

# Hyde Park History

VOL. 30 NO. 3

Published by the Hyde Park Historical Society

SUMMER 2008

## John Dunham's Madison Park

By Charlotte and John Schuerman

**H**aving lived in our old Kenwood house for 35 years, we became interested in learning about its history. Our quest was only partially successful, but along the way, we found out about the history of the area around it and about John Dunham, the controversial and irascible founder of Madison Park. We begin this article with Dunham and then talk about our house at the end of this article.

John H. Dunham was born May 28, 1817 in Seneca County, New York and came to Chicago in the early 1840s from his childhood home in Waterloo, New York, working first in the wholesale grocery business.<sup>1</sup> His biography in *Chicago and Its Makers*<sup>2</sup> describes him as a prominent member of the Board of Trade and one of the organizers in 1857 of the Merchants' Savings Loan and Trust Company bank. He was active in community affairs, a strong supporter of the Chicago Historical Society and various not-for-profit organizations and served a term in the state legislature. Dunham was one of the founders of the Republican Party of Illinois and an acquaintance of Abraham Lincoln.

In 1868 Dunham paid \$4500 for twenty acres of land between Fiftieth and Fifty-first Streets from what is now Woodlawn to Blackstone Avenues in Hyde Park, then a suburb of Chicago, purchasing the land from the receiver of the defunct Marine Bank. At the time, what is now Dorchester was called Madison Avenue, Blackstone was Washington, and Harper was Jefferson. Woodlawn was named as it is now. Later Dunham purchased an additional twenty acres just north, from Woodlawn to Blackstone and from Forty-ninth to Fiftieth. He subdivided the original twenty acres as Dunham's



John H. Dunham

Subdivision in 1869, laying out Madison Park as we know it now, with an oval drive between Woodlawn and Dorchester Avenues enclosing a private park for the owners of the lots facing it. The lots on both sides of Madison Park and on the south side of 50th Street were 25 feet wide by 150 feet deep.

Dunham incurred the wrath of his neighbors on many occasions over his plans for the property. He took great offense at this, frequently threatening lawsuits and sometimes making good on those threats. In its 1876 edition, the *Chicago Daily Tribune*<sup>3</sup> reported a lawsuit by Dunham against the village of Hyde Park because it had condemned part of his land to widen 51st Street. The suit was settled with an agreement that the village would take only nine feet (rather than the original 17 feet) and would pay Dunham \$8,000. In 1891 Dunham was back in court over a similar issue, this time suing the city of Chicago (which had annexed Hyde Park in 1889). Dunham wanted to keep the city from condemning another eight feet to widen ➤②

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◀❶ 51st Street. Further, he claimed that Hyde Park had never given him the \$8,000, and he wanted that, plus interest, from Chicago. We have been unable to determine the outcome of this lawsuit.

Dunham annoyed Paul Cornell, the founder of Hyde Park, by specifying that the houses on the south side of Madison Park face the park, rather than 51st Street. Cornell owned land south of 51st Street that would have to face the back sides of those houses. A number of prominent men in Chicago were building elegant residences in the area, some of them on the west side of Woodlawn between 49th and 50th Streets, facing Dunham's northern tract. Most prominent were houses built by A. G. Spaulding, baseball magnate and founder of the Spaulding sporting goods company, and Judge Van H. Higgins. These individuals, along with Paul Cornell, wanted to extend Kimbark and Kenwood Avenues through Madison Park, a move that would have altered Dunham's plans considerably. Rather than plead for the esthetics of his plan for Madison Park, Dunham said extending the streets would mean more assessments and taxes and, according to the *Chicago Daily Tribune* of August 21, 1891, "he was only a poor millionaire with a family to support."<sup>4</sup> He built a greenhouse on 50th Street in the path of one of the proposed streets. The *Chicago Daily Tribune* of July 31, 1890, under a subhead "The Feud Between J.H. Dunham and His Neighbors Goes Merrily On" says that he had built "half a dozen rough one-story pine cottages at the Fiftieth street end of his tract. They were dreadful looking objects and cost about \$500 each."<sup>5</sup> He threatened to build more such cottages on Woodlawn facing his up-scale neighbors and to "import a colony of [N]egroes." Some later accounts of the events suggest more beneficent motives on the part of Dunham: that he was building needed housing for workingmen.

