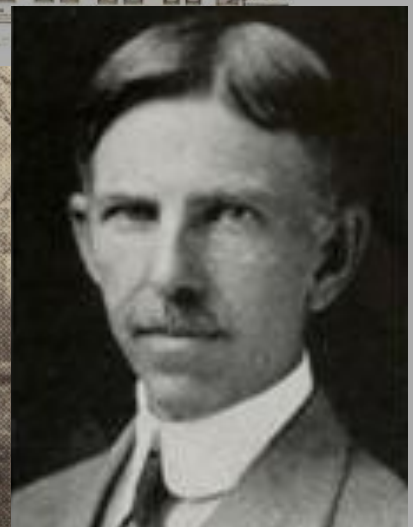


The Life and Works of George C. Nimmons, Flossmoor Architect

*Written for the Flossmoor Public Library
By David Martin, Adult Services Manager
April 2025*



INTRODUCTION

Although not well-known among the general public today, Ohio-born George C. Nimmons enjoyed a long, prolific, and varied architectural career that made a lasting impact on Flossmoor, the Chicagoland region, and across the country. In 1909 he parlayed his financial success into a large summer home near the gates of the Flossmoor Country Club. Nimmons designed the home himself, along with extensive gardens and other outdoor amenities. His most major local impact would come five years later, when he was selected to design a new clubhouse for the Flossmoor Country Club. In this article I will discuss his career, his Flossmoor estate, and notable local, regional, and national works.

PART ONE: EARLY LIFE AND CAREER

Nimmons was born July 8th, 1865 in Wooster, Ohio. As a youngster he showed interest in design and architecture, and would build various objects in the family workshop at his home. However, the local college he attended—now known as the College of Wooster—offered no architectural studies degree so he graduated in 1887 with a bachelor's degree in literature. From there he moved to Chicago and secured a job as an assistant at Burnham & Root—one of the most prestigious architectural firms in the world at that time—while taking night classes in architecture from the Art Institute. While at Burnham & Root, he had the opportunity to work as a draftsman for Chicago's historic 1893 Columbian Exposition, and was named the Superintendent of the “Mines and Mining” building at that fair.

Nimmons eventually left Burnham & Root and began working independently at the age of 29 in 1894. His first important commission was the summer estate of W.B. Conkey in Holland, MI. Conkey, a Chicago printing magnate, was impressed by Nimmons's skills and work ethic and became a supporter and friend to the architect. After the completion of the house, Conkey hired Nimmons to design a large new printing plant in Hammond, IN in 1898. In previous generations, most industrial buildings were given very little thought by business owners and the architects they hired. They were considered nothing more than a functional, basic building meant for labor—dirty, dingy, and odorous. Nimmons expressed the progressive belief—which he would later elaborate upon in numerous journal articles he wrote—that the industrial building could be not just an efficient model of workplace organization, but also a place that promotes the health and well-being of the employee through good design. Conkey was supportive of this idea and approved Nimmons's design even though it increased his construction costs. At this time, Nimmons took on a partner in William K. Fellows and together they operated under the firm name of Nimmons and Fellows until 1910.

One of W.B. Conkey's key clients was Sears, Roebuck & Company, the mail order retailer which printed thousands of catalogs a year with him. It may have been a recommendation from Conkey that resulted in Nimmons and Fellows designing the home of Sears president Julius Rosenwald in Chicago in 1902. Soon, the firm became the Sears corporation's preferred architects. Sears was about to build a massive headquarters complex in Chicago's North Lawndale neighborhood, and they hired Nimmons and Fellows for the project, which opened in 1905 and underwent expansion for the next decade. Sears was also expanding operations across the country and Nimmons's firm designed distribution centers nationwide. The steady employment offered by Sears and other companies stabilized Nimmons's career and made him very wealthy.

EARLY (PRE-1910) WORK WITH WILLIAM K. FELLOWS



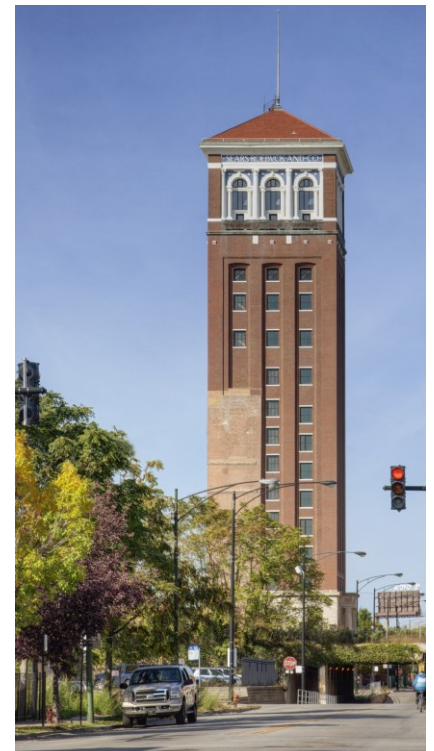
The 1898 printing plant for the W.B. Conkey Company was Nimmons's first industrial commission. The design incorporated a large amount of windows, some topped with decorative arch brick-work. Decorative touches like these were unheard of in industrial buildings of previous generations. The plant also had a full outdoor park installed on-site for employees to enjoy.



