45th Annual Mother’s Day House Walk—By
A Different Kind of House Walk
Sunday, May 10, 2020
Mayme Spencer was Evanston’s first black woman alderman and a civil rights activist. Her focus was on fair housing and she served on the city council when the city’s Fair Housing Ordinance was passed in 1968.

Spencer was born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. After her parents died she raised her three younger siblings. She attended Marquette University and came to Chicago to work in a lab at Mt. Sinai Hospital. She married Dr. Warren F. Spencer in 1952 and in 1957 they moved to Evanston. Dr. Spencer was born and raised in Evanston, and his parents still lived in Evanston at the time. He and Mayme raised their four daughters in this house at 1107 Garnet Place.

In 1961, Spencer graduated from Chicago-Kent School of Law and entered the firm of Stewart & May, who had offices at 1310 Hartrey, the same building
where her husband had his medical practice. Spencer practiced matrimonial, family and real estate law, and did pro-bono work for the community.

She ran for alderman in 1963 for the 5th ward; her opponent was also an African American woman, Josephine Robinson. Spencer made Fair Housing her main focus. “All the black people were in one small area,” she later observed, due to racial discrimination both in sales of homes and rentals. Civil rights groups in Evanston worked diligently to press for a city ordinance. A 1966 ordinance had been vetoed by the mayor. An ordinance passed the following year, however, it exempted property owners, financial institutions, and real estate agencies, and was consequently ineffective. Finally, on April 29, 1968, the city council voted in favor of a Fair Housing Ordinance, 15 - 1. Spencer had marched and worked to pass the ordinance for six years. Shortly after it passed, she resigned her seat on the council - having moved out of the 5th ward to a new home at 1510 Asbury, a location that might not have been accessible to the Spencers before the passage of the ordinance.

Spencer continued to practice law and in 1974 she was appointed to Illinois Governor Dan Walker’s Commission on Race Relations.

In 2011, the Childcare Network of Evanston opened a free legal clinic in her name, the Mayme F. Spencer Memorial Street Law Clinic.

The House

Garnett Place was originally named Ayars Place, for the father of architect Charles Ayars, who had been president of the Evanston Board of Trustees, essentially the mayor, from 1885-1888. It was renamed in 1938 for Thomas Henry Garnett, an African American Evanston infantryman who was killed in 1918 during the Meuse-Argonne offensive of World War I.

The house was likely built before 1892, as there are no building permits for the initial construction. The style is a simplified expression of the Queen Anne that evolved to fit on smaller urban lots. The style expressed in the dominant third floor gable that may have been shingled with shallow cross-gables, and the sheathing would have been wood clapboard. Henry C. Jones and his family lived here from at least 1894, when they added a barn to the property, until about 1915. In 1912, they rebuilt the front porch, expanding it from a smaller portico to one that spanned the front facade. The Ruffner family lived here a little over ten years and in 1926 the Nesbit family put a rear addition on the house. John Spencer, Warren’s father, bought the house in 1946, and this is where Mayme and Warren and their children lived from 1957 to 1968.

One of the oldest African American woman’s clubs in Illinois, the Julia Gaston Club was a leader in the movement to organize and advocate for women of color. The efforts of its members to achieve suffrage and address systemic racial inequities were monumental; their purpose was reflected in the motto of the National Association of Colored Women, *Lifting as We Climb*.

The club was founded in 1898, after Julia Gaston, seeing the value of organizing women, had begun to engage interested Evanston women to explore the possibilities. She died before the club was officially founded in 1898 and it was named in her honor. Among the founding members were Lola Young Downs, Celia Webb (later Hill), Emma Howland, and May Fairfax Smith. Mary McDowell
was instrumental in facilitating the process and the first president was Kizzie Bell.

In 1899, the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) held their convention in Chicago and seven clubs (including the Julia Gaston Club) organized the conference with Ida B. Wells leading the charge. They realized the great benefits of joining the clubs together and so founded the Illinois Federation of Colored Women’s Clubs. The seven clubs were afterward known as the “Original Seven” or the “Magic Seven” and also formed the Chicago Federation of Colored Woman’s Clubs.