The *Chicago Daily Tribune* of August 21, 1891 reported that Dunham had built three ugly barns on 51st Street, close to Dorchester, which were used for dwellings. These properties were vandalized on several occasions, with suspicion centering on local property holders. Dunham proceeded to erect a seven foot "spite fence" on 51st to protect his property, further aggravating the neighbors. The following interchange, reported in the *Tribune*, exemplifies tension between neighbors:

*"I wouldn't trouble myself about the shanties," said a Kenwood lady to Mr. Spaulding recently. "They are not permanent."*

*"Well, I'm not permanent myself, madam," replied the baseball magnate.<sup>5</sup>*

Apparently part of the source of the most recent dispute was that Judge Higgins had gotten the city council to pass an ordinance requiring the property owners on Woodlawn to pay for sidewalks on both sides of the street and Dunham had to pay for his side. Whatever his motives, Dunham appears to have gotten the best of his dispute with his neighbors. He did not live on his property in Hyde Park, instead residing on Michigan Avenue, where he also caused trouble—his house there created an obstacle preventing the Congress Hotel from expanding. He died April 28, 1893, specifying in his will that his property should not be sold until the death of the last of his heirs. He is buried in the family plot at Graceland Cemetery. At the time of his death his estate was valued at \$1,510,000, real estate comprising all but \$10,000 of this total.<sup>6</sup> Heirs included his wife, Elizabeth (Hills), and two daughters, Helen (Lizzie) who married Judge Kirk Hawes, and Mary Virginia who remained unmarried until her death in 1928.

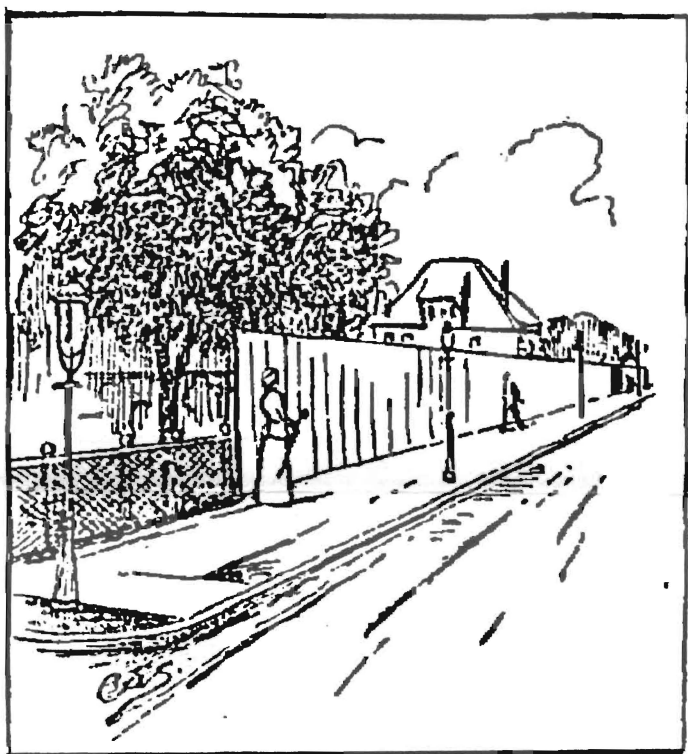
#### *Farmer's Field*

A 10-acre plot of land between Dorchester and Kimbark Avenues and 49th to 50th Streets was known to local residents as Dunham's cow pasture. Dunham planned to build a number of small cheap houses on the property to rent to working men. Due to strong opposition from wealthy neighbors, the plan had to be dropped. Dunham was not one to give in easily to public pressure and was determined to keep the land as a "farm and cow pasture to the discomfiture of the neighbors."<sup>7</sup> As mentioned above, his will stipulated that the land not be sold until his last heir died. This tied up the property for thirty-five years. The death of Dunham's daughter, Mary Virginia, in 1928 opened the door for development. Developers were very interested in the land and one plan included a 10 million dollar luxury apartment building.<sup>8</sup> By the time the negotiations got underway the building boom was over. Ultimately there was only one bidder, Albert W. Harris of the Harris Trust and Savings bank. Harris owned a home adjacent to the land and gave the property as a gift to the school board on the condition that it be maintained as a playground. The school board did not abide by the terms of the deed and ultimately it was turned over to the city to be maintained by the Bureau of Parks.<sup>9</sup> Today, although officially "Kenwood Park,"

is affectionately called "Farmer's Field" by local residents.

