

# Evanston Dimensions | Ask the Historians

A Brief History of Evanston Government Locations

by Kris Hartzell and Jenny Thompson, PhD

May 27th, 2021

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After our last column, Libby Hill submitted the following question for historians at the Evanston History Center:

*In the 1950s, several City departments were run out of red brick two-story buildings on what I think was Maple. One was the Health Department. Perhaps simultaneously, perhaps following those buildings, City offices were in a grey limestone-looking building south of the Post Office, before moving to today's Civic Center.*

*Would the Evanston History Center be able to put together photos of the history of buildings used for City government over time? I can just go back to the 1950s, when I remember having to go to the Health Department in one of those red brick buildings. Now that there's consideration of moving from the Morton Civic Center, it would be interesting to have a history of these buildings used for City government.*





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Thank you for this question, Libby. The history of Evanston's government locations is, to put it simply, all over the map! We've dug into the files at the Evanston History Center to put together this overview of the City government's primary locations. And we begin back in the 1870s, when Evanston as a City did not yet exist. The area was then three different municipalities: Evanston, North Evanston, and South Evanston. North Evanston was annexed by Evanston in 1874, and South Evanston in 1892.

As an independent village, South Evanston ran its own small government from offices in the Ducat block, a building located on the southwest corner of Main Street (then called Lincoln Street) and Chicago Avenue. The building was likely demolished in the early 1900s when the train tracks were raised, which required a larger embankment that encroached on adjacent ground.



South Evanston looking east. Main Street is on the left. The Ducat block is the two-story brick building just east of the tracks. To its left is the South Presbyterian Church, later known as Second Presbyterian. The church was demolished in 1980. (Photograph, Evanston History Center.)

Meanwhile, the village of Evanston conducted business in a brick storefront building located on the south side of Davis Street just west of Chicago Avenue: 407 (later 604) Davis Street.

As the village of Evanston grew, the need for a larger facility became apparent. On May 31, 1891, the local newspaper, *Evanston Press*, ran a front page editorial entitled "Give Us a Village Hall." It noted:

"One of the crying needs of our village ... is a village hall. It is a disgrace to so populous a village that the meetings of its board of trustees must be held in a close, narrow and contracted room which

affords really no opportunity for our citizens to be present, to exercise their privilege of watching the proceedings, and of appealing to the board in cases of necessity.”

The editorial identified a village-owned and vacant lot next to Fountain Square, on the northwest corner of Davis Street and Sherman Avenue. At 50 by 150 feet, the lot was considered large enough to accommodate a building that could house all of the village’s government needs, including its police and fire departments. There would also be room for the public library, which was, at that time, operating out of a storefront building on Sherman Avenue.

The next week the *Evanston Press* ran an announcement that village trustees (as the heads of the village government were called) now had in hand plans for a building to be designed by the local architectural firm Holabird & Roche. (Architect William Holabird lived in Evanston on Maple Avenue, just south of Davis Street. The firm had already designed several buildings in Evanston and was quickly becoming a major architectural firm in Chicago.)

"The building as designed will be a decided ornament to the village," wrote an observer. Proposed Village Hall for Evanston, *Evanston Press*, June 6, 1891.

The planned three-story building would be built of brick and stone in the Richardsonian Romanesque style and with a reddish-orange color palette. A "picturesque tower" would surmount the Davis Street corner, with another smaller tower on the building's north side to be used for "drying fire hose."<sup>[i]</sup> The building's entrance from Davis Street would lead to the main floor offices of the village clerk and the commissioner of public works. From the main floor, a stairway would lead to the second floor, where the library would be located. Also on that floor would be dormitories for police officers and firefighters. An entrance on Sherman Avenue would lead to the council chambers. The third floor

would be devoted to a hall for public meetings. Evanston's police station would also be housed in the building, with a "lock-up in the basement." In an adjoining alley to the north of the building, the fire engine quarters would be located.[ii]

Ground was broken later that year despite some fundamental financing problems. Construction bids came in almost double the \$30,000 budget. Cutbacks in the design and interior plans were implemented, somewhat compromising the functionality of the building. At the same time, the question of Evanston's annexation of the village of South Evanston arose in earnest with the issue of clean water front and center. The village's 1888 water processing plant at Clark Square on Sheridan Road and Main Street had been located too close to the sewage output. Proponents of annexation to Evanston in order to tap its municipal water supply met some opposition by those who did not want to support Northwestern University's tax-free status. Also, as Evanston was roughly 2 1/2 times the size of South Evanston, residents were concerned about adequate representation. Therefore, it was proposed that should annexation occur, the new entity would adopt a city form of government, with wards represented by aldermen on a city council, rather than representation by a number of trustees at large. The vote on annexation was held on Feb. 20, 1892.[iii] Turnout was light and annexation was approved.[iv] Evanston soon became a city.

