

Swift-Morris Mansion

4500 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago



Swift-Morris Mansion, 1892, Willett & Pashley, 4500 S. Michigan Avenue. Photo credit: Cristen Brown

OVERVIEW

The Swift-Morris Mansion at 4500 South Michigan Avenue stands as an echo of the South Side's Gilded Age "Millionaire's Row." A landmark of the Grand Boulevard community for over one hundred and thirty years, the house has gained further significance as the headquarters of local businesses and social service providers well into the twentieth century. The property was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1978, based on its architectural merits and association with prominent Chicago families. Mid-twentieth century signage at the corner of South Michigan Avenue and East 45th Street proudly advertises the house's distinction as the "Swift Mansion: A National and State Historical Landmark Site Built 1892".

Swift-Morris Mansion

Address: **4500 S. Michigan Avenue**

Architect: **James R. Willett & Alfred Pashley**
(attributed)

Date: **1892; c.1917 (coach house)**

Style: **Richardsonian Romanesque / Queen Anne**

Neighborhood: **Grand Boulevard**



December 3, 2023 fire at Swift-Morris Mansion, 1892, Willett & Pashley, 4500 S. Michigan Avenue. Photo credit: Chicago Fire Department Media

Indeed built in 1892, and attributed to local architecture firm Willett and Pashley, the house is associated primarily with its namesake and first resident, Helen Swift Morris and her extended family. After periodic use as a gathering space, funeral home, and insurance office, the property again became noteworthy for its role as the onetime home of the Cook County Bar Association and later, the Chicago Urban League, who occupied the house from 1964 to 1984 amid the height of the twentieth century civil rights movement. Since 1995, it has been owned and operated by Inner City Youth and Adult Foundation (ICYAF), a non-profit providing housing and transitional services to formerly incarcerated individuals.

Sadly, on December 3, 2023, the Swift-Morris Mansion was the site of an intense fire which badly damaged the upper floor, attic and roof. Local media reports at the time indicated suspicion of arson, although the Chicago Fire and Police Departments have not yet concluded their investigations. Fortunately, no individuals were harmed in the fire, and the property damage appears limited to the upper floors and roof. Much of the impressive oak paneling and carved ornament on the ground floor interior appears to remain intact.

HISTORY

Chicago's commercial and institutional elites began flocking to what was then the southern reaches of the city in the decades before the 1893 World Columbian Exposition. Beginning in 1874, the construction of tree lined thoroughfares became popular carriage routes for the city's wealthy who built grand architect-designed houses

Chicago 7: Swift-Morris Mansion



Swift-Morris Mansion, 1892, Willett & Pashley, 4500 S. Michigan Avenue. Image credit: Preservation Chicago Postcard Collection

along boulevards like Michigan and Drexel. The Swift-Morris Mansion is one of the most notable homes to survive later decades of demolitions and disinvestment.

Helen Swift's father, Gustavus F. Swift, oversaw the vast meatpacking empire of Swift & Company, one of Chicago's three primary meatpacking giants (alongside Morris & Company and Armour & Company). Swift is largely credited with revolutionizing the refrigerated rail car, enabling meat slaughtered and processed in Chicago to be efficiently distributed to urban centers on the East Coast and farther afield. Together, Swift and his competitors greatly contributed to Chicago's economic growth in the 19th century.

Gustavus Swift commissioned the house at 4500 S. Michigan Avenue as a wedding gift to his daughter, Helen, and new son-in-law, Edward Morris. Edward Morris hailed from the aforementioned Morris & Co. lineage, and their marriage represented an informal union of two of the city's most prominent business patrimonies. All three – Swift, Armour, and Morris – would later merge to create a monolithic enterprise. For most of its first four decades, the house was a luxurious residence, first for the extended Morris and Swift families; then the art collector John W. White; and later, longtime 19th Ward Alderman John Powers.

The house's design is attributed to Willett and Pashly by its 1978 National Register nomination form. The house displays elements of both the Richardsonian Romanesque and Queen Anne styles, with an exterior faced in rusticated gray stone, articulated dormer windows capped with conical hoods, and a covered stone front porch and large matching porte-cochère separated by a conical corner turret. The house displays a visual heaviness, and sculptural and irregular massing with minimal and simple ornamentation throughout. The house's architects, Willett and Pashly, are most often acclaimed for their work with the Catholic Archdiocese of Chicago, but also designed a handful of similarly grand homes throughout the city. According to staff of the Glessner House in a 2015 article on Swift-Morris Mansion, they suggests that the house's architects might have been influenced by Henry H. Richardson's much celebrated 1887 stone residence for the John J. Glessner family at 1800 S. Prairie Ave, as well as



