

North DuSable Lake Shore Drive

From Grand to Hollywood Avenues, Chicago



North DuSable Lake Shore Drive, c.1890 to c.1950, Nelson, Simonds, Burnham, Atwood, Bennett & Others, Photo Credit: Eric Allix Rogers

OVERVIEW

For the first decades of its existence, North DuSable Lake Shore Drive was a slow-paced, boulevard parkway that allowed Chicagoans to enjoy the ride along the Chicago Lakefront by horses or bikes and later by automobiles. The original design was strongly influenced by the City Beautiful movement. In fact, the original builders of the Drive were the Lincoln Park Commissioners who sought a pleasure drive to help people access and enjoy the expanded and improved Lincoln Park and lakeshore coastline. Graceful, curving, tree-lined boulevards along with the expanded parklands soon attracted beautiful new homes and buildings.

North DuSable Lake Shore Drive

Address: Chicago Lakefront from Grand to Hollywood Avenues

Architects: Nelson, Simonds, Burnham, Atwood, Bennett & Others

Date: c.1890 to c.1950

Style: Naturalistic/Romantic

Neighborhood: Chicago's North Lakefront



North DuSable Lake Shore Drive, c.1890 to c.1950, Nelson, Simonds, Burnham, Atwood, Bennett & Others, Photo Credit: Eric Allix Rogers

This pastoral, naturalistic quality witnessed major changes over time and was also impacted in the post-war era after President Dwight D. Eisenhower signed the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956. In the midst of the Cold War, many highways were created or envisioned, including in some cases existing streets improved to create a high-speed, high-capacity Interstate Highway System, to allow the rapid evacuation of cities and deployment of troops in the event of nuclear threats. The highway engineers had very different priorities than the parks commissioners which is reflected in post-war changes to DuSable Lake Shore Drive. The roadbed was widened, traffic speeds were increased, traffic lights and grade-crossings were removed, and highway-style on and off ramps were added. During the 1950s, highway engineers planned to formally convert the southern portion of the Drive into Interstate 494, but the project never advanced past the preliminary design stage. Traffic engineers continued to make incremental changes over the decades with the long-term goal of bringing the Drive up to interstate highway standards.

Today, North DuSable Lake Shore Drive's character is a unique blend of parkway and highway, a pleasure drive and interstate. However, this character will change dramatically if the proposed multi-billion-dollar construction project called "Redefine the Drive" is completed. Many years in the making, it's an incredibly complex plan with a wide variety of objectives. However, the core goals have been determined by the highway engineers who seek to increase traffic speeds, increase capacity, and increase safety. Interstate highway standards offer a clear path for how to achieve these goals.

Preservation Chicago strongly supports investment in infrastructure, increased green space, bike lanes, and expanded transit. Project renderings tend to focus on the enlarged and improved Lakefront parks, however this plan at its core, is a highway project. There is a concern that these more popular elements are being used to deflect criticism of a vast road project that is largely an effort to bring it up to interstate highway standards, and dramatically change the character of North DuSable Lake Shore Drive from its original Lakefront parkway intent.

To impose interstate highway standards on North DuSable Lake Shore Drive would fundamentally change the character of this important and historic parkway. Destroying the pastoral qualities, slower speed and meandering pleasure drive qualities of the roadway in order to increase the average traffic speed. In reality, this all will have

Chicago 7: North DuSable Lake Shore Drive



North Lake Shore Drive block, Chicago, IL, c.1885. J.W. Taylor, photographer. Historic Architecture and Landscape Image Collection, Ryerson and Burnham Art and Architecture Archives, Art Institute of Chicago. Digital file #19839

little impact, as the string of traffic lights at Grant Park near the Loop and further to the south of the project, will remain unchanged.

Preservation Chicago would like to encourage no widening to occur with the existing roadway or further incursions into Lincoln Park. We would like to encourage the existing historic Art Deco and other bridges, including the Passerelle Bridge, to be restored and not demolished. We would very much like to see the existing green medians, with their mature trees protected and maintained, along with huge sections of Lincoln Park, currently endangered. This plan is highly complex and robust public participation is essential for good outcomes. Sensitive plans, worthy of North DuSable Lake Shore Drive and the park and Lakefront that encompasses this historic and beautiful roadway are essential and necessary.