The first initiative of the Federation was to raise funds for a free Kindergarten. Concern would expand to include older girls and young women (see Mary Bartelme above). This led the Julia Gaston Club to establish the Iroquois League for Girls (see page 60).

As with most women’s organizations, the initial purpose was philanthropic. Many were founded as extensions of their church work, and these women were all members of Ebenezer A.M.E. Church on Emerson. As historian Elizabeth Lindsay Davis observed twenty-two years later:

The evolution from the Church aid and literary society to organizations covering every phase of religious, civic, educational, philanthropic, and political life, for community benefit, has been remarkable…Women were guided out of their narrow spheres to a bigger and more progressive atmosphere. 17

The Julia Gaston Club was not the only African American woman’s club in Evanston. Others included the Dorcas Guild and the Matilda Dunbar Woman’s Club, and the Frances Willard W.C.T.U., named in Willard’s honor.

The House

Julia Gaston Club meetings were regularly held in this house at 1115 Ayars (later Garnett) Place. It was known as the Education and Welfare Center. Bessie Marie Garrison was the superintendent of the Center. Garrison wrote an Evanston column for the Chicago Defender, and took a leadership role in many organizations, hosting the North Shore Women’s Political Club, and the State Republican Club meetings in Evanston, and was mistress of ceremonies when the Club held a memorial service for Ida B. Well-Barnett at Ebenezer Church in 1931. Garrison also presented plans for coordinating the work of the various Evanston clubs at a meeting at the North Shore Community House (see page 60).

17 Davis, Elizabeth Lindsay, The Story of the Illinois Federation of Colored Women’s Clubs, 1900-1922, University of Illinois at Chicago, 1922, p. 4
Many of the houses on this street were built at about the same time, probably circa 1890. Queen Anne was the dominant residential style from about 1880 to 1910 and this house, as do the others, reflects many of the design characteristics. Despite many changes over time, including dividing the house into a duplex, the underlying initial design is still in evidence, particularly in the top gable. Note the recessed window bay with its curved sides covered in shingles. To add further artistic interest there is a string course of wood trim bisecting the triangle of the bay. This execution was utilized on a larger scale on Villa Celeste (see 721 Sheridan Road above.)

1115 Garnett was owned and operated as a boarding house for many years by William H. and Rosa Smith, who lived at 1908 Asbury Avenue. There had long been an association with the residents of 1906-08 Asbury and the Julia Gaston Club. Newspaper accounts cite meetings and social events of the club also being held at the house on Asbury.

In 1958 Rosa notified the city that they would no longer require a license as they were suspending operations. At the time the house had eight bedrooms and eleven boarders, five women and six men.

Some of the other addresses associated with the women who belonged to the club are now demolished. Lola Downs and her family lived at 607 Chicago Avenue. Cecelia Webb lived at 1462 Elmwood and May Fairfax Smith lived at 1726 Grey in 1950.
The Iroquois League was founded in 1917 by the Julia Gaston Club as a response to the growing need for housing and community activities for young African American women who came to Evanston for work. Eva Rouse and Cora Watson raised funds and purchased the house at 1125 Garnett as a residence and community gathering place in 1921. The goal was to provide economical housing and social structure for the increasing numbers of young women. Similar housing solutions were being created in Chicago by African American women’s organizations.

Evanston’s African American population had more than doubled in the decade 1910 to 1920. The Iroquois League, with Eva Rouse as the first president, opened its doors in 1924. For several years the club struggled financially. Cora Watson,
as the second president, stepped in and raised the additional funds to pay off the mortgage by 1929. She also renamed the Iroquois League as the North Shore Community House and constituted it as a non-profit entity in 1930, thereby removing the financial burden of property taxes. The North Shore Community House expanded services to include all adults and its community services to include more classes, private rentals, and civic meetings.

