copy of the monograph Wright was writing, later known as the famous Wasmuth Portfolio; Little helped to finance the printing of this work.³⁰ Little discusses his dissatisfaction with Wright leaving his family, stating that Wright had "wandered off into the underbrush."³¹ Little surprisingly shows concern for

23. Frank Lloyd Wright to Francis Wilde Little April, 1908, *Frank Lloyd Wright Letters*, Taliesin West, Scottsdale, AZ.

24. Frank Lloyd Wright to Mary Little, September, 1908, *Frank Lloyd Wright Letters*, Taliesin West, Scottsdale, AZ.

25. Tim Hartneck, Interviewed by author, Peoria, IL, April 1, 1212.

26. Gill, *Many Masks*, 198.

27. Grant Carpenter Mason, *Frank Lloyd Wright to 1910: The First Golden Age* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1958), 212.

28. Little to Wright, May 28, 1910, G.R.I.; For statistics on the difference in number of commission Wright received 1904-1909 and 1910-1914, see Edgar Kaufmann, Jr., "Crisis in Creativity: Frank Lloyd Wright 1904-1914," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 25, no. 2 (December 1966): 296.

29. Little to Wright, May 28, 1910, G.R.I.

30. Heckscher and Miller, *An Architect and his Client*, n.p; Little to Wright, May 28, 1910, G.R.I.

31. Little to Wright, May 28, 1910, G.R.I.

Wright in this letter, stating, “Possibly it may really interest you to know that I have had very few friends in my life—that is why it hurts and make me feel cross when you do fool things yet perhaps I understand you better than most people do too.”³²

It is a relief to know that Wright did not follow Little’s plans to abandon domestic architecture. Instead, he went to Wisconsin and devoted himself to building one of the masterworks of his career, Taliesin, for his lover Mamah and himself.³³ This may have been another reason that the building of the Littles summer residence was not started until 1912. It is of note that there is an impassioned letter written by Wright to the Littles from 1911, in which Mr. Little had evidentially given his opinion about Wright leaving his children and wife permanently in Oak Park to live at Taliesin. In this letter, Wright quotes Little as calling him a “hopelessly selfish piece” and telling him he needed to “wake up” and return to his family.³⁴

From then on, however, there appears to have been a reconciliation between the two, because blueprints were drawn up in 1912.³⁵ In the building of this home, Little wanted everything exactly to his liking. Much of Little’s dissatisfaction over the designs concerns the glass windows in the living room. Little was not pleased with Wright’s first designs, saying that the window “designs look stiff, formal and complicated” and that he hoped Wright would “be able to get something that satisfied” him.³⁶ Wright obligingly drew up a much simpler design, noting that these newly made designs were “rather sterile” but that “if you don’t like [the first designs] that is the real and only argument.”³⁷ But Mr. Little could not be satisfied, and made Wright redo the window designs a second time, stating in a letter to him:

You don’t get what we want. Probably we have in mind at least in a vague way your designs of eight years or ten years ago – the Thomas House or Miss Dana’s say—while you are reaching for *something different*.... We want something simple, dignified, and having a direct relation to and recognition of the window designs of the present building and you do not seem disposed to give it to us. WHY?³⁸

Wright complied, drawing a design of nearly all “plain plane glass” as Little requested.³⁹ One of the reasons for these plain glass windows might have been that the living room of the home overlooked a view of Robinson Bay, and Little

32. Ibid.

33. Twombly, *Frank Lloyd Wright*, 133.

34. Frank Lloyd Wright to the Littles, January 11, 1911, *Frank Lloyd Wright Letters*, Taliesin West, Scottsdale, AZ.

35. Frank Lloyd Wright to Francis Wilde Little, August 8, 1912, *Frank Lloyd Wright Letters*, Taliesin West, Scottsdale, AZ.

36. Heckscher and Miller, *An Architect and his Client*, n.p.

37. Ibid.

38. Ibid.

39. Frank Lloyd Wright to Francis Wilde Little, November 3, 1913, *Frank Lloyd Wright Letters*, Taliesin West, Scottsdale, AZ.

wished for a clear view of the bay uncluttered by Wright's beautiful detailed windows.

Even with all of this push and pull, the Minnesota home was finally finished in 1914, six years after the Littles had originally requested it to be built. But when finished, it was truly the "last great statement of Wright's Prairie Period."⁴⁰ Although two fine examples of Wright's prairie period came out of this relationship, things became even more strained after 1914. The last letter between the two is from Wright to Little in 1916, in which Wright complains it had been "nearly two years" since the home was built, and still no payment had come from Little.⁴¹ Here the relationship between the two appears to have stopped. No more communication is available, and Little died in 1923.⁴²

This relationship between Wright and Little was exceptional from Wright's other client relationships because Wright yielded to Little's desired changes with barely a murmur of disagreement. Looking at many of the letters between Wright and his other clients, Wright continually asserted his dominance as architect. In these letters, Wright often shows that "he and he alone knows best how to build his own work."⁴³ One excellent example of Wright's typical behavior towards his clients is in the letters between Wright and Darwin Martin during the building of the Martin Home. Wright often belittled Martin, and after Martin gave Wright a list of things he wanted changed about his home plans, Wright replied with snide quips including "Don't you think fireproof floors and a wood stairs are in the nature of a joke?"⁴⁴ He also refused Mr. Martin's pleas for the glass window plans, saying, "Requests for information interfere with its progress."⁴⁵

Both of my secondary sources on this subject call this working partnership between Little and Wright a friendship, saying it was full of "mutual respect and affection," but I firmly disagree with this classification of their relationship.⁴⁶ Despite not knowing the true reasons Wright was so subservient to Little's demands, I believe that Wright realized the benefits of charming such a wealthy patron. During the building of the first Little home, he rather proudly sent potential clients down to Peoria to view the home of "Mr. F.W Little of the Cicero Gas and Electric Co.," which was "in the process of erection," to convince them of his skill.⁴⁷ I also believe the building of the second home can be explained by

40. Heckscher and Miller, *An Architect and his Client*, n.p.

41. Frank Lloyd Wright to Francis Wilde Little, May 5, 1916, *Frank Lloyd Wright Letters*, Taliesin West, Scottsdale, AZ.

42. Obituaries, *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, June 6, 1923.

43. Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer, commentary to *Letters to Clients* by Frank Lloyd Wright (Fresno: The Press at California State University, 1986), 21.

44. Frank Lloyd Wright to Darwin D. Martin, Buffalo, (New York, July 25, 1904, in Wright, *Letters to Clients*), 13.

45. Ibid.

46. Hecksher and Miller, *An Architect and his Client*, n.p.

47. Frank Lloyd Wright to Darwin D. Martin, 1902, in Wright, *Letters to Clients*, 7.

the small number of commissions Wright was receiving during this period, so lack of funds could have made him swallow his pride for a second time with the difficult attitude of Mr. Little.

In this paper, I have tried my best to be an unbiased, objective historian. But this proved far harder in practice than in theory. Despite trying to remain objective, I definitely sympathized with Wright and not Little, and I am sure my bias shows in this paper. In addition, the limit on page length placed constraints on my paper, because I had to choose what details to add and what to highlight. I still believe that, in spite of these constraints, I was able to find part of the historical truth concerning the strained relationship between Wright and Little, the building process of the Peoria home, the situations that led to the Minnesota home being built, and the problems that delayed it. Full and complete truth may be impossible, but with enough time and enough sources, it is possible to attain a considerable measure of historical truth.