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# Watch Hill

A Walking Tour of  
 “Rock Island’s Newest and  
 Most Beautiful Subdivision”

Historic Homes from the  
 1940s & 1950s



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Rock Island has been shaped by its neighborhoods and architecture over the past 160 years. Our history lies in the recent past as well as in older eras. One historic period was the 1940s and 1950s, decades that changed the world and Rock Island.

Although much of the world was already involved in a great war in 1941, not until December did the United States formally enter it on two fronts. Until then, optimism prevailed after the long depression years. In that year, shoes sold for \$1.99 a pair and butter was 34 cents a pound, but technology was expensive. A radio-phonograph automatically playing up to 14 records was advertised at \$44.88. In April, 1941, lots in the brand new Watch Hill subdivision were offered to the public.

In retrospect, this was not an auspicious time to market land. Yet these lots sold quickly to area movers and shakers. With 10 percent down and no interest or taxes for the first three years, many buyers opted for multiple lots to create an in-town estate. Watch Hill Road, which winds through the center of the subdivision, began as an extension of the older 40<sup>th</sup> Avenue on the west. The road was soon lengthened to 17<sup>th</sup> Street, providing a second access to this scenic area.

Only twelve homes were under construction in Watch Hill's first year, most on the Hawthorne and Woodley Road cul-de-sacs. Once we entered the war, building materials became scarce, and labor was diverted. A building boom in the late 1940s and early 1950s created the Watch Hill we see today, with typical construction costs significantly higher than the minimum \$5500 mandated. Many of these original owners would remain for decades.

Watch Hill was the first Rock Island subdivision designed to take full advantage of unique geographical features while creating park-like home settings. Bounded by steep ravines, and shaded by century-old trees, the generously sized lots in the 55 acre subdivision are embraced by their natural surroundings.

The architecture of Watch Hill is a product of its era, yet most of the homes show the influence of colonial American styles, from the modest Cape Cod to the bold and high-style Georgian. The traditional Cape Cod was a gable-roofed 1 ½ story cottage with its side gable, holding small dormers, turned toward the street. The Georgian was more ostentatious, with two or more stories, masonry walls and symmetry throughout. Small-paned sash windows were typical. The combination of colonial decorative elements and modern forms led to a new style known as the Minimal Traditional.

There were new forms as well. The Split Level, sometimes called the Raised Ranch, came into its own in the 1950s, while the spreading one-story Ranch became an icon of the era. These styles were influenced by the earth-hugging Prairie style. A frequent feature of the modern home was a patio or deck accessed by wide double doors, either sliding or hinged.

Watch Hill was platted without alleys, thus requiring street access to garages. Garages were always attached to the home, sometimes linked by an open breezeway. Most originally held only one car, but have been expanded over the years. In contrast to today's homes, Watch Hill garages are typically recessed or use a side entrance and thus do not dominate the front façade.

*The walking tour begins at the intersection of Hawthorne Road and Watch Hill Road. It first goes west, then returns to the east, ending at 37 Watch Hill Road, which is a short distance from the starting point.*

## 37 Watch Hill Road



Steven and Elizabeth Miller built this home in 1950 at a cost of \$20,000. Twenty-five years later, other owners enclosed a formerly open porch to create a larger living area. This 1 ½ story home is designed in the Minimal Traditional style. It has simple massing with a large front gabled area extending beyond the front door. Many features have elements of early American cottages, including the narrow gabled dormer and the small-paned upper window sashes. The modern influence is seen in the large front picture window with smaller double-hung sidelights. The brick façade on the east is modern looking, but the square-cut shakes on the front and west provide a historic touch. The rolling terrain was used to advantage to allow the basement garage that is hidden from street view yet remains very functional.

*End of Tour*



## 35 Watch Hill Road



Two of the originally platted Watch Hill lots provide a beautiful site for the home that was built in 1953 for John and Maravene Bahnsen, who lived here for over 20 years. Mr. Bahnsen was associated with Swan & Bahnsen Drugstore and Bahnsen Lumber Company. Its long, low massing is typical of the Ranch style, while the small window panes, arched arcade, and front gables reflect its colonial era antecedents. The older double-hung windows have 8 small panes on the upper sashes and 12 on the lower. This is an uncommon configuration. Shutters, where they are present, are of a scale that is appropriate to the window. A combination of three kinds of siding -- board-and-batten, brick, and clapboard -- work compatibly to create an inviting home. Although it appears that an original garage and breezeway were converted to living area and a new garage constructed, architectural drawings in the possession of the current owner show today's configuration is original. The open breezeway, which became popular in the 1940s and 1950s as garages started to be attached to homes, provided architectural distinction between garage and home, yet allowed easy transit between the two. Note the dovescotes in a front gable.