Home designed in 1902 by Nimmons & Fellows for Sears president Julius Rosenwald in Chicago's Kenwood neighborhood.



In 1905 Nimmons and Fellows began work on the 40-acre Sears, Roebuck & Company Headquarters in Chicago's North Lawndale neighborhood. The complex included a 3 million square foot mail order plant—the largest commercial building in the world at the time. Only three buildings from the immense complex survive today—one in partial form (see right).



The "Original Sears Tower" at 906 S. Homan Avenue is the last remaining component of the massive building pictured in the postcard at left.

SOLO WORK FROM 1910—1917



The 1914 Reid, Murdoch & Company Building is—to generations of Chicagoans—one of Nimmons's most recognizable buildings, due primarily to its prestigious location on the Chicago River at LaSalle Street. With the positioning of the iconic clocktower, Nimmons was the first to follow an edict in Daniel Burnham's 1909 Plan For Chicago that new downtown buildings should engage with, rather than turn away from, the river. The building was initially entirely symmetrical; a later street widening project required the removal of an entire bay on the left side, as seen here. The building is now the headquarters of Encyclopædia Britannica.



The Franklin Building, located in Chicago's Printers Row neighborhood, was built in 1916 for the Franklin Printing Company. The building was an active printing press until 1983, when it closed. The building was renovated into 65 condominiums and reopened in 1989.



Sears distribution center in Seattle, WA, built 1915. This building is now the world-wide headquarters of Starbucks.

PART TWO: NIMMONS'S IMPACT ON FLOSSMOOR

Like many early residents, Nimmons was drawn to the young village of Flossmoor both by the idyllic peaceful setting and by his love of golf. It is likely not possible to know exactly when he first visited Flossmoor, but records show he was a Flossmoor Country Club (FCC) member since at least 1903. Indications are Nimmons took his golf game seriously, appearing in multiple local tournaments at Flossmoor and on other Chicagoland courses throughout the next twenty years. Around 1904, Nimmons was hired to design the Flossmoor home of W.T. Beatty, the president of a road construction machinery company. Beatty's craftsman-style home is located at 1110 Western Avenue and was Nimmons' first architectural contribution to Flossmoor. In time, Nimmons decided to build his own summer home in Flossmoor. He purchased a 300 feet by 420 feet lot just south of the Beatty house, at 1240 Western Avenue. Although his self-designed house still stands, later reductions in the size of the lot meant the elimination of several amenities of the estate: a 40 by 100 foot lily pond, flower gardens, an orchard, vegetable and berry gardens, a playground, a tennis court, and a putting green/croquet lawn have all been eliminated.

Nimmons designed his summer home so that the second story balcony looked out over the lush greens and fairways of FCC across the street. At that time, the FCC clubhouse was positioned further north, with entry from Flossmoor Road. On May 4th, 1914, that clubhouse—which was supposed to be fireproof—was struck by lightning and burned to the ground. From this tragedy, and a \$100,000 insurance policy for the club, came the opportunity for Nimmons to make a lasting impact on Flossmoor as the club soon asked him to design the replacement clubhouse, which still stands today.

Nimmons actually designed two clubhouses for FCC. The first, in a Spanish Revival style, was favored by the club leaders but construction estimates came in at substantially higher than the \$100,000 insurance policy would provide for. Instead, they chose the present design, which had a construction estimate of \$95,000 (\$3 million in 2025 dollars). That cost provided for both the clubhouse and a dormitory that members from the city could use for overnight accommodations. Before construction on the new buildings began, it was decided that they would be placed in the center of the course and the course would be renumbered and reconfigured so that it began and ended at the new location.

Meanwhile, the Spanish Revival design originally planned for FCC by Nimmons had attracted the attention of others. In 1917, elements of this design were adapted into a new clubhouse for the Ravisloe Country Club in Homewood. Although aesthetically extravagant, the Ravisloe plan reused and absorbed some preexisting buildings, keeping the cost low at \$70,000. Designing FCC and Ravisloe provided Nimmons with the experience necessary to take on "the largest private clubhouse in the world," that of the Olympia Fields Country Club (OFCC).

Nimmons's 1923 design for the OFCC clubhouse was made in a English Tudor style. The club, which was the first ever to feature four 18-hole courses (later reduced to two courses), was designed from the start to be the biggest of them all. Still, the statistics—and costs—for the building are staggering: a dining room seating eight hundred, a cafe with seating for an additional six hundred, five hundred feet of veranda. Where FCC was thrifty—spending only \$95,000—OFCC was outlandish, spending over \$1 million on the building by the end of construction in 1925. This is about \$18 million in 2025 dollars.

