

Washington Park National Bank

6300 S. Cottage Grove, Chicago



Detail on upper elevation on Cottage Grove façade of the Washington Park National Bank © Eric Allix Rogers

OVERVIEW

The four-story Washington Park National Bank building was designed by architect Albert Schwartz in 1924 as part of an expansion and relocation of the bank to a more prominent corner site. The building's primary elevations were constructed of Indiana limestone with ornate carved Corinthian-order capitals and pilasters.

This is the second time the Washington Park National Bank building has appeared on Preservation Chicago's 7 Most Endangered List, first in 2018 and again in 2020. The building was also listed in 2019 as one of the Most Endangered Historic Places in Illinois by our statewide preservation partner, Landmarks Illinois.

Following a community engagement process conducted by the Cook County Land Bank Authority and the Metropolitan Planning Council, it became clear that the Woodlawn community desired the long-vacant building to be restored and adaptively reused. Vacant land is prevalent throughout Woodlawn, and it is disappointing to the community and preservation advocates that the decision was made to demolish a viable historic building in favor of new construction.

Washington Park National Bank

Address: 6300 S. Cottage Grove

Architect: Albert Schwartz

Date: 1924

Style: Neoclassical

Neighborhood: West Woodlawn



*Historic image of principal façade of the Washington Park National Bank fronting Cottage Grove Avenue. R.W.R. Capes Photograph, IL4781_1
© Indiana Limestone Company. Courtesy Indiana Geological and Water Survey, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana*

HISTORY

In 1924 as part of an expansion and relocation, the Washington Park National Bank moved to the prominent corner of 63rd Street and Cottage Grove Avenue. Architect Albert Schwartz designed the neoclassical, dressed-limestone building with the bank entrance on the Cottage Grove facade and retail shops along 63rd Street. An impressive, marble-clad, two-story banking hall with skylight and mezzanine was located on the second floor of the building and was perhaps the finest commercial interior space in Woodlawn.

The imposing four-story limestone and reinforced-concrete structure's name referenced the nearby historic Olmsted & Vaux-designed Washington Park. The bank building's name was also a reference to the much-celebrated Washington Park Race Track. Built in 1884, the horse racing track was located a couple blocks away at 61st Street and Cottage Grove Avenue and hosted the prestigious American Derby. The only surviving race track buildings are the Round House Stable by Burnham & Root built in 1880 which was beautifully restored by the DuSable Museum, and a grouping of adjacent auxiliary buildings along Payne Drive in Washington Park which have fallen into extreme disrepair.

In addition to the banking operations, the Washington Park National Bank building included retail storefronts on the ground level with offices on the upper floors of the building. The bank's advertising slogan, "*As strong as the everlasting hills,*" appeared in advertisements in the Chicago Tribune in 1931. Unfortunately, Washington Park



Historic image of principal bank entrance to the Washington Park National Bank on Cottage Grove Avenue. R.W.R. Capes Photograph, IL4781_2 © Indiana Limestone Company. Courtesy Indiana Geological and Water Survey, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana

National Bank closed on June 8, 1931 and was reported to be reopened as Park National Bank & Trust. A 1952 Chicago Tribune advertisement hailed the Washington Park National Bank as “South Side’s finest office building.” In 1951, the Chicago Tribune reported that “Louis Alpern, former Kentucky distiller,” bought the building for \$355,000. The article noted that the building “changed hands twice in 1944 – first for \$125,000 and later for \$210,000.” Ironically in 2020, the building is in process of being sold to a developer for \$250,000.

The 63rd Street and Cottage Grove Avenue district was a prominent center of the South Side and once contained many great entertainment venues, hotels, ballrooms, theaters and movie palaces including the Tivoli Theater, which stood across the street from the Washington Park National Bank. The two-story Renaissance Revival Cinderella Ballroom was constructed by Frank Loeffler in 1923 and was recently restored as the Grand Ballroom. It was adjacent to the now demolished Tivoli Theater.