## 23 Watch Hill Road



This home was built in 1946 at a cost of \$8300. The first owners were Lee Lundahl of Lundahl Motors, and his wife Nancy. The home is typical of resurgence of the Cape Cod style in the 1940s. It has a gabled roof with the gable side toward the front. Gable-roofed dormers are set directly over the symmetrically placed windows on the first story. A small but formal gabled portico is supported by square columns, and fluted pilasters flank the front door. During their fifty years occupancy, the Lundahls added the garage and also enclosed a side porch. More recently, the original windows were replaced, although it appears that the original configuration with small panes in both upper and lower sashes was maintained. Shutters may have been an original feature as well, but the present ones are a replacement. Shutters would have been sized so that they appear to be functional, even when they were not.



A sleek classic Ranch style home, this was built in 1955 for Aaron and Alice Novak at a cost reported to be \$32,500. It was the Novak family home for nearly fifty years, which may account for the fact that it retains its original appearance. Mr. Novak operated Novak Home TV & Appliances at 1409 30<sup>th</sup> Street in Rock Island. The characteristic sprawling low hipped roof is crowned by a similarly wide and low chimney. Wide eaves shelter the buff brick sidewalls. Note that the bricks themselves are long and narrow adding to the overall horizontal feel of the home. The recessed front entrance provides shelter near the door without the clutter of a separate porch or stoop. Large "picture" windows were an important feature of many 1950s houses. In this example, they are framed by casement windows to allow ventilation. This intact home is remarkable in that it still has only a single-car garage, the norm for the era. The simple evergreen plantings are also typical of the 1950s and enhance the long low silhouette.



## 41 Hawthorne Road



This mid 19<sup>th</sup> Century interpretation of the Georgian style was built in 1951 at a cost of \$40,000 for Adrienne and George Crompton. Mr. Crompton was affiliated with Interstate Pattern & Machine Co. The Cromptons remained here for nearly fifty years. The classic Georgian influence is apparent in the complete symmetry of the front façade. There are twin chimneys, one at each end of the roof, small paned windows on the second story above large windows at the main level. The shutters on the windows appear original, as they are sized so that they could actually be functional. The impressive entry has an interrupted, also called "broken", pediment framing a small balcony. Colonial influenced sidelights -- narrow vertical windows -- flank the front door. The original two-story columns that form the front portico are more typical of the southern antebellum plantation house than the New England Georgian. This is a very large house, with its attached garage and a formerly open breezeway hidden behind the main bulk of the home. The large triangular corner site incorporates two of the originally platted lots.



One of the few two-story homes on Watch Hill Road, this was built for Robert and Dorothy Wellman in 1954 at a cost of \$17,000. A few years later, the Wellmans added a room, although that is not obvious from the front view. This is a classic Colonial home with a Georgian influence. The large end chimney and the small-paned windows symmetrically placed on the façade are characteristic of the Georgian style. Even the shutters are appropriately sized. It is strange that a style named for the four different King Georges who governed England for the century encompassing the American Revolution, has become one of this country's most enduringly popular architectural styles. The number of Georgian homes waxes and wanes over the decades, reaching a peak of interest about every 25 years. This is obviously a late interpretation – an attached front garage was not seen until the 1950s.



## 34 Woodley Road



Built in 1953 at a cost of \$22,500, this home began its life as a classic ranch. The first owners were Nicholas and Pauline Chirekos. Mr. Chirekos was a restaurateur, who was locally famed for his Plantation nightclub in Moline's former Velie Mansion on 7<sup>th</sup> Street near Blackhawk Road. The Chirekos family added a two-car garage in 1965 and later owners added another garage as well as a sunroom. This home features the wide-eaved hipped roof typical of the Ranch style, but there are several levels, reflecting the additions over the years. Notice the area of siding to the left of the front recessed porch and the absence of the banding just below the eave as further evidence of change. Also of note are the low, wide chimneys that are typical of the Ranch style.