THE BEATTY HOUSE

Right: The W.T. Beatty house (1110 Western Avenue) as photographed in 2020 for a real estate ad. This was the first building designed by Nimmons built in Flossmoor. When completed in 1905, the house sat on a four-acre lot which was later subdivided.



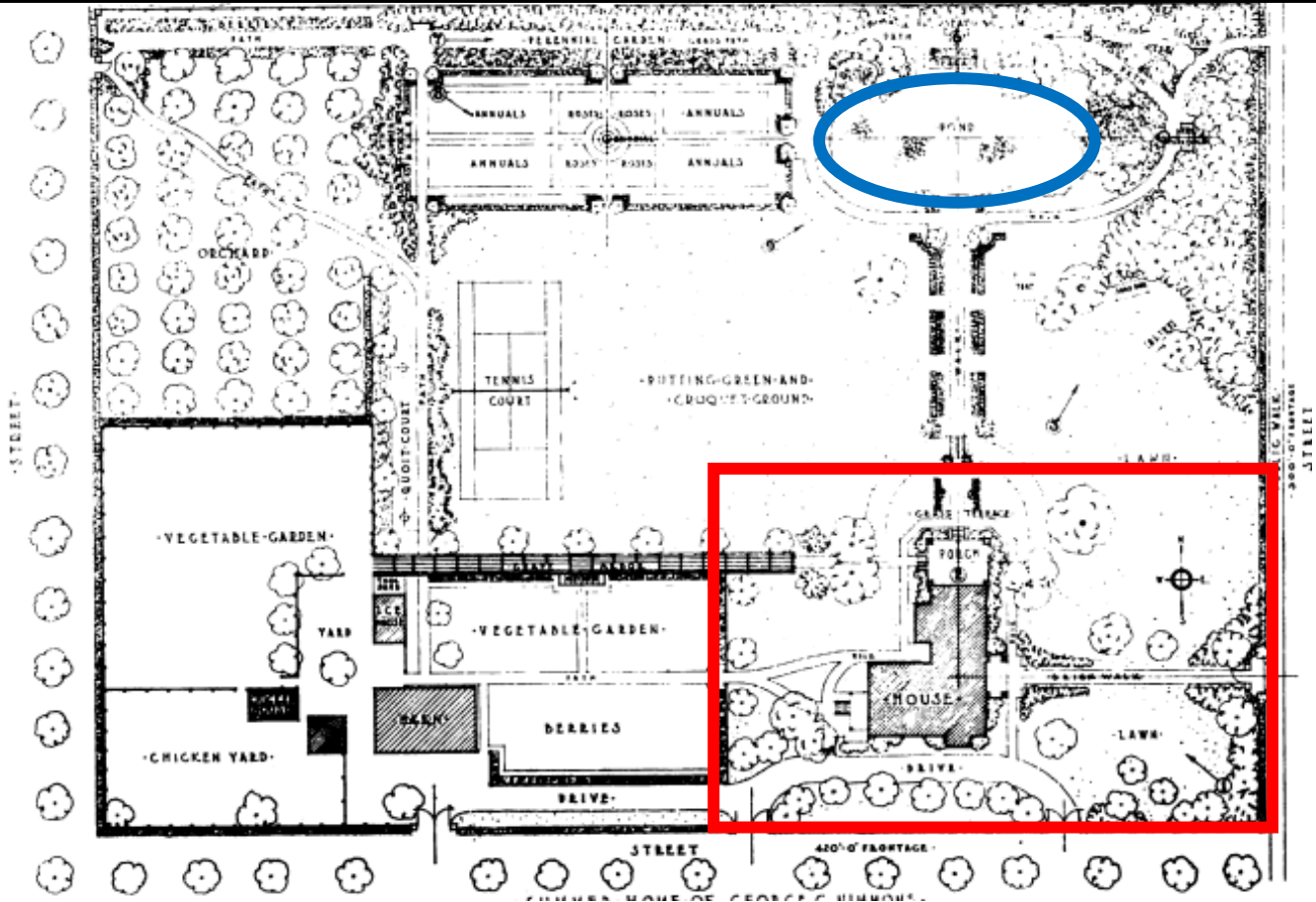
Right: Living room in the Beatty house. The home was first "modernized" way back in 1939. Since then, subsequent owners have provided continuous updates.



THE NIMMONS ESTATE

The historic images in this section are sourced from an extensive article in a 1919 issue of *The Architectural Record*, a journal Nimmons contributed articles to for a number of years.

Below is Nimmons's original plan for the land, which show the positions of gardens, the pond (blue circle), tennis court, etc. The area within the red square is the current size of the lot (approximately).



Right: George C. Nimmons' self-designed house, built circa 1909. This home sat on a 2.9 acre lot before later subdivision. The front door, located on the right in this 2017 image, faced Western Avenue and provided a view golf course across the street—before the trees grew large enough to block it. Nimmons owned the house the rest of his life.