The racial make-up of Woodlawn gradually shifted to an African-American community beginning in the 1940s, and the neighborhood flourished into the 1950s as a prominent location for Jazz Age clubs and a wide range of entertainment and shopping offerings. The area experienced disinvestment and extensive demolition in the decades that followed. However, in recent years there has been substantial renewed interest in the Woodlawn community, including its historic commercial core near the Washington Park National Bank. Woodlawn has many connections to the Civil Rights Era. Emmett Till’s home and school are located in Woodlawn and several prominent African-American organizations and movements were headquartered in the neighborhood in the 1960s and 1970s.

THROUGH THE AGES



A corner of the banking room looking toward the rear, showing in the foreground the marble inclosure where new accounts are opened.

Second floor banking room looking northwest with skylight. *THE WASHINGTON PARK NATIONAL BANK, A Chicago South Side Institution That Offers a Unique Marble Treatment, Through the Ages*, October 1925, Vol 3, No. 6, National Association of Marble Dealers, page 15

THROUGH THE AGES



THE WASHINGTON PARK NATIONAL BANK

A Chicago South Side Institution That Offers
a Unique Marble Treatment

IT is a distinctive human trait that the story of a success should be absorbingly interesting. Perhaps it is because the spark of ambition burns in every breast, and the tale of another's achievement pricks the imagination and fans the spark to brighter glow.

The history of the Washington Park National Bank is such a story. "Total resources of over eleven million dollars"—these words, used to describe the financial condition of the institution, coldly indicate its present strength and stability; they do not reveal the actual facts behind the figures, the record of continuous adherence to certain

ideals of safe and conservative banking that made the figures possible.

Founded in June, 1907, it had assets of \$25,000 and a firm belief in the future of Chicago's great South Side. It was not by chance that this private bank was located near the corner of 63rd Street and Cottage Grove Avenue; it was foresight that realized this intersection was the hub of a wheel of population that was destined to increase in area and density as the years went by. The soundness of this judgment was shortly confirmed. The Washington Park Race Track, famous among turfmen of a generation ago, gave way to modern buildings. Old struc-

THE WASHINGTON PARK NATIONAL BANK, A Chicago South Side Institution That Offers a Unique Marble Treatment, Through the Ages, October 1925, Vol 3, No. 6, National Association of Marble Dealers, page 12

THROUGH THE AGES

tures were torn down and replaced with new and modern buildings. Homes and stores arose where before footpaths stretched across vacant lots. Hotels, theaters and apartments, stately boulevards and spacious parks appeared. The spirit that was to make Chicago one of the greatest cities in the world was magically at work on the South Side.

The Washington Park Bank prospered from the beginning. A little less than two years after its inception, it secured a national charter and moved to a new building at the corner of 63rd Street and Evans Avenue, and added the word "National" to its name. The new building seemed at the time a notable example of monumental bank architecture, and easily capable of accommodating a crowd in its great lobby. Here, it was thought, the bank could do business for an almost unlimited number of years.

Time is the great enlightener. The original

clientele of 500 increased far faster than anticipated by even the most sanguine. When the number approached 30,000 it was seen that only an even more massive home could care for the stream of patrons that flowed daily in and out of the banking room. Arrangements were made in 1923 for the present building, and the lot at Cottage Grove Avenue and 63rd Street acquired.

Mr. Albert A. Schwartz, of Chicago, was the architect of the new home of the Washington Park National Bank. It is a four-story building of fireproof steel and concrete construction. Its exterior is marked by the simplicity of the Roman style of architecture. Four pilasters extending from the second floor level to the frieze distinguish that portion of the façade that contains the entrance to the banking quarters. The remainder of the building is given over to stores and offices.