#### *Apartments on 51st street*

Contrary to Dunham's will, a few sales of his property were recorded prior to Mary Virginia's death in 1928. The last remnants of the "spite fence" were removed in 1917 with the sale of 600 feet of frontage on Hyde Park Boulevard.<sup>10</sup> John Carroll purchased the property from Florence D.



The Fence on 51st Street

(Hawes) Chivers, John Dunham's granddaughter and wife of Arthur J. Chivers, with the intent to sell to builders for the development of high grade apartment buildings. With that sale, the stipulation that all improvements face the park was dropped. Buildings could now face both Madison Park and Hyde Park Boulevard.<sup>11</sup>

#### *50th Street*

Between 1890 and 1895 the landscape on 50th Street changed. The annexation in 1889 of Hyde Park to Chicago, the Columbian Exposition in 1893, and the establishment of the University of Chicago in 1892 provided a stimulus for rapid growth during the period of 1890-1910. The 1895 Sanborn fire map shows 16 new brick two-story

connected houses in two separate groups on 50th Street.<sup>12</sup> Eight of these houses had stone fronts and eight did not. All had basements. The 1894 *Chicago Blue Book*, a directory listing socially prominent residents, contained the names of 19 individuals on 50th Street. It appears that many of these residents lived on Fiftieth Street for two years or less, only two individuals were in both the 1894 and 1897 editions. Several of the residents had moved to homes in other parts of Kenwood. The 1925 Sanborn fire map shows most of the buildings found today in Madison Park and on Fiftieth Street. The architects for these buildings included George Williams, Morrison and Fuller, and William Pruyn.<sup>13</sup>

#### *1229 E. 50th Street*

Our house at 1229 East 50th Street (the original street number was 200) occupies plots 38 and 39 of Dunham's Subdivision. It is a frame house with Eastlake details, steep gables, decorated bargeboard, a tall decorative chimney, and stick style framing.<sup>14</sup> It contains a great deal of oak woodwork, including an elaborate staircase in the entrance hall and wainscoting in the dining room. Large passageways into the parlors can be closed off with decorative oak pocket doors. The newel posts on the staircase have carved lilies and other decorative motifs. In the dining room are three clear glass windows extending to the floor. Above the windows are colored glass windows with hand-painted glass roundels of painted birds, fruit, and fish. The house originally had a large front porch across the front, and there is a brick basement. The exterior is clad by narrow four-inch clapboards with detailing (many of the detailed clapboards have been replaced with ordinary four inch stock). The house is painted grey with black trim. We do not know its original color.

We have made great efforts to track the history of this house and remain baffled by certain problems regarding its origin. We believe that it dates back to the 1880s, given its character and its construction (for example, it has framing in the original dimensions, 2 x 6 lumber is 2 inches by 6 inches), evidence of gas lights, and heating from fireplaces. Grates in the floor allow upstairs rooms to receive heat from the first floor. In *Hyde Park Houses*,<sup>15</sup> Jean Block dates the house to before 1890. But there are inconsistencies in the record. The 1895 Sanborn fire map does not show a house at this location.<sup>16</sup> In addition, the first recording of an action concerning this property is from 1901, when a permit was issued for a basement. Also, ➤ 4

◀③ we find no record of anyone living at this address in early Chicago *Bluebooks* or *Hyde Park Directories*. It is possible that the present house was moved to this location from someplace else, as often happened in those days. Unfortunately, records of building permits of this period have been lost.

Although we have been unable to definitively track the origins of our house, we will continue to enjoy it, as we have for the past 35 years. **HPH**

*We appreciate the assistance of staff at Special Collections and the Map Department of the University of Chicago Library, the Chicago History Museum, the Ryerson and Burnham Libraries of the Art Institute of Chicago, and the Map Department of the University of Illinois, Urbana in locating materials.*

Charlotte Schuerman may be reached at  
ckschuerman1@yahoo.com

<sup>1</sup> Josiah S. Currey, *Chicago: Its History and Its Builders*. Chicago: S. J. Clark Publishing Co., 1912, v. 4, pp. 240-45, 1912.