1919 view from the northwest corner of the estate over the gardens to the rear side of the house.



Gardens and pathways on the estate.



View of the front door, with balcony above.



Above: A southerly view across the lily pond to the back side of the home. The back of the home features a large open porch on the first floor, with an enclosed "sleeping porch" above.

Right: The pond was 40 feet by 100 feet and surrounded with paths.





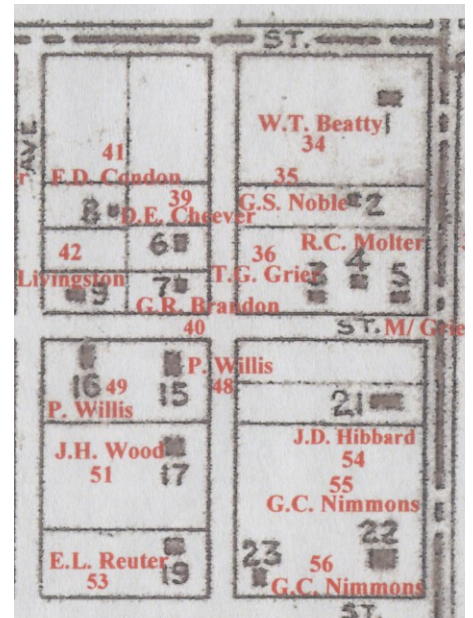
Above is a picture of the home's dining room from 1919 Architectural Record article. Below is a photograph from a 2017 real estate ad, when the house was last for sale, taken from almost the same angle.



THE SECOND NIMMONS HOUSE

Right: A detail of a 1924 map of Flossmoor that includes the names of homeowners in red ink, with their homes represented as black squares. This map shows George C. Nimmons as owning the houses labelled as #22 and #23 in the bottom-right corner. It is not known exactly why Nimmons built a second house on his estate, although we can likely assume it was a guest house for out-of-town visitors.

Map is sourced from the "Flossmoor Historic Home Study" produced by Richard W. Condon and Dr. Kristine Condon in 2020.



Right: The home at 1295 Brassie Avenue, as photographed in 2014. Public records state the home was built in 1908, but that is contradicted by the Nimmons's site plan (shown earlier in this essay) which has a chicken yard and a vegetable garden in this area. Only the central portion of the house is original; the garage on the left and the taller part on the right are later additions.



I have not been able to find definitive evidence that Nimmons acted as his own architect on this project, but it seems likely that he did. After Nimmons's death in 1947, the house was separated from the estate and converted from a "presumed guest house" to a full-time residence. In the 1950 census, the Lester Dean family was living in the home. They did not stay long, moving to California by 1951.

FLOSSMOOR COUNTRY CLUB



Above and Right: Mid-1920s photographs of the southern façade of the FCC Clubhouse designed by Nimmons.



Right: A 1916 photograph of the FCC dormitory built as a companion piece to the clubhouse. Many of the members lived in the city and did not have summer homes in Flossmoor, so the club provided them with overnight accommodations.





Above: Photograph of the Lounging Room in the FCC clubhouse.

Below: The "Men's Lunch Room" in the FCC clubhouse.

Both photographs appear in an article on golf course architecture written by Nimmons in the February 1917 issue of "The Architectural Review."



RAVISLOE AND OLYMPIA FIELDS COUNTRY CLUBS

Right: Artistic rendering of an interior courtyard from Nimmons's unused Spanish Revival plan for Flossmoor. From "The Architectural Review."

Below: Ravisloe Country Club's clubhouse, Nimmons' second golf clubhouse design, contained elements from his unused first design for FCC. Photo from the Ravisloe website.



