

Craig, Sondra

From: David Riel <driel1974@gmail.com>
Sent: Tuesday, July 9, 2024 11:56 PM
To: ZZ Council Members; ZZ City Clerk External; Acklin, Tim
Subject: Why The Mayor's Historic Landmark Designation Appeal Is Misguided
Attachments: South-Branch_Nomination.pdf

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Dear City Council Members,

Earlier today, I learned of an email from Mayor Reynolds to a resident who objected to the appeal of the South Branch Library Historic Landmark designation. Below is a portion of the Mayor's email to that resident (edited for length). I want to explain the problems with the Mayor's justification, some of which I've underlined and highlighted for emphasis...

"I want to assure you that my appeal of the historic designation of this structure has nothing to do with its ultimate disposition and I have no interest in razing and removing the building...The City appeal of the historic designation is based solely on the merits of the application submitted to the Heritage Preservation Commission. My interest is in maintaining the integrity of the historic designation process, something that has been threatened by this latest decision of the Commission. I believe in the just, fair, and equitable administration of law. The historic designation applied to the former South Branch Library undermines that principal."

First, the Mayor implies there was something inappropriate or incorrect about the application and its approval by the HPC. The Mayor is alleging we're threatening the integrity of the designation process, while providing zero evidence. *His allegation is wrong.* From 2017-2023, I served as a Commissioner with the HPC, and during those six years of service, I completed multiple years of commissioner training with the Wisconsin Historical Society. I have a granular understanding of the Historic Landmark designation requirements under your City Ordinances. Both I and the current HPC followed long-standing professional practices for hearing and approving nominations. In case you haven't seen it, I've attached a copy of my 22-page narrative for the South Branch Library nomination to this email. This is the second time I've successfully nominated a building owned by the city. The first building I nominated was Fire Station No. 4, and the process I and the HPC followed for both buildings were identical.

Second, the Mayor's reassurance to the resident that the Mayor has "no interest in razing and removing the building" is not binding. If you overturn the HPC's designation, a future owner could demolish the building without warning. This is not what the Holy Trinity-Longfellow Neighborhood Association wants. Mayors come and go. The Historic Landmark designation is the only way to permanently protect the

Introduction



South Branch Library, ca. 1996. Source: Wisconsin Historical Society.

The South Branch Library building, located at 1307 16th Street S., is a historically-significant example of municipal library architecture. Designed by architect Frank J. Fuchs and built by contractor F.R. Schwalbe & Sons, the Wisconsin Historical Society “Architecture and History Inventory” lists the architectural style as Prairie School, despite being built in 1952.

Made of golden brick and Winona Stone, the South Branch Library building was completed in 1952 for a cost to La Crosse tax payers of \$128,000, which today would be the equivalent of approximately \$1,490,000.00.

Efforts to create a “South Side” library began in the early 20th Century, but several events, including the Great Depression and World War II, led to a series of multi-decade delays. Funding for this building was finally approved by the residents of La Crosse through an election referendum in 1951. It served as a branch of the La Crosse Public Library from 1952 until 2023.

The South Branch Library building satisfies all four criteria under Section 20.90 of the Municipal Code of Ordinances for La Crosse Historic Landmark designation, and if designated, will continue to benefit future generations.

Existing Physical Description



South Branch Library, West Elevation, 2024. Source: David Riel.

The South Branch Library building is a unique, publicly-owned asset. It served as a branch of the La Crosse Public Library for 71 years and is in excellent condition. The façade of the building and main entrance faces west toward 16th Street S. The building, which stands between Farnam Street to the north, Park Avenue to the south, and East Avenue to the east, also shares public land east of the building with Tower Park. The well-maintained building and site, landscaped with a variety of trees, play areas, walking paths and a dedicated parking lot make this an ideal building to be repurposed for future use.

Designed by architect Frank J. Fuchs and built by contractor F.R. Schwalbe & Sons, the Wisconsin Historical Society “Architecture and History Inventory” lists the architectural style as Prairie School, despite being built in 1952. Most Prairie School structures were actually built between 1900 and 1930.

However, the Prairie School greatly influenced modern architecture well into the 1960s, and you can see the Prairie School’s influence on the South Branch Library building in multiple ways. The Prairie School was an architectural movement that drew inspiration from the low, horizontal landscape of the Midwestern prairie. Perhaps the most well-known proponent of the Prairie School movement was Wisconsin-born architect Frank Lloyd Wright.

The South Branch Library wasn't built until 1952, but it was first designed in 1938. By the 1930s, the International Style had become popular, and you can see its influence in the South Branch Library. However, the International Style took *its* inspiration from the earlier Prairie School, so the South Branch Library naturally shows Prairie School influence in massing and decorative brickwork.

