

The Villa Tour - The Basics

- This tour overview is written in script form, but does not need to be memorized. These are the facts that should be conveyed in any tour, but your delivery can be personal. It can help to learn the facts by writing them out in bullet-point form, from which you can develop your own script.
- Text in *italics* is either suggestions or directional information. The text in green relates to Wright's design in the Villa.
- An overview of the Fabyan history and an introduction to Frank Lloyd Wright can be presented outside of the villa if the weather permits, otherwise begin inside by the wing display.

INTRODUCTION:

Welcome to the Fabyan Villa Museum, home of George and Nelle Fabyan from 1907 to 1939. George Fabyan was born and raised in Boston, the son of a wealthy industrialist. His father made a fortune in cotton fabric sales, developing with a partner one of the largest sales firms in the US at the end of the 1800's. George left home at age 17 to make his own way in the business world, working in the lumber and railroad business before joining his father's firm in around 1891.

Nelle Fabyan was born and raised in Northern Wisconsin. Her father owned a dry goods store and lumber yard. It is thought that George and Nelle met as a result of George's business with her father. They were married in 1891, and came to Chicago shortly afterward. They lived on South Michigan Avenue.

The Fabyans purchased 10 acres on the Fox River in 1905 to be used as a country retreat. In 1907 they hired Frank Lloyd Wright to enlarge and remodel the L-shaped farmhouse existing on the property. They made it their permanent residence in 1908, renamed the house "the Villa" and lived here till their deaths--George in 1936 and Nelle in 1939.

They began acquiring additional property in 1907, eventually creating a country estate of 350 acres straddling the Fox River. After Nelle's death, the Forest Preserve District of Kane County purchased 225 acres of the estate; it is now the Fabyan Forest Preserve. *(it may be helpful to indicate the limits of the Forest Preserve—31 on the west, soccer fields east of 25, Fabyan Parkway, and the north end of the limestone wall).*

They named their estate Riverbank, and added features and functions according to their interests. These included a working farm with dairy cows, Jersey cattle, horses, goats, sheep, thousands of chickens and ducks. The estate also housed a private zoo with bears (in the bear cage), monkeys (most likely Rhesus, in 2 separate cages), exotic birds (peacocks, parrots and homing pigeons, in an aviary and coop), alligators (in two separate ponds/pits) and deer. There were 3 barns, dog kennels, a boathouse, garage, ice house, quarry, pools, greenhouses, gardens, grottoes, windmills, arbors, and several houses for staff. In addition, the estate featured the infamous Dutch-style windmill, the Japanese garden and a scientific research facility called Riverbank Laboratories, all still remaining.

*(You may also want to point out **Riverbank Laboratories** across Route 31 before entering the Villa, explaining that it was part of estate, but now privately owned. Indicate information will be*

given later in tour.)

We have no photographs or plans of the original farmhouse (built c. 1870). Frank Lloyd Wright's redesign floor plans exist in his archives, and reflect the original L-shape. *(Plans show minor deviations were made, some on the original prints, some in the execution.)*

The exterior was restored to original materials and colors in 1998.

(If you are outside, this is a good place to indicate the extent of Wright's remodeling and addition to the farmhouse.)

- Added entire south "wing" (past back porch)
- Changed all of the windows, from single double-hung to bands or grouped together casements
- Changed the roof by bringing the gable sides down to below the second story windows, and extending the eaves out from gable ends
- Added verandas to north south and east sides of house, extending living space out into nature
- Added spindle screen fence off of porch to create a horizontal element at ground level—it also visually incorporated a large tree—now gone-- into the architecture

(Now indicate move to interior to see photos and artifacts—lead group to door; open and direct group to wing display)

Indicate door if desired: door and hardware are original to Fabyans, and is a Dutch door—upper half separate from lower, could be opened separately for air (now bolted together) while keeping animals out.

At wing display, flip through panels while giving overview of these estate highlights:

Dutch Windmill - 1914 - originally constructed around 1870 in York Center (between Elmhurst and Oak Brook). Purchased by Colonel Fabyan. Approximately \$75,000 spent by Fabyan to purchase, dismantle, transport and reconstruct at Riverbank. The mill ground wheat for area farmers during rationing in WWI, also for personal use by Fabyans. It is on the National Register and was featured on U.S. postage stamp Windmill series c. 1980. Restoration completed in 2004.

Japanese Garden - designed by Japanese Landscape architect Taro Otsuka c. 1910. The garden was maintained by Susumu Kobayashi from 1918 to 1939; lived here with family during that time. Restored by Geneva Garden Club and the Forest Preserve beginning in 1972.

Centennial Garden – Anchored by a 50-ft. flagpole. The Fabyans, ever patriotic, posted a sign near the flagpole requesting that passersby please salute the flag. Also had a small cannon and a reflecting pool.