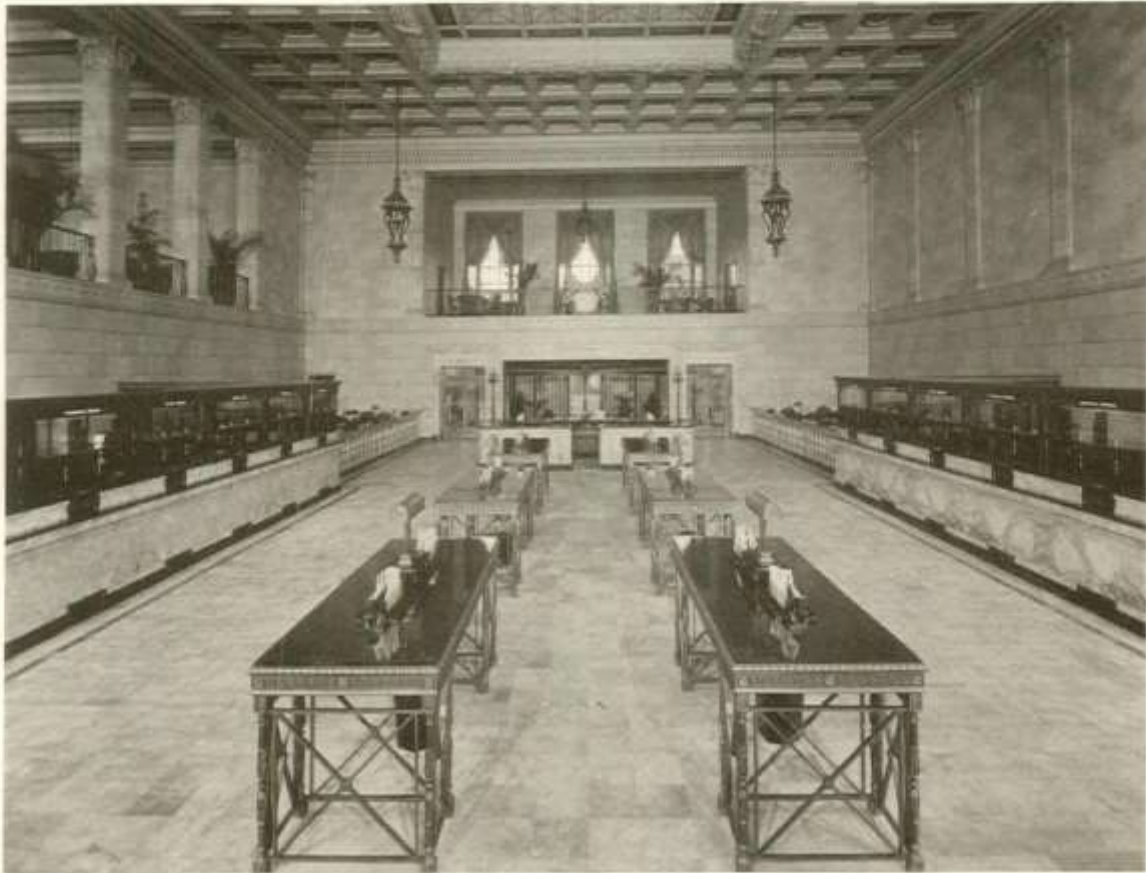
Entering the building through one of its



The entrance lobby gives a foretaste of the richness within.

THE WASHINGTON PARK NATIONAL BANK, A Chicago South Side Institution That Offers a Unique Marble Treatment, Through the Ages, October 1925, Vol 3, No. 6, National Association of Marble Dealers, page 13

THROUGH THE AGES



General view of the banking room looking toward the main entrance. Most of the marble is Old Convent Siena.

three broad doors, one comes into a foyer of remarkable beauty. From the floor to within a few inches of the ceiling the walls of this foyer are marble. Gray and yellow mixed Old Convent Siena was chosen, on account of its soft colors and striking veining. The floor is of the same material. The base is of Black and Gold marble and a small line border of Black and Gold is set in the floor about a foot from the edges. A circular grill of wrought iron, which screens the stairway leading from the main lobby to the vault floor below, is decorated in a design that continues and elaborates upon the motif contained in the cornices.

Passing into the main banking room, two impressions are immediately predominant.