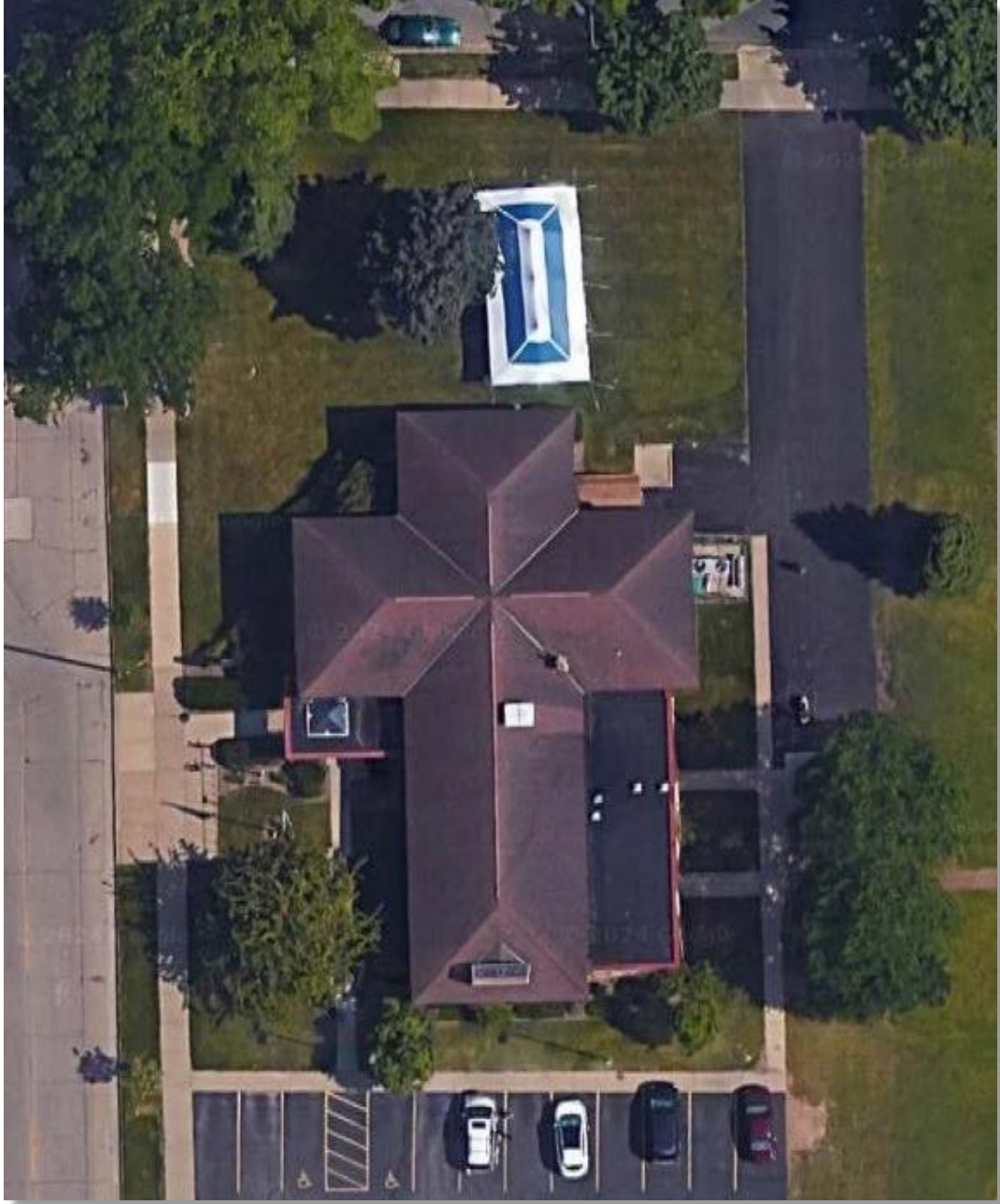


Heurtley House (1902), Architect Frank Lloyd Wright, 2023. Source: David Riel.

For example, consider Frank Lloyd Wright's Heurtley House, seen above. This early Prairie School design used contrasting colored bricks to create horizontal lines that mirror the prairie it sits upon. With the South Branch Library, Frank J. Fuchs also used alternating bricks to emphasize the horizontal. Five rows of brick placed on their sides (stretchers) are separated by one row of bricks lighter in color and turned on their ends (headers), creating horizontal lines and decorative patterns. Pure examples of International Style buildings had largely abandoned these types of decorative motifs for unadorned surfaces.



South Branch Library, Brick Detail, 2024. Source: David Riel.



South Branch Library, Aerial View, 2024. Source: Google.com.

The South Branch Library building was designed by Frank J. Fuchs on a rectilinear, cruciform floorplan, a very traditional Prairie School layout.

The asymmetrical nature of the cruciform plan creates visual interest, and is similar to Otto Merman's floorplan for the North Branch Library.

Originally designed with a flat roof, the existing hipped roof with deep, overhanging eaves wasn't added until 1993, but its addition only enhances the Prairie School influences already present in the building.



South Branch Library, Window Detail, 2024. Source: David Riel.