<sup>2</sup> Paul T. Gilbert and Charles L. Bryson, *Chicago and Its Makers*.

Chicago: F. Mendelsohn, 1929. See also *America's Successful Men of Affairs*. volume 2, Henry Hall, ed., New York: The New York Tribune, 1896, p. 266-67.

<sup>3</sup> "The Courts" column, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, March 10, 1876. Old issues of the *Chicago Daily Tribune* may be accessed through ProQuest.

<sup>4</sup> "Hyde Park's Fence War," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, August 21, 1891.

<sup>5</sup> "Ibid." *Chicago Daily Tribune*, August 21, 1891.

<sup>6</sup> "Will of John H. Dunham," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, May 11, 1893.

<sup>7</sup> "Children Play on City Farm Worth Millions," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Sept. 2, 1951.

<sup>8</sup> "Dunham's Cow Pasture May be Apartments," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, April 3, 1930.

<sup>9</sup> "Children Play on City Farm Worth Millions," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Sept. 2, 1951.

<sup>10</sup> "Apartments to be Erected on Dunham Tract," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, March 25, 1917.

<sup>11</sup> "Old Board Fence on Boulevard to be Torn Down," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, April 8, 1917.

<sup>12</sup> Most of the Sanborn fire maps may be found at the Chicago History Museum. They were developed for insurance purposes.

<sup>13</sup> Jean Block, *Hyde Park Houses*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978, pp. 137-38 quoting *American Contractor*, *Construction News* and *Chicago Historic Resources Survey*, City of Chicago, Department of Planning and Development, 1986 and 1992.

<sup>14</sup> See the *Chicago Historic Resources Survey*, 1986 and 1992.

The *National Builder* describes some of the architectural features of the house, see "Details in Building," August 1887. See also Carl F. Schmidt, *The Victorian Era in the United States*. Scottsville, NY: Author, 1971 and James C. Massey and Shirley Maxwell, *House Styles in America*. New York: Penguin Studio, 1996.

<sup>15</sup> Block, *Hyde Park Houses*, pp. 39, 137.

<sup>16</sup> This Sanborn map (1895, volume 14, sheets 73 and 74) is at the Map Department of the University of Illinois, Urbana.

## Republicans in Hyde Park

After the Civil War, Hyde Park officials and the community at large made no secret of their adherence to the Republican Party in state and national elections. Republicanism meant a good deal to Hyde Parkers' self-image in the 1860s, for it gave them national pretensions... Hyde Park's Republican consensus was graphically demonstrated time and time again at the polls. Ninety percent of the town's voters cast their ballots for Lincoln in 1864, and 97 percent chose Republican candidates in the 1866 election, making Hyde Park the most Republican community in Cook County in the mid-sixties.

*Hyde Park History, Hyde Park Politics: 1861-1919*, Hyde Park Historical Society, No. 2, 1980.

## Contributions Honor Alice Schlessinger

The following people have generously contributed to the Hyde Park Historical Society in honor of Alice Schlessinger, who passed away on January 7, 2008.

Peg Anderson  
Ann Becker & David Muschler  
Howard, Phyllis, Lauren & Dana Cohn  
Charles A. Dale  
Judith A. Derain  
Nick DiGiovanni  
Mary Jo & William Fairbanks  
Ethel Goldsmith  
Edward & Stacey Hamburg  
Mr. & Mrs. Steve Hanauer  
Michael Levy  
Paulette Lieb  
Adam & Debra Natenshon  
Rita & Kitty Picken  
Juliette Richman  
Matthew & Gail Smith  
Nikki Stein  
T. A. Warshell  
Neurine E. Wiggin  
Mary Wilcox & Catherine Wertjes



# The Speakeasy

By Bert Benade

This is a story about Hyde Park, a couple of its interesting citizens, and Prohibition.