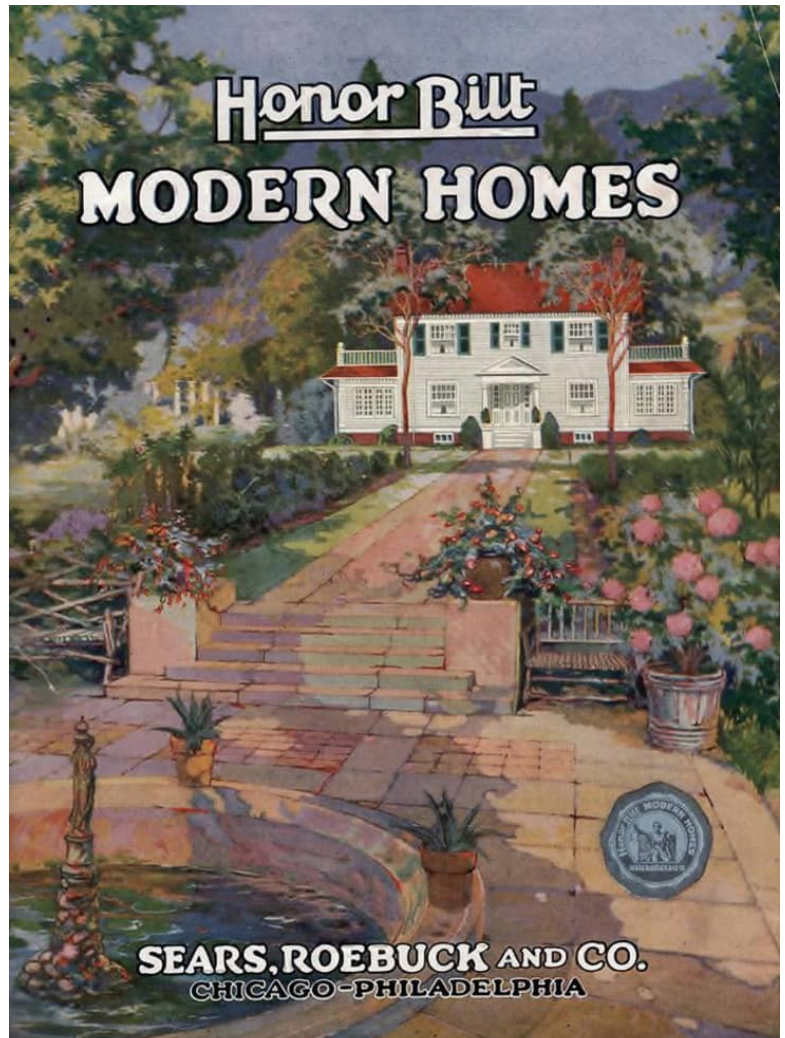
Right: The Olympia Fields Country Club clubhouse, done in an English Tudor style and featuring an 80-foot high four-sided clock tower, was Nimmons's largest and most expensive golf clubhouse design by far. Photo from OFCC website.



PART 3: SEARS “KIT HOMES”

Readers with a special interest in early 20th Century American history might be asking themselves a question by this point. We know Nimmons was the Sears company’s preferred architect for their commercial buildings, and we know he had the ability to design fine residences. Did he also design any of the famous “kit homes” that Sears sold by mail? The answer is yes, but we don’t know how many. The cause for uncertainty is the Sears company was notoriously secretive about crediting architects at all.

The Sears kit home program ran from 1908 to 1942. During the 34 year history of the program, over 370 different home kits were produced by Sears, and over 70,000 kits were sold—an average of 189 sales per model. Customers would order the kits by catalog, and prices were lower than traditional homebuilding due to Sears’ ability to mass produce items and pass cost savings along. The kits, which could contain over 30,000 individual parts, would arrive by boxcar if the building site was close to a train line. Some customers received their order by the truckload. At that point, it was up to them or their hired contractors to put the house together.



Cover of the 1922 edition of the Sears “Modern Homes” catalog. Image courtesy of Wikipedia.

Sears did not credit individual architects in the catalog. The blueprints would occasionally list the architect, but very few customers kept them and the company discarded most of their records after ending the program. Thus, attaching a particular kit design to a particular architect takes a lot of detective work from a number of online sleuths devoted to the cause. Often, these researchers are having better luck searching municipal archives, because homeowners would occasionally transcribe the architect’s name from the blueprints to their city or town’s building permit application (although a larger contingent would just write “Sears” on the municipal form). So far, there is compelling evidence that Nimmons designed at least three of the 370 kit plans—and odds are there’s more waiting to be discovered.

On the next page are the three designs currently attributed to George C. Nimmons by internet researchers. Although there are no Sears Kit Homes in Flossmoor, there are three separate models in Homewood. Only one of them has a verified architect, and it is not Nimmons.

SEARS KIT HOME PLANS ATTRIBUTED TO NIMMONS

All images on this page are sourced from the "Sears Homes of Chicagoland" website



Above left: The "Alhambra," a popular Spanish-style house in the 1921 catalog.

Above right: This mirror-imaged version of the Alhambra was built in 1922 on Chicago's northwest side. Nimmons's name appears on the building permit.



Above left: The "Walton," a craftsman-styled bungalow by Nimmons, was sold from 1920-1930 and was one of Sears' best-selling plans.

Above right: This Walton example is on Wood Street in Crete.

Right: The "Crescent," a nostalgic Cape Cod design.



Sears Crescent, from the 1922 Modern Homes catalog.

PART 4: LATER CAREER, RETIREMENT, AND DEATH

Nimmons split with William K. Fellows in 1910 and worked solo until incorporating the new firm of George C. Nimmons and Company in 1917. His work for Sears continued unabated. In addition to designing ten regional distribution centers across the country, Nimmons and/or his firm eventually designed over 150 stores for Sears as the company pivoted to in-person retail in 1925. Work was credited to the firm in general and it can be difficult to attribute it to one specific partner, but Nimmons likely had a hand in each design.

Following the “Roaring ‘20s,” Nimmons’s career extended throughout the Great Depression of the 1930s. Obviously, the economic strife meant that less money was available for grand architectural efforts. As but one example, at right is an extravagant proposal Nimmons designed for the Chicago Yacht Club in 1929, just before the stock market crash. It would never be built.