Rose Arbor and Sundial – Divided centennial garden and rose garden

Greenhouses – (demolished) Raised flowers, especially roses, and sold to florists in Chicago and locally. The South greenhouse's Conservatory was planted with grass and tropical plants. This greenhouse was additionally used to house the Fabyan's alligators and some of their birds during the winter.

Boathouse- Fabyans had canoes, a rowboat, and a sailboat. Maintained by a Norwegian former sailor named Jack Wilhelmson. He also created the giant spider web seen in photo on wing display.

Fountains and Pools- a large, sunken fountain was located north of the Villa- remains are visible. A smaller reflecting pool with fountain is located on the east side of the Villa. This was originally a pond for alligators. Large swimming pool with Roman colonnade surround on island.

Egyptian-style Cement Furniture: Silvio Silvestri, sculptor/artist who worked for the Fabyans and lived on the estate; also created the other cement structures. Egyptian decorations along with Japanese and Chinese were popular during the late Victorian Era.

The Fabyans maintained a private museum at the Tuning Fork/Engineering Building – the source of many of our artifacts.

***HALL**

****do not backtrack into the hall—give this information when you bring group in or skip this info, especially if group is large***

The entry hall was either added or heavily remodeled; it reflects Wright's Prairie style. Light fixture, mirror, sheep/ram heads, and bench are original. The Riverbank sign is from elsewhere on estate.

Built in bench, stringcoursing, mirror- FLW hallmarks.

NORTH ROOM/LIVING ROOM/DEN

Called the Den

Most of the artifacts are Fabyan

Mrs. Fabyan collected some of the eggs & decorative bird displays were common at the time

The majority of the animals were part of the Fabyan's Private museum

Heavy beamed ceiling –possibly part of Wright's redesign

Open to dining room

Built-in furniture—bookcases, bench

Flat wood trim at or near door and window height - stringcoursing

Diamond-paned screen of windows – like Home & Studio in Oak Park

SUN PORCH

Dummy Mummy – very possibly unclaimed rail freight--Fabyan purchased unclaimed freight-built a storage building for collection, often sold extras to locals. Perhaps from circus side show—these fake mummies were common in circuses. It was believed to be authentic until Friends of Fabyan had it examined by expert (*point out display pictures*).

The only real bone is a dog bone. Very realistic surface treatment according to expert.

Mako Shark - rare specimen in original skin, but painted over

Alligators - not Fabyan raised, their pets were smaller species

Peacocks - not Fabyan pet, although Mrs. Fabyan did raise exotic birds (including peacocks)

Hexagon on pillar, hexagon used by Wright in many designs, first in 1904 Beachy house

Open veranda further extends living space into nature, also is shaped as ½ hexagon. Abundance of windows draws one's attention to the surrounding nature

DINING ROOM

Servants' Call Button—on wood pillar

All Asian artifacts are Fabyan-- porcelain, ceramics, wood, metal– Originally kept in museum.

Samurai Warrior Suit – possibly a gift from Japanese Prince Fushimi, Emperor Hirohito's uncle

This space was originally occupied by Nelle's choralcello, a type of organ.

Buddhas were painted over in colors used in Christian churches during the nineteenth century.

Diana & the Lion (aka "Intelligence Subduing Brute Force") created for the 1893 World's

Columbian Exposition where it was displayed in the Palace of Fine Arts, obtained after 1917 from Art Institute.

Phoenix statues—Japanese mythological creature, made in USA

Built-in cabinet for telephone - FLW didn't want modern amenities detracting from his designs

Wood spindle screen - common FLW element, allows light and air movement, also allowed meal servers to assess serving needs without interrupting diners

Stringcoursing- tie together doors, windows as part of architecture, effectively lowers ceiling height

BUTLER'S PANTRY

Servant's Call Box (Buttons located in Dining Room, Nelle's Bathroom, Colonel's Bedroom, and both porches)

German silver and Marble sink- Original

Cow Bells- Made for the Fabyans at the Chantel Foundry in Switzerland. Bells are perfectly tuned.

Fabyan plates and Silent Butlers (used for cleaning up crumbs and emptying ashtrays)

Pantry is part of Wright addition

Very similar to FLLW Barton House, Rochester New York

KITCHEN

Designed for servants

Icebox area and built-in cabinet added during FLW redesign. Hole in wall with wooden door allowed ice to be loaded into box from porch. Note drain in floor for icebox, photo of Fabyan's icehouse, and ice handling tools (tongs, crusher)

Pantry has shelves and cabinet inside

Sink original (lowered to be comfortable for cook, who was quite short)

Range and table not original to the Villa, but are from the era

NELLE'S BEDROOM

Original Arts & Crafts style furniture – custom-made at a mill in North Aurora - note that the furniture fits into the molding by the floor. *(May have been designed by FLLW, have FLW look)*

Bed hung from the hooks which are still on the ceiling - probably believed it was healthy to have air circulating around her while she slept (avoid tuberculosis). Bed destroyed while in storage when the Villa Barn burned in the 1980's.