The South Branch Library windows are horizontal in shape as well, continuing the Prairie School influence. A large picture window north of the entrance is completely framed in Winona Stone, and a band of smaller windows that run directly under the eaves have Winona Stone sills. Use of the smaller, elevated windows, which allow light into the interior while also providing privacy to the occupants, is another design feature you can see in many, early Prairie School designs, such as Frank Lloyd Wright's F. F. Tomek House, seen below.



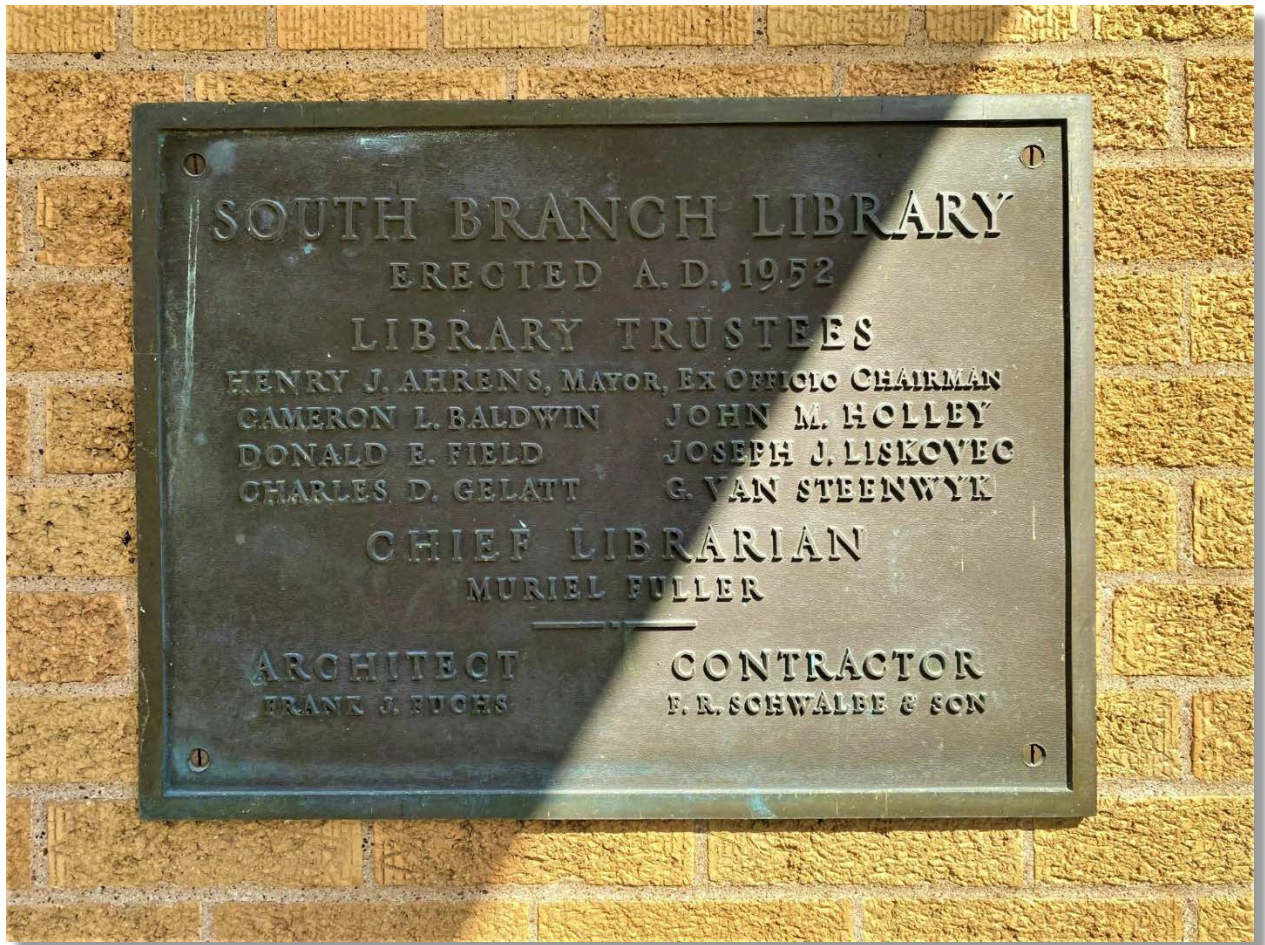
F. F. Tomek House (1904), Architect Frank Lloyd Wright, ca. 2022. Source: Terry Cahill.

The only truly vertical elements on the South Branch Library are the piers of the portico which were added during the 1993 remodel by La Crosse architect Valentine Schute. The 1993 remodel was performed in a very sensitive manner, and most of the changes made in 1993 could be reversed by a future owner if desired. However, the addition of the hipped roof and other changes only serve to enhance the appearance and improve the functionality of the building.

The name “South Branch Library” is elegantly carved into the Winona Stone header above the entrance, showing the work of a master mason.



South Branch Library, Carving Detail, 2024. Source: David Riel.



South Branch Library, 1952 Dedication Plaque, 2024. Source: David Riel.



