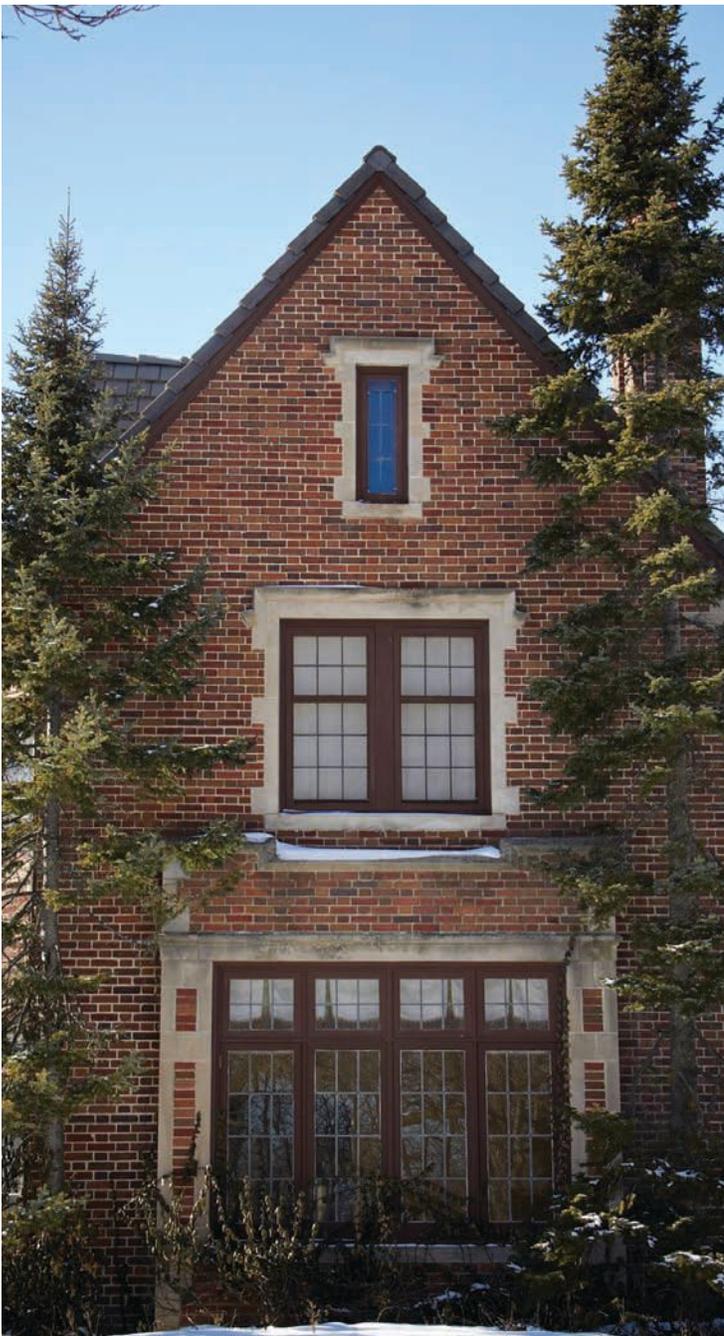


Milwaukee's Forgotten Architects

MANY NEIGHBORHOODS SHAPED BY DESIGNERS' PROLIFIC WORKS

BY JEFF BENTOFF | PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAN BISHOP



Milwaukee's Story Hill neighborhood was built primarily by the firm of George Schley & Sons. Son Perce was the primary architect.

Perce Schley: Story Hill, Newberry Boulevard and the North Shore

The names of historic Milwaukee architects Edward Townsend Mix, Alexander Eschweiler, Henry Koch, Frank Lloyd Wright and Ferry & Clas are well-known among local history and architecture buffs.

But with so many historic buildings across Milwaukee, perhaps it's inevitable that many early architects would end up largely forgotten. One such architect, whose impact today is bigger than his celebrity, was Perce Schley.

Schley worked in a successful design/build firm, George Schley & Sons, with his father and brother. By his own estimate, Perce Schley designed more than 1,600 homes and commercial buildings in the Milwaukee area from the 1910s to the 1970s.