HISTORY

North DuSable Lake Shore Drive, like many other thoroughfares across Chicago, developed over many decades following the City's growth. Portions of Lake Shore Drive and the Outer Drive, as it was known until 2020, began in stages, with most of what was Lake Michigan's submerged lands being reclaimed from the Lake by Chicago in various phases of massive landfill projects.

In the early days of Chicago, Michigan Avenue, which itself has been refigured, both to the south and north, actually bordered the Lakefront and Lake Michigan's shoreline, hence its name. After the Chicago Fire of 1871, and continuing into the 1920s and 1930s, the development of Grant Park and what is now the Museum Campus in the



Outer Drive, Lincoln Park, Chicago, IL, c.1910. Henry Fuermann, photographer. Historic Architecture and Landscape Image Collection, Ryerson and Burnham Art and Architecture Archives, Art Institute of Chicago. Digital file #14601

Central Area led to broader landfills. This occurred with the expansion of the lakefront railroads, including the Illinois Central and others, and the City of Chicago's desire to expand the eastern sections of Grant Park. Similar landfill projects also occurred north of the Chicago River, adding land to the Near North Side and places such as Streeterville, which was a partially infilled sandbar, and extending northward, along the majority of the lakefront.

These grand and visionary expansions of North DuSable Lake Shore Drive and other infill projects were heavily influenced by Daniel Burnham and Edward Bennett's 1909 Plan of Chicago. After publication, the plan's beautiful renderings and visionary concepts inspired the City leaders and civic organizations which implemented these bold construction projects.

The unification of many different plans and conceptualizations together into one singular document proved transformative. These grand plans and big ideas linked both the South and North Sides of the City of Chicago together. They incorporated broad thoroughfares, and they were envisioned and planned with monumental and inspiring developments. This all occurred in a manner which would further enhance a growing American industrial city, thought to eventually be the largest city in the United States, noting Chicago's projected growth in the first decades of the 20th century.

Parts of what was to become Lake Shore Drive date to the city's earliest years, but the arrival of Potter Palmer, a city father, former retailer and wholesaler, investor and founder of the Palmer House Hotel, helped to further the street. In 1883, Palmer decided to move to the Near North Side and build a palace on the North Lakefront. Then known as Lincoln Parkway, in reference to President Lincoln and nearby Lincoln Park, named in his honor, Potter