Swift-Morris Mansion, 1892, Willett & Pashley, 4500 S. Michigan Avenue. Photo credit: Chicago Urban League headquarters (corner view), 4500 S. Michigan Avenue (at Grand Boulevard), Chicago Urban League Photos (University of Illinois at Chicago), Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago Library, CULR_04_0190_2160_002

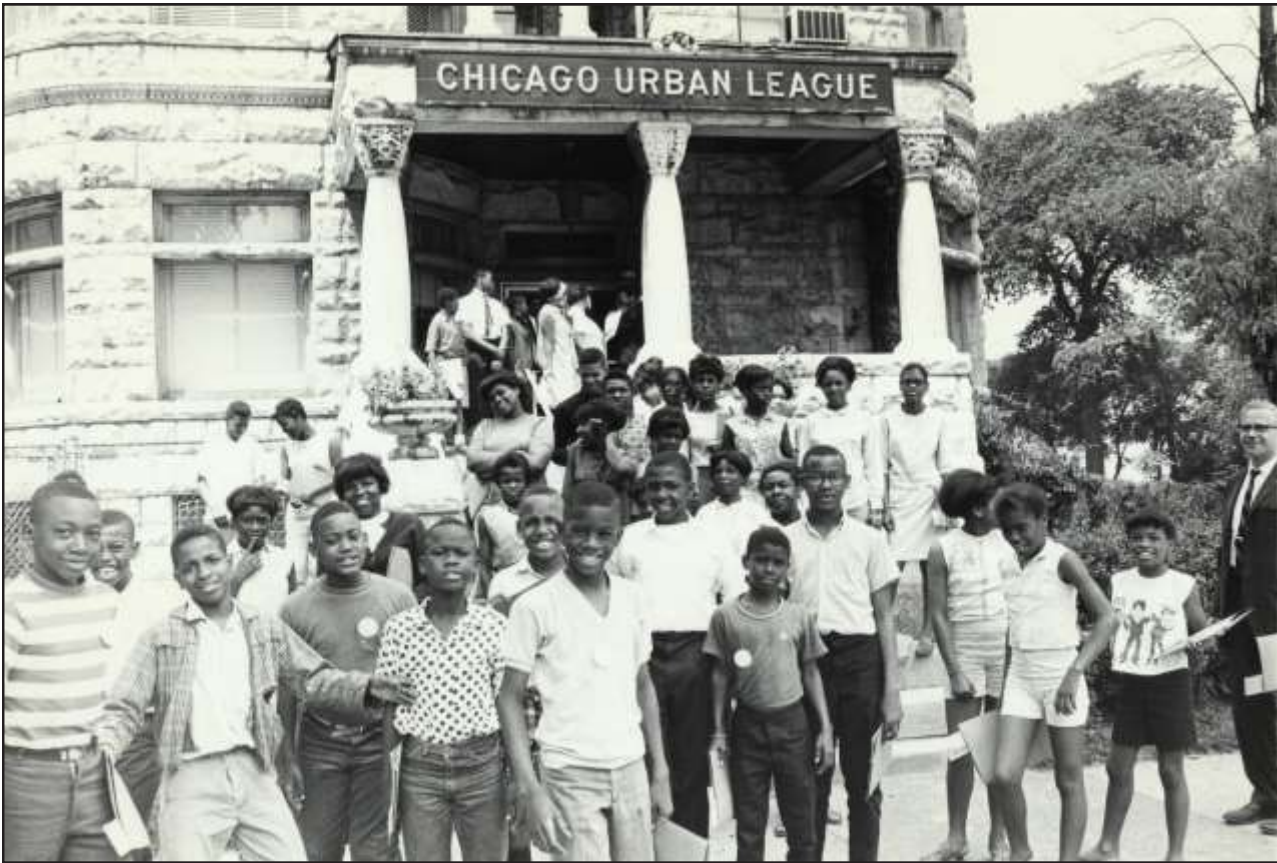
his since demolished 1885 Franklin MacVeagh House at Schiller and Lake Shore Drive.

At the close of the nineteenth century the house at 4500 S. Michigan Avenue was a appropriately bold yet austere design for the city's young and emerging elite, it is fitting that many passersby see it as a small "castle" given the building's legacy. As noted earlier, the Swift and Morris families represented two-thirds of Chicago's empiric meatpacking enterprise. Upon his death in 1913, Edward Morris left behind an estate estimated between \$20 and \$40 million. And even after the Swifts' time at the property, 4500 S. Michigan Avenue served as the primary residence of both a reclusive, yet wildly impressive art collector, John W. White, and an entrenched local politician, John Powers. The Swift-Morris Mansion is a site of power as much as it is an architectural treasure.