You can see many of the homes built by the firm and largely designed by Schley on Milwaukee's West Side, Story Hill and East Side neighborhoods, and along Lake Drive from Milwaukee through the North Shore. Built in a mixture of styles, with solid craftsmanship, most of these attractive, well-designed homes and mansions endure, quietly contributing to the charm of Milwaukee neighborhoods.

"They're sort of under the radar of everyone," says Carlen Hatala, a city of Milwaukee historic preservation senior planner. "Maybe there was no one big flashy commission but they did build a heck of a lot of houses for the upper-middle-class and upper-income clientele."

"And they're very livable houses," says Hatala, who has resided in a 1920 Schley house in Story Hill for 21 years.

Company founder George Schley was born in Waukesha County in 1868. In 1904, he formed his own home-building company, constructing about 30 houses on spec on Milwaukee's West Side during several years. The house designs came from stock plans that he purchased or that were supplied by contractors.

Schley's business began to blossom a few years later as he expanded the firm in 1914 to include his son, Herbert, to handle real estate, and Perce, to design homes. The firm was eventually reborn as George Schley & Sons.

Perce Schley, born in 1891, graduated from Milwaukee's West Side High School and earned a civil engineering degree in 1914 from UW-Madison. He later received American Institute of Architects credentials, becoming the designer of most future Schley projects.

The new firm quickly began to build its business up as it built and designed many of the first homes in the new Story Hill neighborhood from 1911 to 1920. Story Hill was built on former farmland owned by the Story family, with the initial phase between West Wisconsin Avenue, West Blue Mound Road, North 51st Street and the Miller Valley.

The business association between the Schley and Story families paralleled a more personal interfamilial union — Perce and one of the Story daughters, Natalie, married in 1915, having met years earlier at a high school party.

The firm's work in Story Hill, which for first time included Perce Schley's designs, produced better homes than George Schley built earlier in his career on the West Side, Hatala says. The improved quality was possible because in this highly desirable new neighborhood, the Schleys "were able to cultivate a more upper-middle class and wealthier clientele. Story Hill was a cut above a working-class neighborhood," Hatala says.

Dan Schley, a grandson of Perce Schley, says, that in Story Hill, the firm consciously built spec homes in a variety of styles.

"He was very market-driven," Dan Schley says of Perce. "Do English sell better than Colonial? Or is a bungalow more popular?" They were looking for what worked. That's why there are so many housing styles in Story Hill."

Around the same time, George Schley & Sons began to build bigger and more expensive homes on the East Side. These included multiple houses on East Newberry Boulevard and North Hackett Avenue. On the 2600 block of North Lake Drive alone, the Schleys built six homes on spec from 1924 to 1927.

Schley homes were built in many area communities, including Shorewood, Whitefish Bay, Fox Point, Bayside, Mequon and River Hills, and in Waukesha County. Styles included Tudor, Mediterranean, Craftsman and Classical Revival, and in later years, sprawling ranch homes.

Many of these homes were mansions and estates, including some of the more than 100 houses built north of Milwaukee's Lake Park along Lake Drive as it winds through the North Shore.

The last home designed by Perce Schley was built for his daughter, Sally, and her husband in 1973 on Pine Lake in Chenequa. He died in 1980.

Dan Schley, who grew up in a Perce Schley-designed home in Bayside, says the firm had "a huge impact on what Milwaukee looks like. It was an era when homes were designed and built by architects rather than builders using stock plans. It gives a personal nature to the city."



Architect Max Fernekes worked in a variety of styles on Milwaukee's East Side, including this home in the North Point Historic District.

Max Fernekes, the Elder: Historic East Side

Milwaukee architect Max Fernekes designed about two dozen stately East Side mansions and homes in the early 1900s. Yet despite designing beautiful homes that still grace the city today, Max is less known than his son, also named Max Fernekes.

The elder Fernekes was born in Milwaukee in the late 1800s and established his own architectural practice in 1895 with J. Walter Dolliver. The firm designed several East Side homes but was best known for the 1897 Classical Revival Fred Pabst Jr. mansion on West Highland Boulevard on the West Side that he designed for an old school friend, who happened to be son of Pabst Brewery founder Frederick Pabst.

In 1900, Fernekes started a firm with partner Edwin C. Cramer. Before the partnership dissolved around 1919, the firm designed nearly 20 impressive homes that are integral to the fabric of today's historically preserved East Side.