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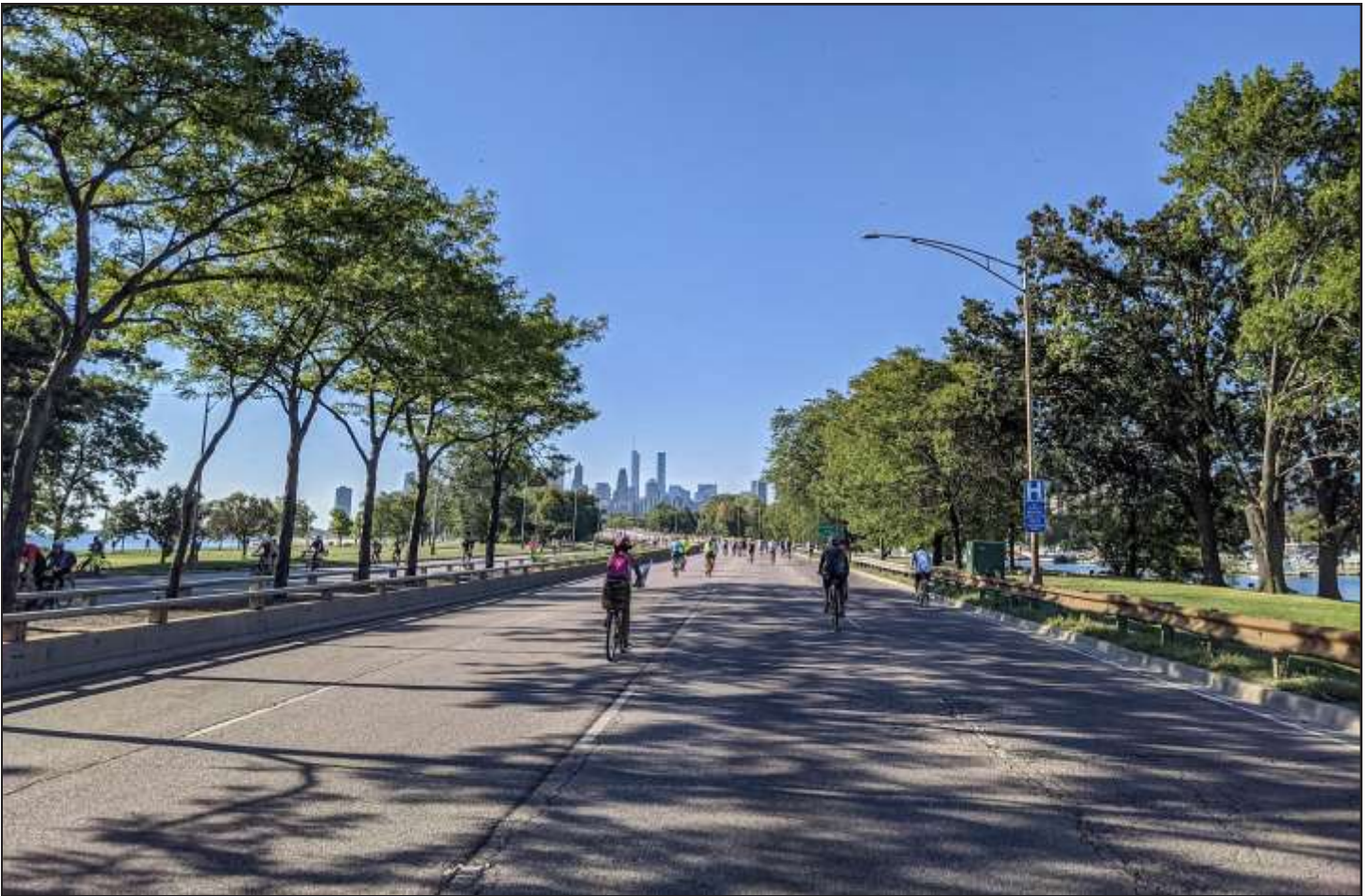
North DuSable Lake Shore Drive, c.1890 to c.1950, Nelson, Simonds, Burnham, Atwood, Bennett & Others, Photo Credit: Eric Allix Rogers

Palmer and his wife Bertha constructed a tremendous castle of a mansion designed by architects Cobb & Frost in an area that had few developments prior. This house, along with other nearby developments supported by Potter and Bertha Palmer, often designed by Charles M. Palmer (said to be no relation), really helped to establish what's known as the "inner drive" of North DuSable Lake Shore Drive, and what would come to be referred to as the Gold Coast Community of the Near North Side.

Over time, Lincoln Parkway, which connected to such streets as Stockton Drive, portions of Cannon Drive and Lincoln Park West, was revised to become Lake Shore Drive or Inner Lake Shore Drive, as it remains today.

Expansion of Lake Shore Drive, now DuSable Lake Shore Drive occurred, beginning in the 1920s and 1930s, with the creation of the Outer Drive, which was envisioned as more of a throughway and picturesque drive, allowing traffic to move at higher rates of speed. The more established Lake Shore Drive — the original carriageway, fronting many residences and later many tall buildings, continued to be referred to as Inner Lake Shore Drive or simply by an address on Lake Shore Drive. This expansion of an Inner and the creation of the Outer Drive, both sharing the same name, and interconnecting at many points, almost created two parallel streets with the same name. One being a more local street, serving residents and visitors, with the other being a boulevard drive, which over time has expanded to be perhaps one of the country's most scenic inner-city boulevard expressways.

The roadway continued to expand northward into the 1950s, absorbing additional lands to Hollywood Avenue, the current terminus. Despite these modifications, the boulevard-like design and overall character continues to be unique. North DuSable Lake Shore Drive continues to be both an expedient and efficient means to travel across the city on a beautiful and picturesque lakefront drive.