The House

The house may have been built prior to 1892 as there is no building permit in the files. The 1893 Evanston Directory indicates Alfred and Emily Swan lived at this address. The architectural style is the popular modified Queen Anne mode that is consistently in evidence on this block. This example is ideally sited at the top of the hill at Ridge Avenue and the particulars of the design relate to the corner lot. The southwest corner of the house has an angled bay on the first floor in the main living area with a large window that maximizes the view and natural light. The second story also relates to the orientation by clustering the windows at the same corner. It has a cross-gable design and the porch entry is highlighted with another gable.

All three of the houses on this block have such similarity in era and style, that one wonders if they were built as part of a subdivision. A look at the 1899 Sanborn map shows the two blocks that constitute Ayars (now Garnett) Place are described as the J. B. Hobbs subdivision (still named in housing titles.) James B. Hobbs was an early grain merchant who became one of the wealthiest men in Chicago. An 1893 Chicago Tribune article states that Hobbs “has hired Chicago architect E. M. Newman to design an apartment building on the corner of Ayars and Maple,” but that “he will wait for the market to improve before beginning construction.” This could indicate that he was developing Ayars Place and may have commissioned many of these houses as speculative investments. He was a prominent Methodist, financier, and developer of real estate in Evanston and Chicago. His wife, Mary Hobbs, was one of the original founders of the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union and was on the board for many years. He was one of the incorporators of the building association for the Woman’s Temple and would later become the leading critic of the financial condition that caused the W.C.T.U. to return their headquarters to Evanston (see page 24).

A large addition was added to the rear facade in 1956 to accommodate the many community activities hosted by the North Shore Community House. In 1973, it was listed for sale and purchased by Anna Watson, the daughter of Cora Watson.
Lorraine Hairston Morton  
(1918-2018)  
First African American Woman Mayor – 1993-2015

Lorraine Morton was a teacher, principal, and a leader in the educational community who brought those skills to bear on a second career in political service. After teaching in the Evanston school system for over forty years, she spent nearly thirty years in elected office. Morton appreciated the various perspectives of the community and understood how to achieve consensus and build leadership.

Constance Lorraine Hairston was born in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, the youngest of 10 children. Her father was a businessman and her mother was a teacher. Hairston graduated in 1938 from Winston-Salem Teachers College with a degree in elementary education. She taught school in the area for a few years be-
fore earning a master’s program at Northwestern University in 1942. She attended a social gathering at the Emerson Street Y.M.C.A. where she met James Morton (1911-1974). Morton was a native Evanstonian who had grown up at 2102 Dar-row (see below). He was also attending Northwestern University studying for a doctorate in clinical psychology. They were married and moved to the Tuskegee Institute for several years. In 1953, they returned to Evanston, where Dr. Morton was on the staff of Evanston Hospital.

Lorraine Morton began her teaching career in Evanston at the all black Foster School. In 1957, she was offered a teaching position at Nichols Middle School, the first African American teacher in District 65 outside of Foster School. Ten years later she moved to Chute Middle School, leading the school’s team-teaching system. In 1977, she was offered the post of principal of “troubled” Haven Middle School. After a succession of principals had left it rudderless, the atmosphere had deteriorated to the point where closure was considered. Morton’s years of experience, leadership, and ability to empathize while imposing discipline turned the school around. She would remain principal of the thriving school until her retirement in 1989.

The broader community became aware of her success. When the 5th ward aldermanic seat opened up mid-term in 1982, Mayor James Lytle reached out to Morton. She accepted the appointment and was subsequently elected to two more four-year terms as alderman, serving from 1982-1991. She said, “I am not a political person; I recognize fully, also, that no one on the city council operates alone.” It was Morton’s ability to supersede differences and emphasize commonalities while appreciating distinctions that made her a remarkable leader.

When Joan Barr declined to run for a third term, she headed a bi-partisan coalition who supported Morton as a candidate for mayor. Campaign literature included a letter of support that said, in part:

We have worked with Lorraine in... {the} various capacities in which she has served Evanston...We have been colleagues on the city council, taught at Haven School, or served on one of the many boards and committees to which she has given her time and energy to make Evanston a better place for all of us. Lorraine Morton is a bright, energetic, experienced woman with a proven capacity to work with all of the groups represented in Evanston’s diverse community. Her integrity is unassailable, her temperament judicious and responsible.