The styles of these homes include Colonial Revival, Early Georgian, Tudor, Eclectic and English-Inspired. Many prominent Fernekes & Cramer homes can be found today on East Newberry Boulevard, North Hackett Avenue, North Summit Avenue, North Terrace Avenue, East Linwood Avenue, North Marietta Avenue and North Lake Drive.

Fernekes & Cramer also designed several downtown Milwaukee commercial buildings, including the eight-story, terra cotta /brick/ reinforced concrete Merchant's & Manufacturer's Building, 740 N. Plankinton. Today, the building is home of the Rock Bottom Brewery.

While Fernekes and his partners' names are not commonly remembered, his son is relatively well-known for etchings and watercolor painting. As a young man during the Depression in Milwaukee, the younger Max Fernekes and other struggling artists hung paintings on clotheslines around the fountain in the park now known as Cathedral Square, selling their artwork for \$1 or more. He later relocated to Mineral Point, Wis., the first artist to move to the community. His paintings are available for purchase, and some are in the collection of the Museum of Wisconsin Art in West Bend.

Much of his work was inspired by the small town and rural character of Mineral Point and Door County. But one painting shows his Milwaukee roots and perhaps is a homage to his father — it's a painting of the Pabst Building, a since-demolished downtown Milwaukee landmark that once housed the Fernekes & Cramer architectural firm.



Before moving to Pasadena, Calif., where he went on to become a renowned architect, Elmer Grey designed numerous buildings in Milwaukee, including this East Side home.



Elmer Grey: Before Pasadena, Milwaukee

When architectural historian Chris Szczesny-Adams and her husband were buying an 1899 home on Milwaukee's East Side, she called her dissertation adviser to see if he knew of its architect, Elmer Grey. "You mean Elmer Grey of Pasadena?" Szczesny-Adams recalls him saying. "From then on, I knew I had found something that was going to be very interesting."

One fact she quickly learned: Before being known as Elmer Grey of Pasadena, he was Elmer Grey of Milwaukee.

Not much recalled in Milwaukee today, Grey has long been regarded as a star architect in California. Starting in the early 1900s, he designed important Southern California landmarks and English Tudor, Beaux Arts and Craftsman Spanish Colonial homes for starlets and businessmen in that state. His California homes are highly prized today and sell for millions.

Born in 1872 in Chicago, Grey moved to Milwaukee, attended public schools here and worked for nine years as a young apprentice at the local Alfred C. Clas and Ferry and Clas architectural firms. During that time, he helped design the Milwaukee Public Library and the Wisconsin State Historical Society Library in Madison.

Grey started his own practice in 1898 in Milwaukee. One of his first works was his own Newport Shingle-style summer home in Fox Point overlooking Lake Michigan. The highly praised design resulted in his becoming, at a very young age, an American Institute of Architects fellow.

Grey moved to Pasadena in 1904, initially forming a firm with Myron Hunt and then starting a long-enduring solo practice in 1910. Grey, singly or with Hunt, designed

many notable southern California landmarks, including the Beverly Hills Hotel, the Huntington Art Gallery (originally the home of Henry E. Huntington) and the Pasadena Playhouse. During his career, Grey designed about 150 prominent homes, churches, hotels and other buildings in California and elsewhere. He died in 1963 at age 91 in the Pasadena mansion he designed for himself.

Among Grey's Milwaukee gems are his Fox Bay home (now on East Thorne Lane), Milwaukee's Sixth Church of Christ, Scientist, on North Van Buren Street and several noteworthy large East Side houses. These include his first solo commission — Szczesny-Adams' 4,100-square-foot home on East Kenwood Boulevard near UW-Milwaukee, which was featured in a 1901 issue of *House Beautiful*.

Grey's anonymity in Milwaukee may not last long. Szczesny-Adams has been researching Grey and plans to publish her results online and in other media.

Jeff Bentoff owns the public relations firm Bentoff Communications. He is the author of "Just The Facts: The 100-Year History of Milwaukee's Public Policy Forum." He writes about East Side history on the Historic Water Tower Neighborhood website. He and his wife have lived in a Schley home since 1998. M



Grey designed the iconic Beverly Hills Hotel in the Mediterranean Revival style.

Milwaukee's Sixth Church of Christ, Scientist, 1036 N. Van Buren St., built in 1902, is among Grey's works.