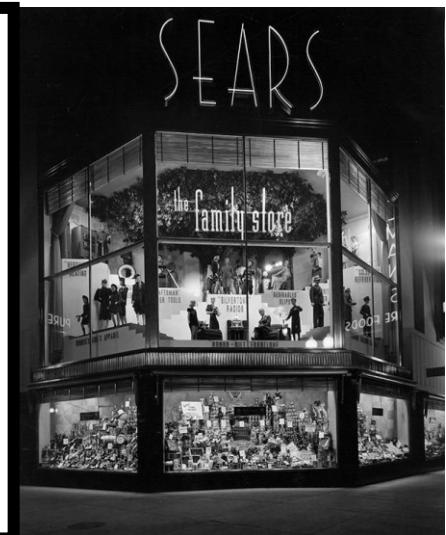


In 1933, Nimmons made his assistants George Wallace Carr and Clark Wright full partners and reincorporated the firm as Nimmons, Carr and Wright. At right is one of the firm’s most important accomplishments of the 1930s—The Sears, Roebuck, & Company pavilion, a strikingly modern showpiece built as a temporary structure for the 1933 World’s Fair in Chicago. Due to his work as a draftsman for Burnham and Root during the 1893 Columbian Exposition, it is entirely possible that Nimmons may be the only architect to have worked on both the 1893 and the 1933 Chicago World’s Fairs.



As the Great Depression continued, work for the firm became much less frequent than what Nimmons experienced earlier in his career. In 1944, after over fifty years of work, he retired at the age of 79. He died three years later, in 1947. Despite his prolific career, his death seems to have prompted little interest at the time. Hometown paper The Chicago Tribune only published a brief death notice that didn’t even mention his career as an architect.

Right: This striking two-story display window was the central feature of the 1938 design by Nimmons’s firm for a Sears store at the “Six Corners” location on Irving Park Road in Chicago.



LATER (POST-1917) WORK



Above: By the time Nimmons & Company designed this Los Angeles building in 1926, they had started using art deco/streamline motifs that appear more modern than Nimmons's earlier works. This was a hybrid building that contained both a ground level retail store and a distribution plant.



Above: Nimmons's firm designed over 150 retail stores for Sears. This example is from 79th Street in Kenwood.



Above: The last of the ten regional Sears distribution centers, all of which were designed by Nimmons or his firm. This opened in 1928 in Boston.



Above: Nimmons worked with fellow architects Max Raeder and Nelson M. Dunning on the 1926 American Furniture Mart Building in Chicago. Encompassing an entire city block, the building was the largest in the world at the time it was built. It has been converted into residential usage, with over 400 units.

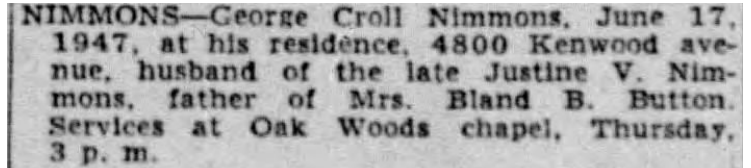
PART 5: LEGACY

That Nimmons died in relative obscurity—and remained there in the decades since—should perhaps not be a great surprise. For every “name brand” architect like Louis Sullivan, Frank Lloyd Wright or Daniel Burnham, there are dozens if not hundreds of capable architects that do not achieve any level of fame. Also, the period of Nimmons’s career—1888 to 1944—overlapped not just with the aforementioned titans but also with the rise of

groundbreaking European Modernists like Walter Gropius and Mies van der Rohe (who moved to Chicago in 1938 and radically changed the city’s architecture). It is easy to see why he would have been overshadowed. Still, he had a career worth recognizing and left behind a number of well-designed buildings, some modest and some monumental, that are still inspiring people today. Although a complete list has seemingly never been compiled, it is safe to say that there are between 200 and 300 buildings designed in whole or in part by Nimmons throughout the country—and that’s not counting the untold number of Sears kit homes that may be out there. Dozens of his buildings are on the National Register of Historic Places, and 21 have been designated as Chicago Landmarks.

One of the trends that keeps Nimmons’s legacy alive today is that of adaptive reuse, the process of reusing an existing building for a purpose other than which it was originally designed. Many of the massive commercial buildings Nimmons designed have taken on a new life. These developments have used Nimmons’s architecture to help reinvigorate neighborhoods that had been declining through the decades of America’s postindustrial era. Here in Chicago, the three remaining buildings at the old Sears Headquarters have been converted to loft apartments, a charter high school, and office space for local non-profit organizations. In Seattle, Starbucks remodeled an entire Nimmons building to serve as their global headquarters. In Boston, developers turned a warehouse into 401 Park, a retail and dining destination which is located just a block from venerated Fenway Park and helps anchor the neighborhood. More recently, adaptive reuse has been tied into “New Urbanism,” the movement towards creating mixed-use, densely populated, and walkable neighborhoods in cities that are heavily car-dependent. Recent conversions have changed Nimmons’s old Sears warehouses into spaces that combine retail stores, corporate offices, *and* residential units—all under one roof. Examples include Ponce City Market in Atlanta, Crosstown Concourse in Memphis, Southside on Lamar in Dallas, and Midtown Exchange in Minneapolis.