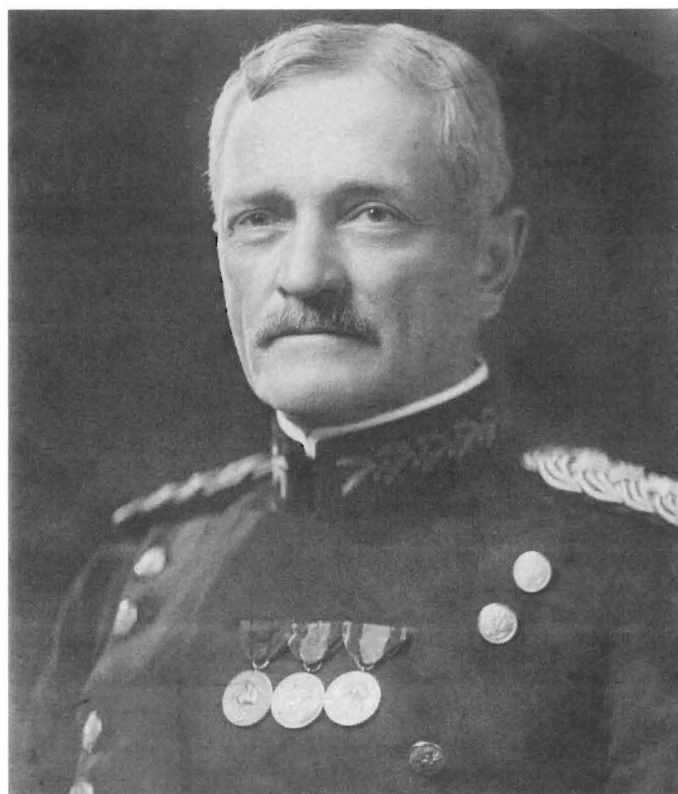
A few years ago Charles Beck, a long retired doctor in his 90's and fellow volunteer at the Museum of Science and Industry, came up to me and said, "You're with the Hyde Park Historical Society, aren't you?" When I answered affirmatively, he asked if I knew who John Pershing was. I said he was the first U. S. five-star general and that his parents were buried in Oak Woods Cemetery. Charles said I was the person who needed to hear this story.

When he finished I encouraged him to write it up for our Society's Newsletter. He agreed to, but I couldn't get him to act. One day, after I had pestered him several times he said he'd give me a tape to transcribe. When I listened to it I realized it had been done quickly, almost in telegraph-eze. So the following recital is a mix of the tape and what he had told me earlier. Charles passed on a little while ago so this story is written in his memory.

In 1930 or 1931, when Charles was a teenager of 16 or 17, his parents bought a house on South Cornell Avenue (at 5242, I believe). The house was up against the Illinois Central Railroad embankment. They bought it from the estate of the senior Pershings. Being curious about his new home, Charles went on his own tour of the three-story house and became interested in the circular tower with a cupola at the house's southwest corner. When he got to the basement and looked into the room under the tower, he was puzzled. The room was lined with wooden, crisscrossed racks obviously meant for wine bottles, except for one area, which had a water valve handle in the middle of a blank section of the wall. When he looked at the ceiling he saw it had an old style galvanized showerhead hanging down. Having a young boy's curiosity, he started to open the valve gingerly. Nothing happened, so he kept on turning the handle. Suddenly the blank wall started swinging out on one side. He couldn't see into the cavity where the wall had been, so went upstairs to find a flashlight.

While rummaging around, his mother asked what he was doing, so the two of them went to the room, flashlight in hand. All they could see was a jagged hole leading to a tunnel. The tunnel seemed to head west under the Illinois Central embankment. It was full of cobwebs and had very rough sides, so Charles's mother forbade him to look any further.

At this point I'll stop the story to remind the reader



General John "Black Jack" Pershing, undated U. S. Army photo

that until urban renewal and well after Prohibition, Lake Park Avenue between 47th and 55th Streets was well west of the railroad embankment. On the west side of Lake Park Avenue was the Blackstone Library and on the east at about 49th Street was the Harding Museum. South of the museum was a row of three-story apartments with stores at street level. Among those stores were bars, the local police station, the original Morton's Steakhouse, the first venue of the Compass Players, and the original Valois Restaurant.

Now back to the story.

You must understand that at the time of this account, prohibition was in full swing and people who wanted to drink privately had problems carrying booze home. People like the Pershings went to great lengths to hide their activities. So it seems that the Pershings had worked out a deal with the established speakeasy on the west side of the embankment, which as luck would have it was immediately across from the Pershing home. They had a tunnel dug between their liquor storage room and had a door built into the basement of the speakeasy. No one could see them bringing alcohol home.