South Branch Library, South Elevation, 2024. Source: David Riel.

The original chimney (and accompanying fireplace) of the South Branch Library is another example of traditional elements more common in the late-1800s and early 1900s than the 1950s, as newer ways to heat an interior were available.

In the 1998 documentary “Frank Lloyd Wright” by Ken Burns & Lynn Novick, architecture critic Paul Goldberger said of the International Style architects “They worshipped modern technology and sought ways to symbolize it. They had very little interest in using wood and stone, which struck them as old fashioned materials. There was much more glass, much more metal.” The simple fact that Frank J. Fuchs included a wide chimney as part of a 1952 design shows the influence of early, traditional styles like the Prairie School.

During the 1993 remodel, the height of the chimney was increased just enough to clearly intersect the newly added hipped roof. These changes help to soften the angular mass of the building, and easily give this 1950s-era building the appearance of a Prairie School design that was ubiquitous in La Crosse forty years earlier. Shadows cast by the hipped roof change shape along the surface of the building throughout the day, increasing the buildings visual interest.



South Branch Library, East Elevation, 2024. Source: David Riel.



South Branch Library, North Elevation, 2024. Source: David Riel.

Narrative History



La Crosse Public Library Building (1888), ca. 1960. Source: UWL Murphy Library Special Collections/ARC.

As early as 1853, efforts began to form a public library, with the La Crosse Library Co. opening in a store on Front Street. The library company formed when La Crosse only had about 500 residents. Struggling to acquire books and steady funding, they eventually disbanded in 1859. A new group, the Young Men's Library Association formed in the year 1868, with local businessman Mons Anderson acting as chairman while the group became organized.

In 1882, former Wisconsin Governor, Civil War General, and businessman Cadwallader C. Washburn died, leaving \$50,000 to the City of La Crosse for the establishment of a public library. His will only allowed \$12,500 of that money to buy land and construct a building, which proved financially challenging.

The board of the Young Men's Library Association worked to secure more funding, then purchased land on the corner of 8th and Main Street in 1885. The group disbanded when the La Crosse Public Library was formed in 1888.

With La Crosse's population surging between 1888 and 1900, it quickly became apparent the library would need to expand to meet the community's needs. In 1905, the first branch library opened on the North Side in Brakke Drug Store at 1353 Caledonia Street, with a collection of 225 books. By 1914, that branch had more than 2500 books. Focus then shifted to the South Side.



Former Barracks In Powell Park, ca. 1924. Source: Courtesy of La Crosse Public Library Archives.

According to the La Crosse Public Library: "In 1914 the "Webster Outlet" was opened in Webster School at 1402 Redfield Street, although the South Branch Library wasn't a reality until 1922. The library moved into a former school barracks at Jackson Street and West Avenue, on the south side of Powell Park, in 1924. It was cold in winter and so hot in the summer it had to be closed many afternoons. Like its sister to the north, the South Branch Library also suffered severe space shortages for collections and programming."

Seen above, these barracks (initially considered temporary), served as a library branch for about 28 years. In the 1930s, an effort was made to secure funding from the Public Works Administration to build a modern library, but the effort was unsuccessful. In the 1940s, World War II restrictions on building materials diverted necessary resources. In 1951, funding was finally approved by the residents of La Crosse through an election referendum. After a decades-long struggle, a modern South Branch Library was about to become a reality.

Architects Open Offices In City

Orval J. Nelson, born and raised in La Crosse, and son of Bernt Nelson, of the local contracting firm of Peter Nelson and son, has, together with Frank J. Fuchs, registered architect, become successor to the late Otto A. Merman, prominent architect who passed away recently.

The two men have taken over the entire office and business, including plans of buildings erected in the past, as well as sketches of proposed work.

"Architects Open Offices In City." Source: La Crosse Tribune, June 23, 1935, pg. 11.

Nelson Wm S (Theresa A) shoemkr LaCrosse Rubber M Co
h2100 Liberty
Nelson & Fuchs (Orval J Nelson, Frank J Fuchs) archts
115 S 4th
**NEON SUPPLY CO, Cyril Hedrick Mgr, Everything in Neon
Signs 111 S 2d, Tel 555**

La Crosse City Directory, 1937. Source: Courtesy of La Crosse Public Library Archives.

The South Branch Library was designed by architect Frank J. Fuchs. Born in Austria on July 5, 1904, Fuchs attended the University of Chicago and graduated with honors from the Armour Institute of Architects. After graduating, he worked in a Chicago architecture firm with Orval Nelson until 1934, when both men decided to move to La Crosse, creating the firm Nelson & Fuchs.