Nimmons owned his Flossmoor estate, as well as his main residence in Chicago’s Kenwood neighborhood, right up until his death. His wife Justine had died ten months prior. Their remaining adult daughter lived in north suburban Wilmette and sold off the estate after 38 years of family ownership. Thankfully the homes he designed, as well as the FCC Clubhouse across the street, continue to contribute to the collective aesthetic value of Flossmoor well over 110 years after their construction.



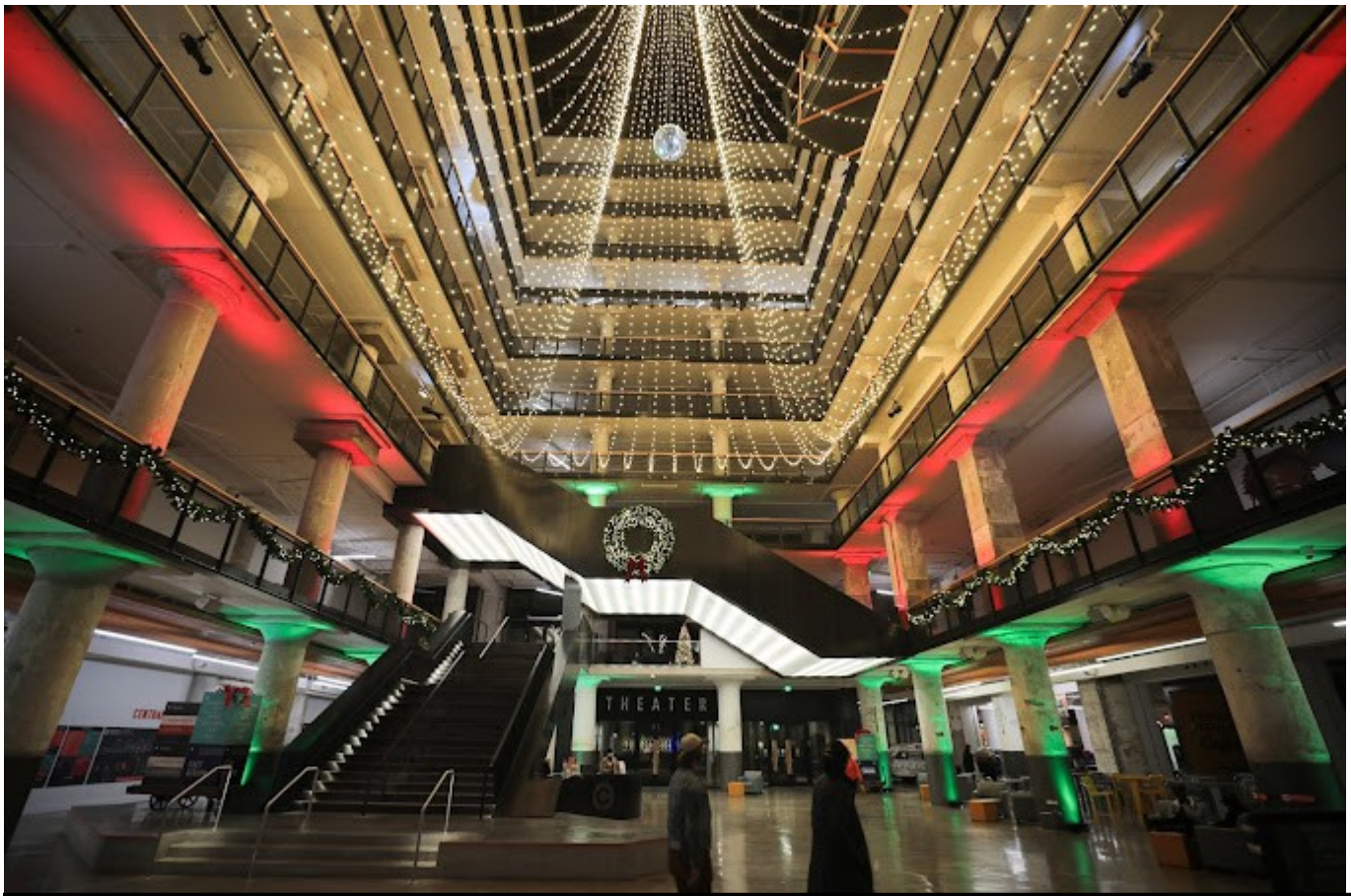
NIMMONS—George Croll Nimmons, June 17, 1947, at his residence, 4800 Kenwood avenue, husband of the late Justine V. Nimmons, father of Mrs. Bland B. Button. Services at Oak Woods chapel, Thursday, 3 p. m.