One is that the architect was not hampered by space limitations—that he took full advantage of the dimensions allotted to this portion of the structure. A lofty coffered ceiling, in which is set a large skylight of cathedral glass bordered by a wide, flowing design of conventionalized oak leaves, sheds a flood of light over the spacious quarters below. To the right, high above the tellers' cages, a mezzanine floor is half hidden by seven square columns with ornate capitals; to the left, the counterpart of these columns is found in the pilasters of the wall, their bases resting on a frieze scroll that is carried completely around the room.

In front is another mezzanine, the wall opening only partly filled by a low graceful

Second floor banking room looking east with windows overlooking Cottage Grove Avenue. THE WASHINGTON PARK NATIONAL BANK, A Chicago South Side Institution That Offers a Unique Marble Treatment, Through the Ages, October 1925, Vol 3, No. 6, National Association of Marble Dealers, page 14

THROUGH THE AGES



Entrance to the vaults in the basement. Black marble benches contrast with the lighter tone of the Siena marbles.

metal railing; a background of three wide windows richly draped adds to the sense of spaciousness.

The second impression is that of regal grandeur. In spite of the practical uses to which this room is put, evidences of which are naturally apparent, the beauty and dignity of its appearance almost conceal its utilitarian purposes. Stretching ahead is a splendidly gleaming marble floor, with a bewildering variety of rich tawny colors like a rare oriental rug done in stone. To either side the counters continue the scheme upwards some three or four feet, the only breaks in the continuity of color occurring at the juncture of floor and counter, and in the floor border strip close by.

The material employed is Gray and Yellow mixed Old Convent Siena, with the base and strip above mentioned of Black and Gold—the same marble treatment as in the foyer and one that is very unusual. There is, in fact, no other building in the middle western section of the country, as far as can be

ascertained, that has a similar treatment; this renders the room all the more striking.

On the floor below the main banking room are the investment department, the rest rooms and the safe deposit vaults. A stairway from the foyer leads to this floor, and here, too, Old Convent Siena was chosen as the floor material and for the treads and risers of the stairs. The vaults, notable for their size and impregnability, are entered by a short flight of two broad marble steps. To each side of this entrance are marble benches of Black Belgian, with bases of the Black and Gold marble that appears again in the floor border and wall bases. The contrast of this brown-veined ebony material with the yellowish gray of the floor surface is most pleasing and is only faintly indicated by the illustration on this page. The addition of green growing plants, both here and on the mezzanine floors of the main banking room, is a touch of decorative intelligence that could be profitably copied by other institutions.

THE WASHINGTON PARK NATIONAL BANK, A Chicago South Side Institution That Offers a Unique Marble Treatment, Through the Ages, October 1925, Vol 3, No. 6, National Association of Marble Dealers, page 16



Principal Cottage Grove Avenue elevation of the Washington Park National Bank with a relocated original stone door surround at southernmost entrance bay © Eric Allix Rogers

A Structural Assessment Report of the Washington Park National Bank building was completed by Probe Consulting Services as part of the request for proposal process in August 2018. The report recognized that the building is littered with construction debris from decades of neglect, however it concluded that “that the existing framing system of the building is structurally sound, intact, and still in good condition and that the building is salvageable and can be repaired to restore its full structural integrity.”

THREAT

Located adjacent to the 63rd Street CTA-Green Line elevated train station and terminal at Cottage Grove Avenue, the Washington Park National Bank building has anchored this prominent corner in the Woodlawn community for nearly a century. Under the leadership of the Rev. Leon Finney, Jr., the Woodlawn Community Development Corporation owned the property for decades. During this period the building was mostly vacant with no apparent general or on-going maintenance, renovation, construction, or redevelopment work evident on the bank building. The condition continued to deteriorate, and the building is now open to the elements.

The Washington Park National Bank building languished due to ownership which was unwilling or unable to restore or even properly maintain the structure. However, during the same period, other prominent historic buildings in the immediate area have been successfully restored and reopened, specifically the nearby Strand Hotel and the Grand Ballroom, originally known as the Cinderella Ballroom, located across the street.