As the neighborhood around the Swift-Morris Mansion experienced rapid racial transition and evolved into a hub for Chicago's African American community, the building's role shifted from a single-family residence to serving commercial and family interests. The Cook County Bar Association established a lease at 4500 S. Michigan Avenue in 1927, and seem to have been the first non-owner tenant of the building. Formally established in 1914, the Cook County Bar Association was a group of young Black attorneys who sought to challenge discriminatory practices in their own judicial professions and Illinois' public sphere and schools. The organization continues to this day and operates out of offices in Avalon Park. Later tenants of 4500 S. Michigan included the McGavock Funeral Chapel, Selenia Garden, Bethel A.M.E. Church, and the offices of Unity Mutual Life insurance—all Black-led organizations.

Beginning in 1964, the property was wholly owned and operated by the Chicago Urban League. Like the Cook County Bar Association before them, the Urban League is a Black-led organization with origins dating to the early twentieth century. Since 1916, they have pursued a mission devoted to economic empowerment and equity of opportunity. The organization's tenure at 4500 S. Michigan coincides with their growing presence in Chicago's social service sector. Some of the Urban League's proudest organizational achievements took place in this building.

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Swift-Morris Mansion, 1892, Willett & Pashley, 4500 S. Michigan Avenue. Photo credit: Children at the Chicago Urban League headquarters (staircase view) and (sidewalk), 4500 S. Michigan Avenue (at Grand Boulevard), Chicago Urban League Photos (University of Illinois at Chicago), Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago Library, CULR_04_0207_2330_004 and CULR_04_0190_2160_004



Swift-Morris Mansion, 1892, Willett & Pashley, 4500 S. Michigan Avenue. Photo credit: Cristen Brown

The Chicago Urban League is still connected to the Swift Mansion, now as their neighbor in a commissioned four-story modern office building at 4510 S. Michigan Avenue that they have occupied since 1984. After a brief period of apparent vacancy, the Swift-Morris Mansion was purchased in 1995 by Maurice and Christine Perkins. The Perkins family remains the owner of record and have overseen the efforts of the Inner City Youth and Adult Foundation (ICYAF), a non-profit providing housing and transitional services to formerly incarcerated individuals.

THREAT

Despite periodic vacancy and semi-frequent changes in ownership, the Swift-Morris Mansion has nonetheless found multiple viable uses and persevered for well over a century. Prior to the December 2023 fire, the property's appearance was largely and remarkably unchanged. Composite roof materials were added sometime in the mid-twentieth century, in lieu of original slate, but otherwise its heavy stone exterior appears much the way it did at the time of its 1892 completion.

Media coverage, photographs, and drone footage of the recent fire, however, reveal extensive damage to the roof and upper floors. In the efforts to tame the fire, many of the upper floor windows were broken and the building suffered water damage. Most urgently, the roof experienced significant damage and needs to be sealed against the elements.

Despite its significant history, the Swift-Morris Mansion is not a locally designated Chicago Landmark. Its orange-rating on the Chicago Historic Resource Survey would only require a 90-day demolition delay, in the event that the current or a future owner sought a demolition permit. Furthermore, at the time of the fire it was suggested that the City of Chicago's Department of Buildings was conducting a structural report "to determine if the damage [was] bad enough to order the home demolished."

Another challenge facing the building is its location in Grand Boulevard, a neighborhood of the city that has contended with decades of disinvestment and extensive property vacancy. Any rehabilitation options may be perceived as cost-prohibitive.



December 3, 2023 fire at Swift-Morris Mansion, 1892, Willett & Pashley, 4500 S. Michigan Avenue. Photo credit: Chicago Fire Department Media

RECOMMENDATIONS

Preservation Chicago recommends the immediate stabilization of the Swift-Morris Mansion and the securing of its exterior envelope. These actions would minimize any further damage due to weather exposure successfully positioning the structure for eventual rehabilitation, if not full restoration. Despite the considerable resources required to bring the house back to its former glory, the building's stable, primarily stone structure can surely be reconfigured for residential, commercial, or mixed use.



Aftermath of the 2023 fire at the Swift-Morris Mansion, 1892, Willett & Pashley, 4500 S. Michigan Avenue. Photo credit: Debbie Mercer

The Swift-Morris Mansion is an undeniable landmark in a South Side community with few other surviving examples of its rich gilded age architecture. Its significance to Chicago's legacy of meatpacking and historic business magnates, alongside its multi-decade's role as a Black-led social service provider, make it a more than worthy recipient of the funding and sweat equity its restoration will require.



Swift-Morris Mansion, 1892, Willett & Pashley, 4500 S. Michigan Avenue. Photo credit: Debbie Mercer



Pre-fire interior lobby and stairs at Swift-Morris Mansion, 1892, Willett & Pashley, 4500 S. Michigan Avenue. Photo credit: Eric Allix Rogers

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Colonnade detail. Chicago Vocational School (CVS), 1941, John Christensen, 2100 E. 87th Street. Photo Credit: Max Chavez

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