After the passing of architect Otto Merman in 1935, Nelson & Fuchs purchased Merman's firm, which included Merman's blueprints, pending projects and other intellectual property. Even though Otto Merman (who also designed the North Branch Library) worked in a variety of styles, he was primarily known for his Prairie School architecture. Frank J. Fuchs may've taken his design inspiration for the South Branch Library from Otto Merman's Prairie School background. Nelson & Fuchs dissolved in 1941, but Frank J. Fuchs

would continue his architectural practice, designing a variety of significant buildings and structures in La Crosse and throughout the region, including:

- The PWA-funded Memorial Pool and Bathhouse on State Street (1938).
- Logan High School Auditorium on Avon Street (1939).
- Pla-Mor Bowling Alley on 4th Street (1940).
- The "WayLite Blocks" Demonstration House at 815 S. 22nd Street (1941).
- VFW Hall Post No. 1530 on 3rd Street (1947).
- Freyhoff Flying Service Airport Hangar at Municipal Airport (1947).
- Alfred G. Shay House in the Verchota addition on 21st Terrace (1949).
- La Crosse County Highway Dept. Shop Building on Highway 16 (1949).
- Our Redeemer Lutheran Church at 21st Place and Weston (1952).
- The "Bear Den" at Myrick Park Zoo (1953).
- Mary E. Sawyer Auditorium (1955).
- Shelby Town Hall and Fire Department (1957).
- The Jackson Street Shopping Plaza (1957).
- Pittsburgh Plate Glass (PPG) Co. Building at 59 Copeland Avenue (1959).
- Educational Building - St. John's Church on West Avenue (1961).
- John's Memorial Chapel - Wesley Methodist Church at 8th & King (1963).



Frank J. Fuchs. Source: La Crosse Tribune, September 25, 1977, pg. 1.

The Mary E. Sawyer Auditorium was perhaps the most significant and well-known building designed by Frank J. Fuchs during his lifetime. However, it's also worth noting that Fuchs designed the first house in La Crosse specifically planned for a paraplegic in 1949. Alfred G. Shay, a WWII veteran paralyzed from the waist down, was to have wheelchair ramps instead of stairs and swinging doors that could be "easily entered from any side."



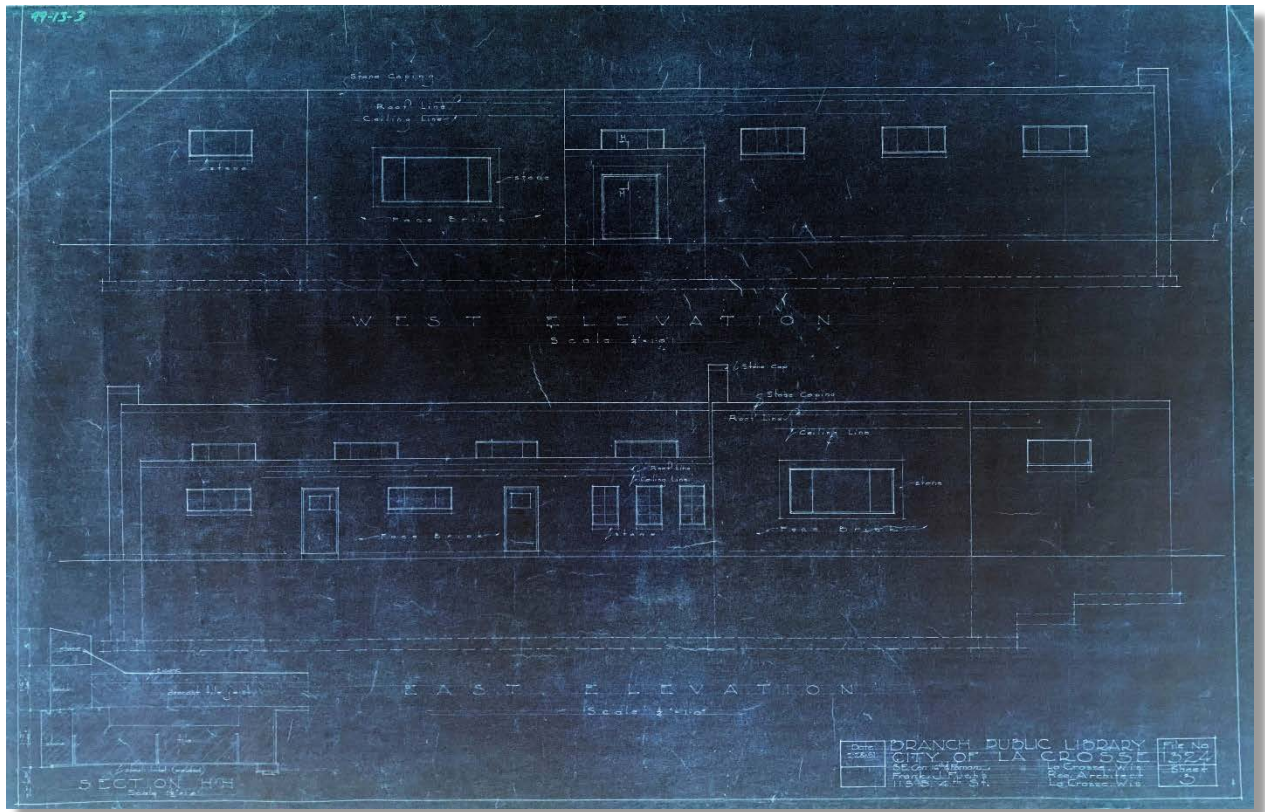
South Branch Library Concept Art, Architect Frank J. Fuchs. Source: Courtesy of La Crosse Public Library Archives.

