

Robert Closson Spencer, Jr.

Robert Closson Spencer, Jr. was born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin on April 13, 1864. He graduated from the University of Wisconsin with a degree in mechanical engineering in 1886 and then enrolled in the architecture program at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Spencer left M.I.T. in 1889 to work in the Boston architectural firm of Wheelwright & Haven and then Shepley, Rutan & Coolidge.



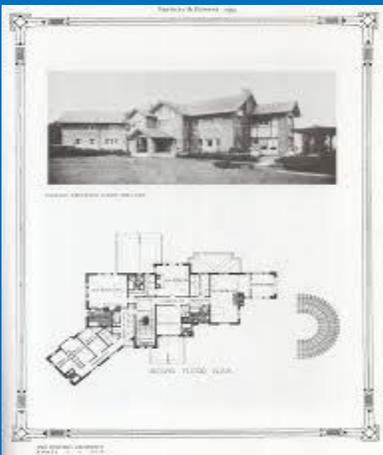
Spencer married Ernestine Elliott on November 28, 1889. In 1891 he was awarded the Rotch Traveling Scholarship, an annual design competition sponsored by the Boston Society of Architects. The scholarship enabled the Spencers to spend the next two years studying and documenting the architecture of Europe as they traveled across the continent.

Upon returning to the United States, Spencer went back to work for Shepley, Rutan & Coolidge, but this time in their Chicago office. In 1894 he completed his very first large commission, the Tudor Revival style Stanley Grepe house in Evanston, Illinois.

In 1895 Spencer established his own practice in the Schiller building in Chicago. His office space happened to be right next to Frank Lloyd Wright and the two became close friends. The very next year Spencer and Wright moved their offices to the Steinway Piano building. Architect Dwight Perkins completed Steinway Hall in 1896. He designed office space on the top floor of the building and convinced some of his architect friends to join him. Each had their own office, they shared a secretary, and then above, by stairs, the architects shared a big open drafting room that came to be known as The Loft. This open work space attracted a number of young architects interested in developing a new architectural style that was free from historical forms and details. It was here that the Prairie School was born and Robert C. Spencer and Frank Lloyd Wright were charter members.

In 1905 Spencer left The Loft and formed a partnership with Horace S. Powers. Spencer was the designer and Powers served as the office manager. They designed residential structures in Chicago, the surrounding suburbs and accepted additional commissions that began the movement of the Prairie School across the Midwest. This was the office that Suzanne Denkmann visited when per her diary entry on April 2, 1909: "went on a trip to Chicago...went to see some architects, liked Spencer & Powers best.

In 1911 the influential *Western Architect* of Minneapolis switched its editorial policy to favor the Prairie



School. For the next five years this widely read monthly produced numerous profusely illustrated editions that influenced architects and home builders alike. The Hauberg Mansion was featured in the April 1914 issue. It included both exterior



and interior full page photos, insets of design details and advertisements by the companies that supplied everything from plumbing to light fixtures. A copy of the issue is on display at the Hauberg Mansion.

It was also during his partnership with Powers that in 1906 Spencer founded The Casement Hardware Company of Chicago. He was a strong proponent of the use of the out-swinging casement window writing numerous articles in popular magazines and trade journals voicing praise for casements and disdain for double-hung, or what he called the “guillotine” window. Adding a leaded, stained-glass pattern within the casement window itself became a principal ornamental feature of the Prairie Style. But Spencer found problems with the European hardware available at the time. What was needed was hardware that would allow for easy opening and closing, hold the window open at a fixed position, and do so while keeping interior screens in place. Spencer was awarded a patent for a device to keep the windows securely fastened, the “Hookfast” latch in 1903. He then turned his attention to the task of creating a mechanism to hold the window open at the desired distance. In 1905 he filed a patent for the “Holdfast” adjuster. The simple, elegant mechanism is built into the window sill and easily opens the window by means of a central, hidden gear. Notches allow the window to be securely open in a choice of settings. These patents were the basis for forming the hardware company that would be run by Spencer’s son Charles for more than forty years. This hardware was used and still remains on the Hauberg Mansion windows.



Spencer returned to private practice in 1923, joined the faculty of the school of architecture at Oklahoma A&M in 1928, moved to the University of Florida in 1930 and then left teaching in 1934 to produce murals for the United States government until his retirement to Tucson, Arizona in 1938. Robert Spencer died on September 9, 1953.