When I told this story to Len Despres, he said at that time he had known five or six speakeasies in our community. I had the diplomacy not to ask if he had been a patron of any of them. ➤⑥

## ◀ 5 Correction and addenda

It turns out that there is more to this tale than young Charles was aware of. It turns out that the Pershing Seniors may have owned the house with the tunnel, but they probably never lived in it. Their home was over the dry goods/clothing store they owned on the south side of 53rd Street, between Kenwood and Kimbark Avenues where Nichols Park faces 53rd Street today. It was almost directly across from the YMCA, where the General's father was involved in programs, both in his home and at the Y.

At least two of the General's siblings attended the University of Chicago, and one of his brothers is buried with the senior Pershings at Oak Woods Cemetery.

So it turns out that Charles Beck's story needs an answer for who built the tunnel. It raises interesting questions about the Pershing family and their role in our community. **HPH**

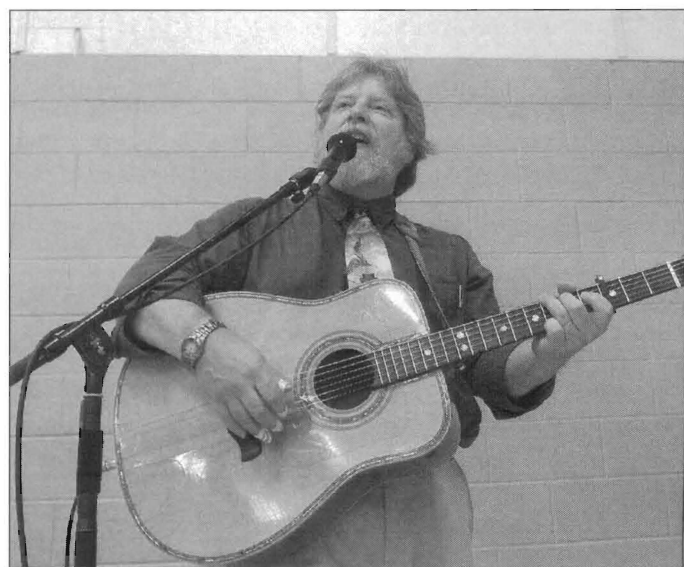
## Archives Committee Activities

Archives Committee Chairman Michal Safar reports the following Committee activities:

1. The Special Collections Research Center of the University of Chicago has picked up remaining materials from both the Hyde Park Cooperative Society and from Nancy Hays' apartment. Additional materials related to the Co-op are now being sought from former Co-op board members.

2. Committee members Mark Mandle and Doug Anderson are eager to begin work on the Society's Oral History Project and are looking for suggestions for people to interview. More information can be provided by contacting Michal Safar at (773) 752-4412 or [msafar@ameritech.net](mailto:msafar@ameritech.net).

3. Rebecca Graff of the University of Chicago's Department of Anthropology has begun excavating sites in Jackson Park that may hold artifacts from the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition. Old utility conduits, and fragments of metal, glass, and pottery have already been identified.



Lee Murdock sings songs of the Great Lakes and by Henry Clay Work at the Hyde Park Neighborhood Club, April 13, 2008.

MARC MONAGHAN / HYDE PARK HERALD

## Volunteers Needed

The Hyde Park Historical always welcomes volunteers to staff the Society's headquarters on Saturday and Sunday afternoons from 2-4. For more information, please call Alta Blakely at (773) 753-4633.

## New Membership Coordinator

Claude Weil has generously and enthusiastically agreed to assume the responsibility of membership coordinator for the Society. Thank you, Claude.