Concept art for the South Branch Library, seen above, was presented in the La Crosse Tribune March 11th, 1951, depicting a rectilinear structure with a flat roof. With the exception of the hipped roof that was added in a 1993 remodel, the building today appears nearly identical to Frank J. Fuchs plan.

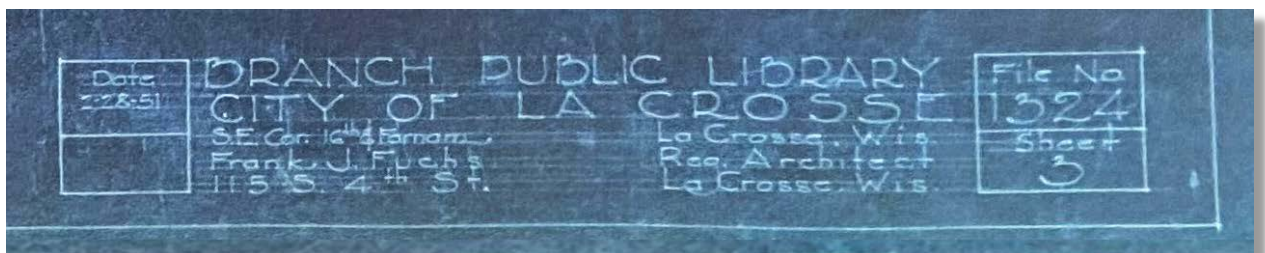
It should also be noted that Fuchs is cited in the March 11, 1951 article as the architect of the North Branch Library. Architect Otto Merman actually designed the "Tudor style" North Branch Library in 1923. However, funding challenges delayed the North Side project until after Merman's passing in 1935. When Frank J. Fuchs acquired Merman's firm in 1935, Fuchs oversaw construction of Merman's design in 1942 after funding finally became available. It is unclear if Merman was already sketching ideas for a South Branch Library, but the floorplans of the North Branch Library and South Branch Library are very similar. Considering that Fuchs bought all of Merman's work, it is very likely that some of Merman's design aesthetic had an influence on Fuchs projects.

Blueprints for the South Branch Library are on file with the City of La Crosse Engineering Department. Sheet 3, seen below, was drawn February 28, 1951 and depicts the west and east elevations. A comparison of the 1951 blueprints to the South Branch Library building today shows no discernable change. The building retains a high degree of historic integrity and is in excellent condition.

That excellent condition is due in large part to the *years of significant financial investment* the taxpayers of La Crosse have made in the building. In addition to the cost of the 1993 remodel, upgrades in 2020 included new energy-efficient LED lighting and replaced boilers in the HVAC system. In 2021, a new roof was added, and that upgrade alone cost La Crosse taxpayers \$74,710.00.



South Branch Library Blueprints, Architect Frank J. Fuchs, 1951. Source: City of La Crosse Engineering Department.



South Branch Library Blueprints, Detail, Architect Frank J. Fuchs, 1951. Source: City of La Crosse Engineering Department.



South Branch Library Ground Breaking, 1951. Source: Courtesy of La Crosse Public Library Archives.

Ground broke on the South Branch Library June 30, 1951. Officials in attendance, seen above, from left to right was Miss Nellie MacDonald, South Branch librarian; Arthur Schwalbe Jr., representing contractor F. R. Schwalbe & Sons; Judge C. R. Baldwin and Joseph Liskovec, members of the library board; Miss Muriel Fuller, librarian; Frank J. Fuchs, architect; Alderman Melvin Olson; and Mayor Henry Ahrens, breaking ground with shovel in hand.

Construction of the South Branch Library building was a source of great civic pride. It represented a major accomplishment for the community, decades in the making, and was publicly celebrated in several La Crosse Tribune articles.

Three reputable contractors submitted bids to construct the building. Of these, F.R. Schwalbe & Sons was the lowest bidder and selected. Their low bid was \$88,768.00, which did not include the architect's fees. A bond of \$125,000.00 was approved to cover the total cost, which ended up being \$128,000.00.

FRANK R. SCHWALBE,

General Contractor and Builder.



Contracts taken for
all kinds of Build-
ings and Carpenter
Work.