When the Cook County Land Bank Authority took control of the property in 2016, they cleared over 20 years of back

Chicago 7: Washington Park National Bank

tax debt estimated at \$3.7 million. They conducted a community engagement process and issued a request for proposals. Two of the three submitted development proposals included adaptive reuse. However, the decision was made to award the project to DL3 Realty, which proposed demolition and new construction.

Newly elected 20th Ward Alderman Jeanette Taylor has expressed opposition to demolishing the Washington Park National Bank building. In an interview with the Chicago Sun-Times, Taylor said, “It’s unfair that communities on the South Side do not get to preserve historic buildings like they do on the North Side.” (Ballesteros, Chicago Sun-Times, 3/31/19)

RECOMMENDATIONS

Preservation Chicago stands united with members of the Woodlawn and West Woodlawn communities in urging DL3 Realty to change its plans from demolition to adaptive reuse. The Washington Park National Bank building should be protected and we encourage a creative, community-oriented, preservation-sensitive redevelopment of the historic structure and its two elegant limestone facades.

The architectural and design firm of CallisonRTKL prepared renderings for Preservation Chicago which envision an adaptive reuse of the original four floors of the historic building, along with a two-story new addition atop the building to accommodate additional square footage. This scenario achieves comparable square footage to DL3’s design while retaining the historic facades of this important community asset. The renderings indicate 69,492 square feet of gross floor area and 59,555 square feet of leasable area. An experienced contractor familiar with adaptive reuse projects estimated the costs for both this alternative reuse proposal and new construction development to be in the range of \$15 to \$18 million.

The City of Chicago and elected officials should consider a designation of the building as a Chicago Landmark to enable access to additional incentives. If the building were to become a Chicago Landmark, it could be eligible for permit fee waivers, “Class L” tax incentives, and competitive Adopt-a-Landmark funds. The Illinois State Historic Preservation Office determined in March 2018 the Washington Park National Bank building is eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places, which creates opportunities for federal and state historic tax credits.

The Strand Hotel is a successful model for the transformation of a neglected historic building into a viable use. Holsten Development successfully converted the former Strand Hotel, located directly across the street from the Washington Park National Bank building, into a 44-unit residential building.

In recent years, Theaster Gates and the Rebuild Foundation transformed a long-vacant, endangered, historic bank building in Woodlawn into the highly successful, widely visible Stony Island Arts Bank. Other developers have recently creatively transformed the Old Main Post Office in downtown Chicago and the old Cook County Hospital into desirable adaptive reuse projects.

We are confident that DL3 Realty can reach a workable solution that avoids the destruction of this historic building and further diminishing the built environment of the Woodlawn community. Both profit and progress can be achieved through the restoration of this historic building to a greater degree than through demolition and new construction, especially when the cultural, historical and environmental impacts are considered.

Significant numbers of vacant land parcels exist adjacent to the Washington Park National Bank building, along 63rd Street and Cottage Grove Avenue and on other nearby streets that would be ideal for new construction infill development. Washington Park National Bank is an impressive, historic building that should be adaptively reused.

Preservation Chicago welcomes the opportunity to work with DL3 to achieve a profitable and preservation-sensitive outcome for the Washington Park National Bank building. We also look forward to working with the Cook County Land Bank Authority to consider a “Preservation First” analysis is implemented for other historic buildings which become available in the future.

The Woodlawn community expressed support for reuse and they deserve to have their history honored and protected. Preservation Chicago encourages DL3 Realty to honor the community’s preference while maximizing every tool and program to save and reuse this incredible historic building. Such a project would become an amazing and continuing asset for the Woodlawn community for decades to come.