North DuSable Lake Shore Drive, c.1890 to c.1950, Nelson, Simonds, Burnham, Atwood, Bennett & Others, Photo Credit: Eric Allix Rogers

THREATS

In recent years, various City of Chicago agencies put together a project called “Redefine the Drive: North DuSable Lake Shore Drive,” with studies and proposals conducted by the Illinois Department of Transportation (IDOT) and the Chicago Department of Transportation (CDOT), which have been tasked with a rethinking of historic Lake Shore Drive. Examining various traffic studies, including Rush Hour congestion, in both the morning and evening hours, the team has worked to consider options toward the resolution of a host of issues.

The result has been a series of ideas which threaten the overall character of Lake Shore Drive, turning a boulevard drive into a superhighway, which will need to meet modern highway standards with such an update. The plans call for extensive landfill into Lake Michigan, tunneling large portions of Lake Shore Drive while also creating incursions into Lincoln Park. Also, many of the distinctive features—including historic bridges, vistas, underpasses and trees—will be removed for this massive project. A general straightening of the gentle curves, the rolling inclines and perspectives are all to be reconfigured and changed.

Preservation Chicago is of the opinion that many of these changes and modifications will dramatically impact and adversely affect the character of this world-renowned drive, making it resemble the Dan Ryan/Kennedy or Eisenhower Interstate highways. While this may not seem imaginable, just look no farther than to the past reconstructions of Lake Shore Drive, near McCormick Place and near the I-55 interchange, or another example at the former “S-Curve” extending from Randolph Street to Grand Avenue. These areas have been part of past revisioning projects and employ highway standards in their reconstruction which is very unfortunate for a Lakefront boulevard.



Foster Avenue Bridge on North DuSable Lake Shore Drive. Photo Credit: Serhii Chrucky

RECOMMENDATIONS

Preservation Chicago realizes the need for efficient transportation across our city. We also realize the need for repairs to many of our roadways and North DuSable Lake Shore Drive is no exception.

We therefore encourage all of the municipal agencies involved and their consultants to work together to preserve and repair the many special features of North DuSable Lake Shore Drive. This would include restoration and repair, in lieu of demolition of many of the bridges and underpasses. This was accomplished in a thoughtful way on South DuSable Lake Shore Drive at the Art Deco 47th Street Bridge and underpass, more than a decade ago. We encourage the City to maintain the many unique features, vistas, gentle curves and character of North DuSable Lake Shore Drive, keeping it more like a boulevard than a superhighway.

We also need to avoid the tunneling of DuSable Lake Shore Drive, as noted between Grand Avenue/Navy Pier and Walton Street, and also north of Belmont Avenue, which would create essentially a dry-river bed prone to flooding and other hazards. We are of the opinion that some of these proposed tunneling concepts and plans may lead to life-safety issues in the future.

In the past, the current Oak Street access to the express lanes of Lake Shore Drive have often become flooded, and we feel that a series of long and deeply-trenched tunnels anywhere near Lake Michigan is not a safe plan.



Lincoln Park Passerelle Pedestrian Bridge, 1940, Ralph H. Burke. Photo Credit: Serhii Chrucky

Pedestrian access does not necessarily need to occur at grade level, but a series of fine-quality bridges and safe and clean underpasses can be designed to alleviate such problems. We have seen snowstorms and floods impacting the Chicago lakefront and DuSable Lake Shore Drive over time, which have resulted in dangerous and hazardous conditions for motorists and pedestrians alike, along with closures. In some cases, these lakefront conditions and high winds, along with extreme precipitation, have placed individuals in perilous situations with some being in harm's way for more than hours on end.

We are also noting extensive incursions into the beautiful parklands and greenspaces of Lincoln Park, as well as the removal of the planted medians separating north and southbound traffic. Proposed plans to date would require the removal of thousands of trees along these medians and in Lincoln Park. We are also concerned about plans for buses to be stacked for long hours at locations like Belmont and Sheridan along North DuSable Lake Shore Drive and the impact on quality of life issues for nearby residents. This could substantially increase noise and carbon dioxide levels in certain areas where buses may idle for hours at a time.

The issues along North DuSable Lake Shore Drive are many. However, let's take a more sensitive and holistic approach to preserving and – where required or needed – rebuilding bridges and underpasses. Let us continue to maintain and honor those remarkable features that make traveling on North DuSable Lake Shore Drive, or adjacent to it, pleasurable experiences. After all, this is a very special boulevard drive and we should not squander its beauty and natural qualities nor its historic resources.