21 Interview with Nena Peltin, November 30, 1993, Evanston History Center clipping files
22 Morton For Mayor: Get On Board! Campaign letter, signed Joan Barr & Rosemary Pabst, undated
On April 20, 1993 Lorraine Morton was elected Evanston’s first African American mayor, its first Democratic mayor and its second woman mayor. She would also become Evanston’s longest serving mayor. During her tenure she worked to grow Evanston’s economy and maximize the relationship with Northwestern University. When she left office in 2009, the Evanston Civic Center was renamed the Lorraine Morton Civic Center.

During her lifetime she received countless awards and was active in and on the board of myriad organizations, including the League of Women Voters, Evanston Coalition of Black Women, National Council of Negro Women, NAACP, Second Baptist Church, McGaw Y.M.C.A., Evanston History Center, Links and Alpha Kappa Alpha.

Lorraine Morton was a bridge-builder who reached across divides. Many who benefitted from her help called her Mama Morton. Some said her approach to mayoral leadership was much like that of a principal of a school. One interviewer wrote: “Speaking of her pleasure in public service, she said she hoped she would be remembered as someone who ‘tried to do something for everybody and found joy in doing so.’”

The House

The house Morton lived in for over 60 years was on a spacious double lot on the southwest corner of Simpson and Darrow. It was built in 1908 by B. H. Hughes and his wife Minnie. At the time there were only a few small buildings at the north end of the block, leaving this essentially the first house on the west side of the street. Hughes was a gardener who listed himself as architect on the building permit. The house is a vernacular interpretation of the Prairie Style, sometimes called a Prairie Box or a Four-square. It has a hipped roof and stucco siding. At the front entrance is a small porch with a hipped roof and square pillars. These are topped with brackets and raised ornamentation in an Arts & Crafts hallmark often used in Prairie style designs. There is a polygonal bay on the first floor of the south facade.

James Morton, Sr. purchased the house for his family in 1925. That year he added a two-car garage and in 1929 he hired Midwestern Construction to build an enclosed porch on the west rear facade.

23 “A Long, Last Look at the State of the City,” Evanston Roundtable, February 18, 2009
The first section of the current building was the southern east-west wing built in 1901, as evidenced on the 1920 Sanborn map. It was designed by ecclesiastic architect Henry J. Schlacks as an academy and convent for the Sisters of Visitation. The building was purchased by the Sisters of Providence St. Mary-of-the-Woods in 1915, and the name changed from Visitation Academy to Marywood. An addition larger than the original building was added along the north-south axis in 1924. Designed in the Georgian Revival style, it is built of red brick with Bedford limestone quoins, stringcourses, and architrave surrounding the main entrance on the east facade.

Marywood Academy began as a Roman Catholic girl’s school, including elementary and high school students. In the 1940s it became a high school only. Declining enrollment forced the school to close in 1970. At that time, city administration was outgrowing its offices located in the former country club building on Oak and Lake Street. Mayor Jay Lytle headed the negotiations to purchase...
the building from the Sisters of Providence in 1975. Evanston architect Edward Noonan (see Lohr Park) supervised the adaptive reuse of the building and in 1975 the city moved into this building. By 1998, aging infrastructure, including the failing slate roof, prompted discussions about the sustainability of the building. Despite a city council vote to leave the building, no viable alternatives were accepted.

In 2005, the building was added to the National Register of Historic Places. The civic center was renamed to honor outgoing mayor Lorraine Morton in 2009. The Evanston architecture firm of McGuire Igleski was hired to replace the roof and restore the iron balustrades atop the bays in 2011.

The Architect

Henry John Schlacks (1867-1938) was born in Chicago, attended Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and worked for Adler & Sullivan before establishing his own practice. He also founded the school of architecture at the University of Notre Dame. Schlacks has been noted as Chicago’s finest ecclesiastic architect. In Evanston he also designed St. Nicholas Church at 806 Ridge Avenue and the original school building just west of it.