Chicago 7: Washington Park National Bank



Existing Conditions of the Washington Park National Bank fronting Cottage Grove Avenue © Eric Allix Rogers

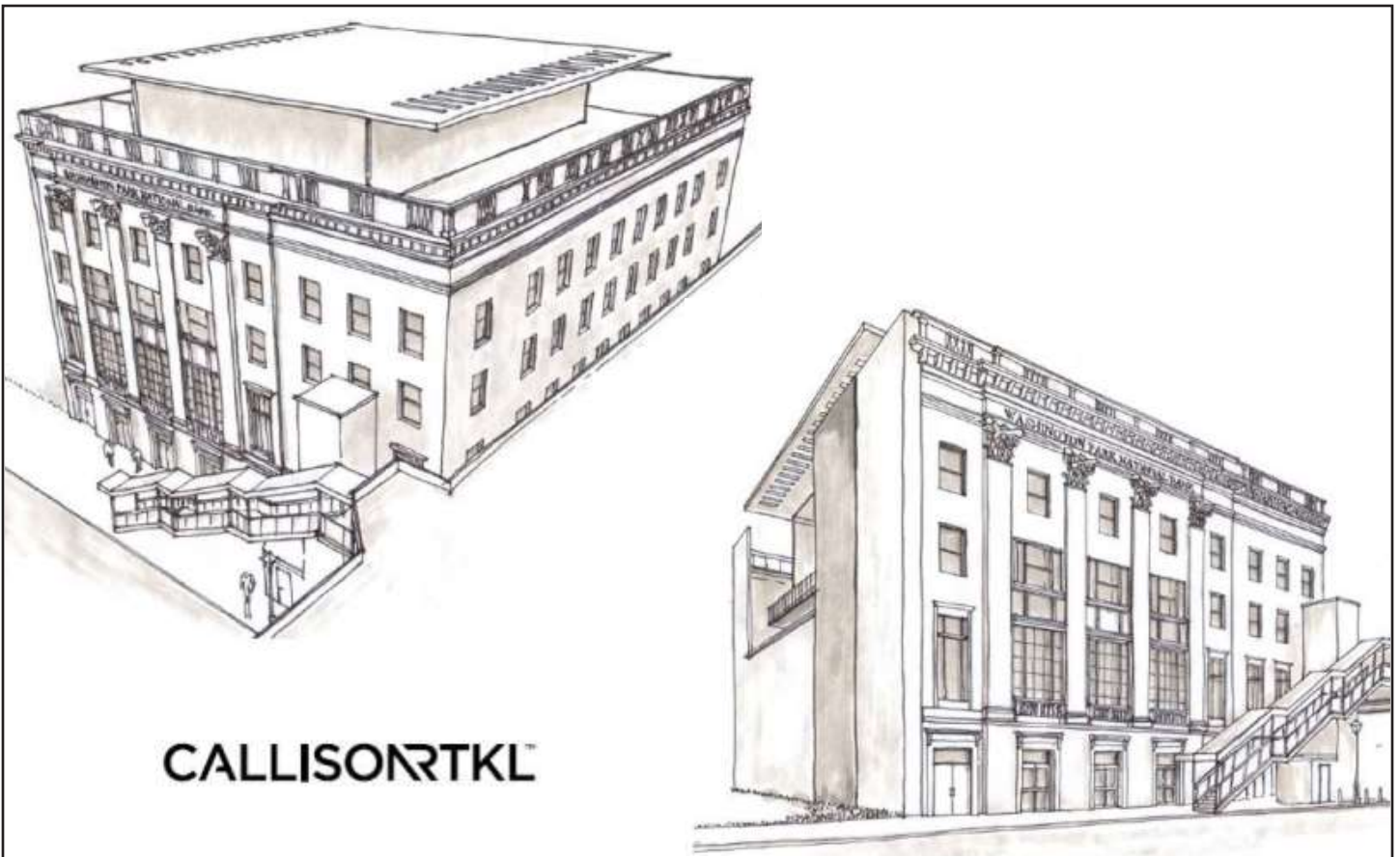


DL3' Realty's proposed new development for Washington Park National Bank site © DL3 Realty

Chicago 7: Washington Park National Bank



Preservation Chicago's alternate adaptive reuse development rendering for the Washington Park National Bank © CallisonRTKL Architects



Preservation Chicago's alternate adaptive reuse development rendering for the Washington Park National Bank © CallisonRTKL Architects