The new City of Evanston's ward map. (Chicago Tribune, March 31, 1892)

In April 1892, the City held another election. All City offices were up for election including mayor, treasurer, clerk, and city attorney. Oscar Mann, former president of Evanston's board of trustees, was elected mayor. Mann won his seat despite allegations that he had mismanaged funding for what was now being called "City Hall." As wards were drawn and new governmental procedures instituted, the building of the City Hall proceeded. And that same year, Evanston's newly constructed government building opened its doors.



Evanston's City Hall, Fountain Square, c. 1911. Despite its limitations, the building would serve as the hub of Evanston's city government for more than 50 years. (Postcard, Evanston History Center)

However, it was not long before critics would deem the structure too small and inadequately appointed. Five years later, in 1897, a new fire department and police station building was built at Grove Street and Sherman Avenue. And, by 1906, the cornerstone for a new library building would be laid at Church Street and Orrington Avenue.

At this time, there was no municipal health department as we know it today. Most of those duties were carried out by charitable institutions, loosely organized under the Central Association of Evanston Charities. In 1913, the Association built a red brick office and laboratory building at 1802 Maple Avenue. In 1931, the Association's name was changed to the Family Welfare Society, eventually becoming the City of Evanston Health Department.

### **From Country Club to Municipal Building**

Fifty years after Evanston built its monumental civic building, the search for a larger, more efficient building began in earnest. The Fountain Square property, owned by the City, was considered prime commercial real estate. And so the City put the property up for sale and sought a new location.

Some found the shuttered Evanston Country Club on Lake Street and Oak Avenue to be the perfect place for the City's government offices. (The Club's declining membership had forced it to close.) A bank had foreclosed on the property and the City could get it at a bargain price.

Designed by Holabird & Roche in 1892, (the same firm that designed City Hall), the original Evanston Country Club (above) was destroyed by fire in 1922. In 1923, the Club was rebuilt and redesigned (below) along its original lines by Evanston architect Ernest Mayo. (Photographs, Evanston History Center)

Evanston Country Club, Mayo & Mayo, 1923.

In 1942, the City purchased the old country club building, including its lot of nearly two acres and adjacent tennis courts, for \$85,000. That same year, the Fountain Square City Hall property was sold for \$310,000, making a sizable profit for the City. "I have become thoroughly convinced the City is being offered a real bargain," stated Evanston mayor S. G. Ingraham about the deal.

An estimated \$100,000 was needed to remodel the old country club building for City government use. That work was delayed for a few years by World War II, but by 1945, the project was underway.

Architects George B. Eich and Earl H. Reed were hired to redesign the building's interior and replace the exterior colonnade with a pergola. On the site of the former tennis courts, a memorial rose garden was planned, to be named for Evanston alderman Clinton Merrick (1886-1944), who had served on the City Council for 23 years and had cultivated a collection of roses from around the world.[v]

Evanston City Hall (former Country Club building), 1501 Oak Street. (Postcard, Evanston History Center)

Evanston City Hall, 1942, just a few years before its demolition.  
(Photograph, Evanston History Center)

One year after World War II ended, the old City Hall was demolished and the Fountain Square intersection was redesigned in order to accommodate modern traffic patterns. The cast iron fountain, located on a small green space in the middle of Fountain Square, was removed and a few years later relocated to the Merrick Rose Garden.

Soon the old Fountain Square would be changed dramatically as the City sought to “streamline” and modernize its center, eventually focused on supporting and expanding downtown as a commercial district.

On Jan. 6, 1947, the City held a gala to dedicate what was now called Evanston’s “Municipal Building,” the former Evanston Country Club.

*(For a closer look at this building, see Evanston History Center’s upcoming exhibit, Diorama-Rama, opening in June.)*

### **A New (Old) Location for Evanston’s City Government**

History repeated itself in Evanston. Just 20 years later, the Municipal Building was itself deemed too small, and, once again, there were calls for the City to find, buy, or build a new government building.

Proponents of securing a new site argued that City departments had been scattered across the City owing to limited space in the 1501 Oak Street building. Some of the City’s Health Department and Parks and Recreation Department offices were now located at 1802-06 Maple, and the City was also renting office space on Davis Street.

Many supported moving the City headquarters back to downtown Evanston. And some wanted a newly constructed high-rise government building in the downtown's center. Several City-owned sites just north of downtown were also considered, including a City parking lot bounded by Sherman Avenue, Clark Street, Benson Avenue, and Elgin Road, and a site on the south side of Church Street, both locations that had historically been predominantly Black neighborhoods and were now being threatened by developers.

A Church Street site was envisioned as a public transportation hub right next to a modern, high-rise civic center, *Evanston Review*, August 1968.



These proposals never materialized and efforts to relocate the City's government offices languished.