Personally oversees the
fulfillment of all his con-
tracts. ❁ ❁ ❁ ❁ ❁

Estimates Furnished on Application

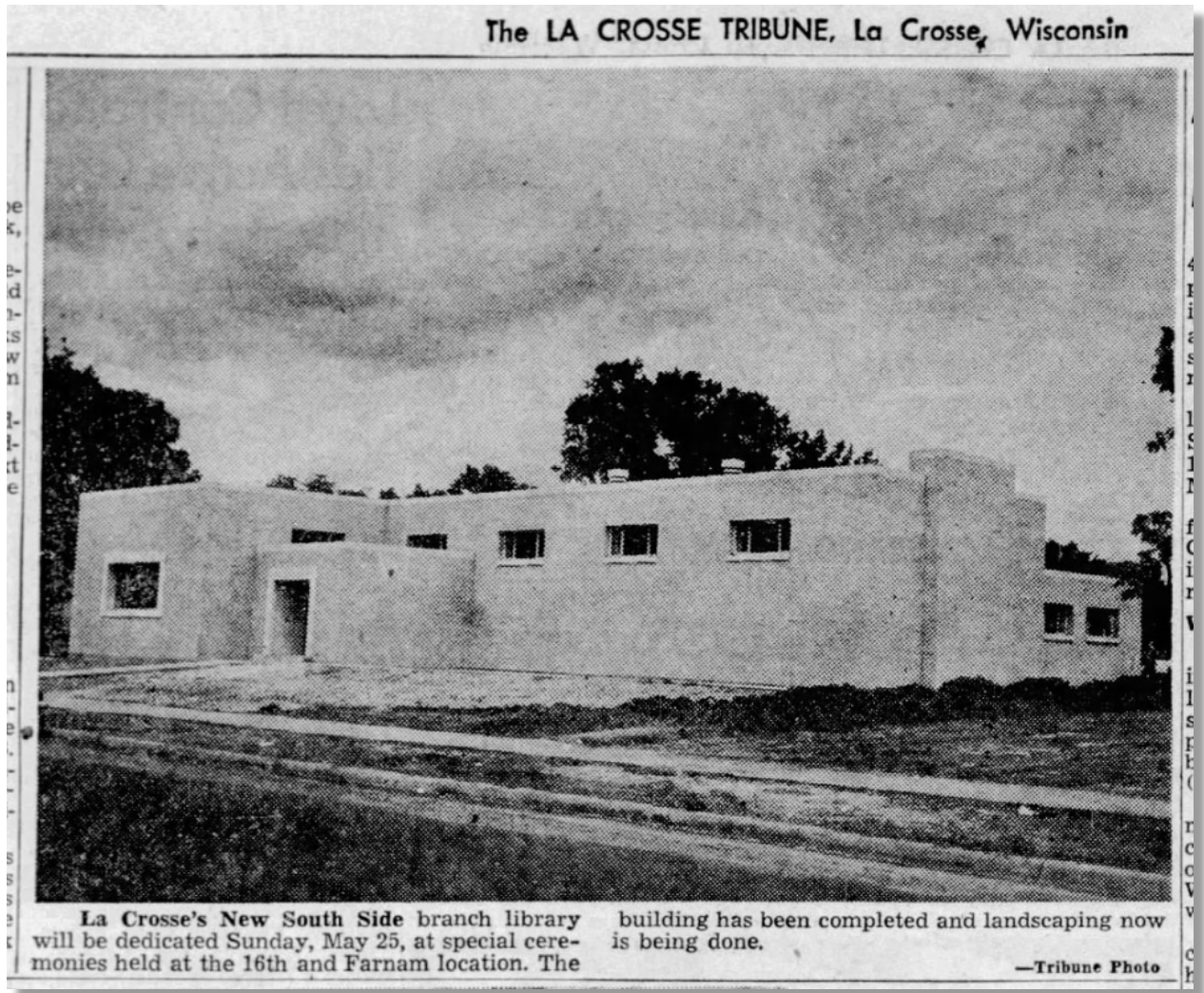
OFFICE 1524 MADISON STREET.

Frank R. Schwalbe Ad, La Crosse City Directory, 1900. Source: Courtesy of La Crosse Public Library Archives.

The South Branch Library was built by F. R. Schwalbe & Sons, one of the most prominent General Contractor and Builder firms in La Crosse history.

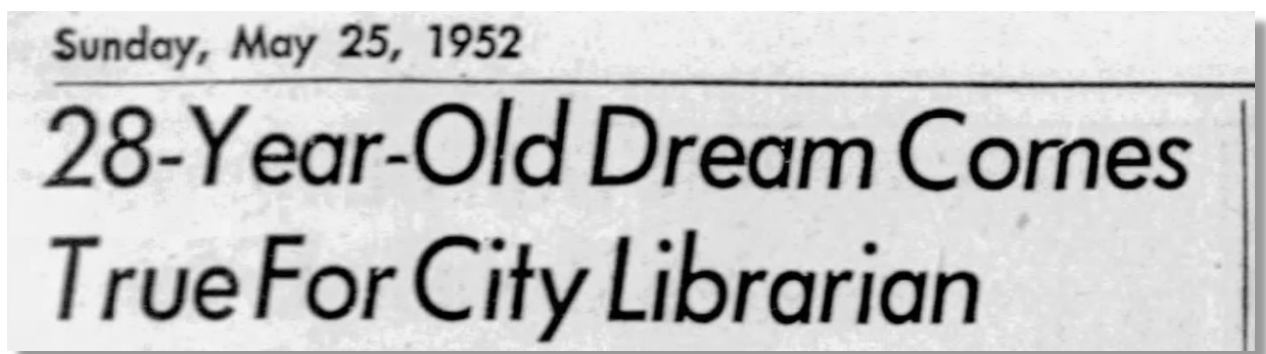
Frank's father, Joseph Schwalbe, first appears in the 1873 La Crosse City Directory, listed as a carpenter residing on 8th Street near Mississippi Street. Joseph and his son Frank created Joseph Schwalbe & Son, which operated from 1891 until Joseph retired in 1897. At that point, Frank formed Schwalbe & Magnussen with contractor Nels Magnussen.