The brief obituary published by the Chicago Tribune. Tribune articles in previous decades would report on most of Nimmons’s architectural creations in the city, but the obituary doesn’t mention his career at all.



Above left: The façade of the Ponce City Market in Atlanta, originally designed by Nimmons as a Sears distribution center in 1926.

Above right: The dining area of the Ponce City Market retains the building's industrial aesthetic.



Above: Atrium in the Crosstown Concourse in Memphis. This redevelopment created a theater, retail spaces, restaurants, offices, and apartment units on the upper floors.

APPENDIX A: SUGGESTED ADDITIONAL VIEWING

Before moving on to the bibliography, I wanted to advise the reader—should they be interested—about a trove of remarkable videos available online. George Nimmons was an avid “home movie” hobbyist, and approximately seven years ago the Olympia Fields Country Club Historic Landmark Foundation went to great lengths to digitize and publish online a series of short clips he had filmed between 1929 and 1933. While a significant portion of the videos were filmed at the OFCC, there is also a great amount filmed at the Flossmoor Country Club or Nimmons’s Flossmoor estate. After learning about the estate through this essay, you may be interested in the rare opportunity of taking a “virtual walk” through the extensive grounds, most of which has been lost to later development.

Below is a series of links to the relevant videos, along with my annotations of the scenes. Thanks again to the OFCC Historic Landmark Foundation for making these enchanting glimpses into the past available for the general public. If viewing this PDF on a computer, hold Ctrl key and click on the links in blue; if on a phone or tablet, simply tap on the links.

Nimmons Estate Scenes, Presented in chronological order:

<https://vimeo.com/277542927>

This video from 1929 starts at the front gate of the Nimmons estate. The video then follows George’s young daughter Nancy Nimmons on a stroll throughout the grounds. At 2:26 Nancy and two others go for a swim in the pond. At 4:00 George, Justine and Nancy appear together in a touching family scene (screen grab at right). George is 64 and Justine is 55, but because they had Nancy late in life she is only 12 or 13. In fact, George and Justine had two children before Nancy who both died before she was born; daughter Marie lived from 1899—1903 and son Paul from 1901—1912. Nancy was born in 1916.



<https://vimeo.com/277542869>

The entirety of this video follows Nancy Nimmons and another young girl walking around the estate. The pond and various gardens are seen.

Continued on next page

SUGGESTED ADDITIONAL VIEWING (CONTINUED)

<https://vimeo.com/277542934>

The video begins on the house's balcony. FCC golfers are seen walking in the background. Nancy and a friend are working on a project. At 00:45 George comes out to greet them, and the scene ends. From 00:58 to the end, Nancy and her friends are seen around the grounds in very extravagant period costumes, as if for a fashion show or a theatrical performance.

<https://vimeo.com/277542861>

Video begins with a group of young people, including an older Nancy with a shorter haircut, walking through the gardens of the estate. At 00:30 they exit the estate and walk alongside a busy Western Avenue. At 00:45 they reenter the estate through the front gate and the home is seen in the background. At 1:00 Justine Nimmons is sitting on a bench in front of the estate's pond. The young people seen walking earlier join her for a conversation. At 1:50 is a golf scene, probably filmed at OFCC. This portion is noteworthy for some unusual and comedic putting sequences that would have required either some in-camera special effects or a trick ball and green; see 2:34—2:42 and 3:04—3:25. From 3:35 to the end of the video are more scenes from the estate.

<https://vimeo.com/277542891>

A rather lengthy video (9+ minutes), all shot at the estate. Mostly features Nancy Nimmons and her friends strolling through the grounds. This was filmed in 1933 and Nancy is now 16 or 17. The house is seen at 6:43.

Flossmoor Country Club scenes:

<https://vimeo.com/277542843>

At 00:08, an establishing shot of the Flossmoor Country Club clubhouse. This is followed by several scenes of golf, presumably at FCC. At 3:15, the clubhouse is shown again. At 3:26 the dormitory is briefly seen.

<https://vimeo.com/277542886>

All golf scenes from FCC. The clubhouse is seen from 2:03—2:18

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The below is a list of articles published by George C. Nimmons in various publications between 1907 and 1924. They are available via Google Books or the HathiTrust Digital Library (www.hathitrust.org). It is also very possible that some of the “uncredited” articles that are in bold type on the previous page of this bibliography may have been written by Nimmons, but their lack of attribution precludes them from being listed here.

Collectively, these articles provide a modern-day researcher with the best possible insight into Nimmons’s mind, illuminating his architectural philosophies. Some are banal discussions of topics such as the use of concrete as a building material, while others explore his progressive belief in the power of architecture and design to improve the lives of the working class. His epic seven-part series on “Modern Industrial Plants” was considered a guiding work for a generation of industrial architects, with citations to the articles appearing in works produced years later.

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