## ✻ WELCOME! ✻

The Society welcomes the following new members:

**Gershon Mayer** of Chicago, and **Drs. Francis and Lorna Straus**, also of Chicago.

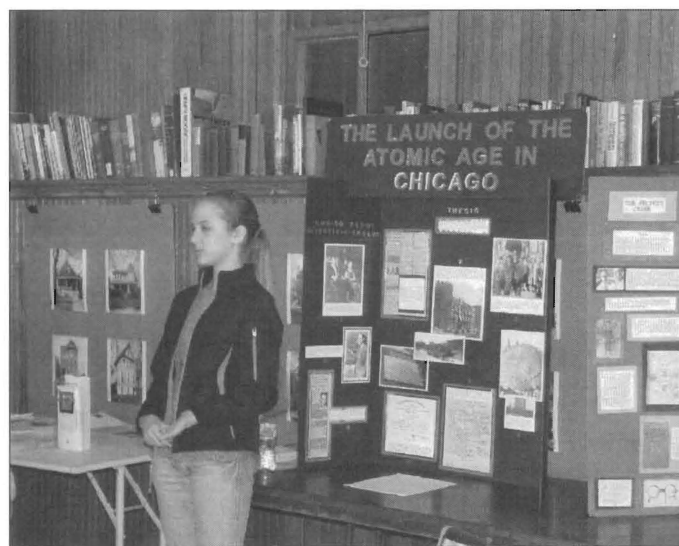
## Hiking For History

On Saturday, May 17, 2008, more than 100 history buffs from all over the Chicago area hiked 5 kilometers to view some of Hyde Park's best-known landmarks. This event helped support the annual history fair the Chicago Metro History Education Center.

Encouraged on their way by State Representative Barbara Flynn Currie and 4th Ward Alderman Toni Preckwinkle, walkers visited the Hyde Park Union Church, the Henry Moore sculpture commemorating the world's first controlled nuclear reaction, and such sites as the Robie House, Midway Plaisance, and the Doctors' Hospital of Hyde Park. At



Niles West High School students (in alphabetical order) Amy Amin, Kaitlyn Fleming, Elaine Kim (not pictured) Jasmine Ramahi, prepared this project. Joshua Cohen, classroom instructor, is shown at the left.



Brook Borowiak describes how the atomic age began on the University of Chicago campus.

HPHS Headquarters they enjoyed award-winning presentations by students about the 1893 Columbian Exposition and Chicago's role in the Atomic Age.

Kathy Huff of the Society's Program Committee was a key organizer of this important event. Rita Allen, Carol Bradford, Janice Knox, Rita McCarthy, Gary Ossewaarde, Frances Vandervoort, and Carol Vieth of the Society and Maryhelen Matijevic, assistant principal of Mt. Carmel High School, volunteered at HPHS headquarters. Joshua Cohen, Pauline Kochanski, Lisa Oppenheim, of the CMHEC, and Krystal Johnson, CMHEC's executive director led city-wide efforts to make the program a success. Encouragement came also from former 5th Ward Alderman Leon M. Despres and current 5th Ward Alderman Leslie Hairston. **HPH**



**Mark your calendar!**

## UPCOMING EVENT

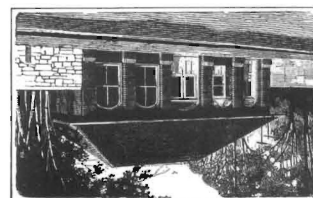
On **Saturday, June 21, 2008**, Society members are invited to visit the **First Presbyterian Church of Chicago**, 6400 South Kimbark, at 2:00 PM. Society member **Diane Luhmann** will recognize the 175th anniversary of the church by speaking about its history and role in the Woodlawn Community. Her talk will be followed by a tour of the church.

**IMPORTANT MEMBERSHIP NOTICE**  
A RED DOT on the address label indicates that your membership is about to expire. Don't miss any newsletters; renew your membership NOW!

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5529 S. Lake Park Avenue  
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# Hyde Park Historical Society

COLLECTING AND PRESERVING HYDE PARK'S HISTORY

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*Enclosed is my — new — renewal membership  
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This Newsletter is published by the Hyde Park Historical Society, a not-for-profit organization founded in 1975 to record, preserve, and promote public interest in the history of Hyde Park. Its headquarters, located in an 1893 restored cable car station at 5529 S. Lake Park Avenue, houses local exhibits. It is open to the public on Saturdays and Sundays from 2 until 4pm.

Web site: [hydeparkhistory.org](http://hydeparkhistory.org)

Telephone: **HY3-1893**

President: **Ruth Knack**

Editor: **Frances S. Vandervoort**

Designer: **Nickie Sage**