By 1915, F.R. Schwalbe & Sons was established, which included Frank's sons Frank Jr. and Arthur. The Schwalbe family built (and/or owned) some of the most significant commercial and residential properties in La Crosse, including the Rivoli Theater at 115-123 4th Street, the Salzer House at 1634 King Street, the Frank Schwalbe House at 1524 Madison Street, and the Frank Schwalbe Jr. House at 1420 Madison Street. Frank Schwalbe Jr. died in 1929 at the age of 40. Frank Sr. died in 1941 at age 77, but the firm F. R. Schwalbe & Sons continued under Arthur Schwalbe until he died in 1956.



“La Crosse’s New South Side Branch Library.” Source: La Crosse Tribune, May 15, 1952.

The South Branch Library was dedicated Sunday, May 25, 1952 at 2:30 p.m. An open house was scheduled from 2-5 p.m. with refreshments served, encouraging the public to join in the celebration of their new, modern library.



“28-Year-Old Dream Comes True For City Librarian.” Source: La Crosse Tribune, May 25, 1952, pg. 15.



South Branch Library Dedication Ceremony. Source: La Crosse Tribune, May 26, 1952, pg. 7.

At the dedication ceremony, seen above, from left to right are Melvin Olson, 8th Ward alderman; Walter S. Botsford, executive secretary, Wisconsin Free Library Commission, who was the principle speaker; Miss Nellie MacDonald, South Branch librarian; Miss Muriel Fuller, chief librarian; and Mayor Henry Ahrens. Even though it was a day of celebration, Miss Muriel Fuller was quoted as saying she expected the following day “would be business as usual.”



"Already Busy At Her Desk." Source: La Crosse Tribune, May 25, 1952, pg. 15.

The May 25th, 1952 La Crosse Tribune quoted Miss Nellie MacDonald, the South Branch librarian as saying "People always told me to wait for my new library," says Miss MacDonald, "and now it's really a dream come true."



"Pre-School Story Period." Source: La Crosse Tribune, November 27, 1952, pg. 21.

The South Branch Library building is worthy of preservation for several reasons. The building was designed by a prominent architect and master builder, and is in excellent condition thanks to the substantial financial investment taxpayers have made for more than seven decades. However, the building is also worthy of preservation because it was at the center of social life for multiple generations of La Crosse residents. There are residents who visited the South Branch Library as children in the 1950s, only to return 30 years later with *their children*, then in subsequent years with *their grandchildren*. It is part of the very fabric of this community. If the South Branch Library building is preserved, it will continue to serve the community for many decades to come.



South Branch Library, ca. 1952. Source: Courtesy of La Crosse Public Library Archives.

The South Branch Library building is more than just a structure. It's a symbol of the perseverance and determination of our community. It also represents a significant financial investment made by multiple generations of taxpayers, and it would be cost prohibitive to build something of this quality again. It's an asset of great historic, cultural, and financial importance to the community.

The South Branch Library building satisfies all four criteria under Section 20.90 of the Municipal Code of Ordinances for La Crosse Historic Landmark designation, and if designated, will continue to benefit future generations.

- The South Branch Library building is a unique, publicly-owned asset, a historically-significant example of municipal library architecture whose creation made significant contributions to the history, heritage and culture of the City of La Crosse and multiple generations of residents.
- The South Branch Library building embodies the distinguishing characteristics of a Prairie School influenced mid-century library. Constructed of golden brick and locally-sourced Winona Stone, it is inherently valuable for the study of a period, style or method of construction or of indigenous materials and craftsmanship.
- The South Branch Library building is representative of the notable work of a master architect, Frank J. Fuchs, a significant architect responsible for a variety of buildings and structures in La Crosse and throughout the region, including the non-extant Mary E. Sawyer Auditorium. It is also notable for the work of a master builder, F. R. Schwalbe & Sons.
- The South Branch Library building is the result of a multi-decade struggle to provide educational opportunities to the community. The community effort to build a modern public library exemplifies of reflects the broad cultural, political, economic or social history of La Crosse.

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building from demolition. For these reasons, I once again urge you to reject the Mayor's appeal. Thank you again for your time and consideration.

-David Riel-