In the early 1970s, as stagflation and a host of woes, financial and otherwise, beset a cash-strapped Evanston and the country in general, attention turned to another adaptive reuse opportunity. "Rather than sink tax dollars into construction of a new city office complex," reported the *Chicago Tribune*, Evanston "decided to go the recycling route."<sup>[vi]</sup>

For five years the former Marywood Academy, a girls high school on Ridge Avenue, had stood empty after the school closed due to declining enrollment. Many proposals for its re-use had been made, including using the building as a low-income housing residence. But in 1975, the City of Evanston won out. It purchased the building for \$1.5 million and began to plan its makeover into the City's new "civic center." Some considered the site to be too far from downtown Evanston, but the idea that prime commercial property should not be devoted to civic uses prevailed.

In the meantime, the City sold the old country club headquarters to a developer for \$900,000, who promptly demolished it to make way for new construction.



Built in 1901 as the Visitation Academy, the former Marywood School was designed by architect Henry J. Schlacks (1867-1938), who also designed St. Nicholas Church on Ridge Avenue in Evanston. In 1915, the Sisters of Providence St. Mary-of-the-Woods purchased the school and renamed it Marywood Academy. In 1924, additions to the building were constructed. (Photograph, Marywood Academy Yearbook, 1948)

The former Marywood School building stood on a 9.5-acre property and was large enough to accommodate all of Evanston's City departments under one roof. There was even a surplus of interior office space that the City would eventually rent out for additional income. The surrounding grounds provided the City with an additional park.

The repurposing of the building was directed by Evanston architect Edward Noonan. Mr. Noonan had directed the successful renovation of an older multi-use commercial building at Main Street and Chicago Avenue, transforming it into a modern atrium building, "The Main." He would subsequently repurpose Noyes School into the Noyes Cultural Arts Center.

Renovations of the former Marywood school building cost an estimated \$750,000 and included installing air conditioning and new lighting and replacing the wooden staircases with concrete and steel stairs.

In 1979, the City of Evanston moved into its new home.

In 2009, Evanston's civic center was renamed the Lorraine Morton Civic Center in honor of Evanston's first Black mayor.  
(Photograph, Wikimedia Commons, 2010.)

## **The Conversation Continues**

Evanston's City government had only been working out of the building on Ridge Avenue for about two decades when calls for finding yet another new city government location were being sounded in the late 1990s. The old school building, some argued, was in need of extensive repairs; it was too expensive to maintain.

In 2006, Evanston's Civic Center was listed on the National Register of Historic Places. And the next year, a vote on a ballot referendum revealed that a majority of Evanston voters supported rehabbing the building, although they were divided on the price tag [vii] Over the next few years, the question of the future location of Evanston's City government would reemerge on various occasions. Most recently, in April 2021, the Evanston City Council approved a resolution to conduct a search for consultants to investigate relocating the civic center.[viii]

While we can't predict the future, we can propose that, as the conversation continues, perhaps there are some lessons to be found in the long history of Evanston's various government locations.

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*The Evanston History Center is happy to partner with the Evanston RoundTable to share the insights that our expansive collection of Evanston history provides. Public records, newspapers, letters, maps, photographs, and artifacts all carry messages from the past to inform our lives today. The differences and changes can be compelling, disconcerting, educational, but always fascinating and often downright funny.*

*Since history looks at the past but also influences the future, and today will be history tomorrow, we have titled this column "Dimensions." We are living in a historic time, and you can help us tell future generations what it was like. We are located in the National Historic Landmark Charles Gates Dawes House*

at 225 Greenwood St.. Please visit our website, [evanstonhistorycenter.org](http://evanstonhistorycenter.org), to learn more about how you can participate and contribute to the collection.

What are you curious about in Evanston history? Let us know what you've wondered about! Send your queries to [info@evanstonhistorycenter.org](mailto:info@evanstonhistorycenter.org).

Thank you,  
Eden Juron Pearlman, Executive Director

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[i] "New Village Hall for Evanston," *Chicago Tribune*, July 24, 1891.

[ii] "New Village Hall for Evanston," *Chicago Tribune*, July 24, 1891.

[iii] "Promises to Be a Bitter Fight," *Chicago Tribune*, February 20, 1892.

[iv] "The Evanston Will Unite," *The Inter-Ocean*, February 21, 1892.

[v] "City Hall Bids for Evanston Due Saturday," *Chicago Tribune*, November 4, 1945.

[vi] Elizabeth Brenner, "Evanston's City Hall Goes to School," *Chicago Tribune*, May 20, 1979.

[vii] Deborah Horan, "Evanston Backs Rehabbing Site; Split on How Much to Pay," *Chicago Tribune*, April 18, 2007.

[viii] Adina Keeling, "City to Move Forward With a Study That Will Evaluate the Potential Relocation of the Civic Center," *Evanston Roundtable*, April 27, 2021.

## Rosemary Powers

May 27th, 2021 at 8:38 AM

I have lived in Evanston over 60 years. This is a wonderful , informative article. Thank you.  
Rosemary Powers, Sherman Gardens

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