## 9 Watch Hill Road

This is the only Watch Hill Road example of the Split Level style (sometimes called the Raised Ranch) that was popular in the 1950s and for decades thereafter. It was built for Sidney and Pearl Deutsch in 1955 at a cost of \$22,700. The Deutsches remained here for 45 years, which may explain why relatively few changes have been made. The one-story portion has a stone facing, likely original as such exterior surfaces became popular in that era. The typical Split Level placed the public living spaces – kitchen, living and dining rooms – on the middle level. Here we see that level on the right, with a gabled roof and a huge masonry chimney. The windows – a row of large, fixed pane sashes above lower operable panels -- were a 1950s innovation for homes. To the left and slightly above the living area are the bedrooms and private family areas, while beneath them is the garage. Typically this lower level would also hold a recreation room and the utility area. The hipped roof on this two story section keeps it visually low so that it does not dominate the façade.



## 12 Watch Hill Road



This was built in 1949 for Frank and Elizabeth Gadiant. He was an actuary with Modern Woodmen of America, and spent \$12,000 to build this new home. Although building records do not indicate additions to the home, the varying height of rooflines may mean that half of the garage and the "ell" to the left were not part of the original floor plan. The home has a very contemporary appearance, because of the uncommon corner windows on the ell. Such windows were popularized by the International style architects in the 1930s and later, and are not often seen in residential construction.



## 6 Watch Hill Road

One of the few homes built in 1941 in Watch Hill, this was first owned by Robert and Agnes Norwich. Mr. Norwich was an auditor for The Argus. Originally the house was probably built in the popular Minimal Traditional style. After being sold to Elmer and Genevieve Spiller in the mid 1940s, a one-car garage was added. The Spillers, who remained here nearly fifty years, were one of the longest residents of this area. After 2000, larger additions brought the home to today's appearance. Fortunately the home sits on three of the originally platted lots, so there was plenty of room for expansion. These later changes include an 18 x 22 foot addition, conversion of the old garage into living space, another 8 x 24 addition, and new garages. The original window configuration beneath the front gable was a "picture" window with double-hung sashes on either side. Today the home is long and low, similar to the Ranch style, except that multilevel roofs are not typical of the Ranch.



## 7 Watch Hill Road



This is one of the earliest homes in the subdivision, constructed in 1941 for Herman and Lillian Nelson. It cost \$5000, the minimum required by subdivision restrictions, and was one of only 12 homes built that year. Mr. Nelson was the owner of a Moline business, Herman Nelson Heating Equipment. Mrs. Nelson, later a widow, remained here for twenty years. This is one of the smaller Watch Hill homes. Over the years the front porch has been enclosed and the garage has been enlarged or perhaps even added. Because of its comparatively modern vintage and its traditional massing with little ornament, the style is known as the Minimal Traditional. This example evokes the massing of the classic Cape Cod, with its gabled roof and minimal roof overhang. The large front gable is a 1941 modern enhancement. Small-paned windows reflect the Cape Cod tradition, but the casement style sash is definitely modern. Note the huge rare American Elm in the front yard that survived the Dutch Elm disease of the 1950s and later. Trees like this once lined Rock Island streets.



An example of the Minimal Traditional influence on the Ranch style was the home of Albert and Clara Anderson, built about 1956 at a cost of \$25,000. Mr. Anderson was a parts manager for Economy Motor Sales. The Ranch style is apparent in the long, continuous roofline, although it is gabled rather than the typical hipped roof and the eave overhang is narrower. The Minimal Traditional is seen in the recessed front entry that is flanked by sidelights. In the 1950s, small-paned windows still had true divisions, with wood muntins and separate panes, rather than the simulated small panes popular today. Although such windows were difficult to clean – as many as 24 corners rather than just 4 in a sash -- they reflected light differently. If originally present, shutters would have been sized so that they could, at least theoretically, function as window covers.

## 5 Watch Hill Road



## 1 Watch Hill Road



Ralph and Lela Ritter, who were associated with Ritter Real Estate, were the first owners of this home built in 1951 at a cost of \$32,000. Stucco gables topping the brick walls provide visual variety in this Minimal Traditional style house. While obviously a modern home, the effort to incorporate the traditional influence is apparent. The roof is simple, composed of intersecting gables and false gables. A classic column or modern quoin effect is seen at either side of the bay windows. It was created by stacking especially long bricks, alternately recessing and extending the courses. Casement-style windows, topped with transoms, accent these slightly protruding bays. Simpler casements appear elsewhere in the home. In the 1960s, the home was enlarged with a three bedroom addition.

*At this point cross the street and return east along the south side of Watch Hill Road. Note that further to the west, the homes have 40th Avenue addresses. They are not part of the Watch Hill Subdivision but lie in a 1918 subdivision*