She occasionally slept on her veranda in a hammock during the summer

Shower - very modern for time - called Roman Shower - Water also sprayed from circular bars
Foot bath and foot controls on sink – Nelle was health and hygiene conscious.

Call Button located directly next to her “throne”

Loved the outdoors, imagine views and outside accessibility because of windows and doors.

Prints by the Leyendeckers- Nelle was an avid supporter of the arts

Statue- plaster cast- also in Little Room recreated at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Part of the Frank Lloyd Wright addition of 1907

Room scaled lower than other rooms - probably for Mrs. Fabyan who was 5 ft. tall

Frank Lloyd Wright often used classical and Renaissance art repro in his early years.

UPSTAIRS: HALL

Chaise lounge belonged to Colonel Fabyan – reupholstered by Forest Preserve

Art work was Fabyan’s from the Lodge

Floors refinished in 1980—not original color

Stairwell open—low wall creates feeling of larger space, lets light and air into stairwell.

Group of 3 French doors dissolves the wall, lets light/air into room from porch.

SLEEPING PORCH

Common element in Arts & Crafts period houses

Hooks for hammocks or porch swing - date installed unclear

The flooring is tinplate—typically used as flat roofing or surface for flat exterior elements.

Possibly originally roof of porch below or open air 2nd story porch floor—as has shingles on walls.

Call Button near southwest doorway

Patsy the Monkey and birds are reported to have wintered here.

Enclosed during FLW remodeling. East facing windows originally matched side windows.

SOUTH BEDROOM

Guest room, maybe sitting room

Light fixtures original –combination fixtures with both gas and electric

Normal height mantel (for average height people)

Rug adhered to floor due to heat

Marble topped dresser part of a 4 piece bedroom set in the West Guest Bedroom

Windows echo cross gable roof and frame views of Nature (FLW always used capital N)

Built-in bench incorporated into window design

Hexagon formed with mullions in windows; large window is ½ hexagon

CLOSET

Wardrobe from Riverbank Lodge

Original light fixture

KITCHEN (we don't show, but some people ask about)

Originally a bathroom that opened onto porch – converted by FP

COLONEL'S BEDROOM

Rosewood piano-leg table from Riverbank Lodge (top is not original to Fabyan era - will be remade hopefully)

Book case also from Riverbank Lodge- restored by Friends of Fabyan

Closet with unusual window—(can show if time permits)

Note step down into room and very high mantel - possibly to accommodate Fabyan's height of 6 feet plus. *Built-in bench, window design*

Riverbank Labs Exhibit cases

Labs were developed by George Fabyan for scientific pursuits. Labs main buildings still remain, across Rte. 31 from the Villa. The Lodge, a house used for offices and scientist housing, was most likely constructed by 1912. The Acoustic Lab was built in 1918 and the Engineering Building was constructed in 1922.

In 2005, the laboratories joined the Villa on the National Register of Historic Sites.

His first venture into science was hiring a plant geneticist named William Friedman, a recent Cornell graduate, to do experiments in improving crop production. Many gentleman farmers like Fabyan devoted resources to agricultural development.

Fabyan also had a long-standing interest in Shakespeare and ciphers (or codes). He became aware of a researcher trying to prove Sir Francis Bacon's authorship of the Shakespearean plays, using a cipher invented by Bacon. Fabyan convinced her, a scholar named Elizabeth Wells Gallup, to conduct her research under his auspices—and with his financing. For this research project he hired 5 college graduates to assist her, and acquired a large library of Baconian and Shakespearean work, including 3 first folios. Fabyan received much publicity for this research, especially after a Chicago judge declared Bacon the true author based on Gallup's findings!

William Friedman became involved in the codebreaking research after he was asked to take photographs—his hobby--of the manuscripts. He asked Fabyan if he could spend some time on the project and Fabyan consented. Friedman also had developed an interest in one of the assistants—Elizbeth Smith—and they were married in 1917. About the same time, the US was getting involved in World War I, and Fabyan offered his code breakers' expertise to military. U.S. military codebreaking was done at Riverbank in early 1917, and 70+ U.S. soldiers were trained at Riverbank in late 1917, by Friedman. These soldiers became the US Signal Corps, the precursor to the National Security Agency. Friedman himself was commissioned in late 1917, and went to the Front as the head of the US Signal Corps.

Riverbank Labs was recognized in 1992 by the U.S. Government as "Birthplace of the National Security Agency"

Fabyan had also investigated the potential of levitation from a description in a Bacon manuscript. He hired an engineer c.1915 to design and build the device. A cumbersome contraption, larger than this display case, it consisted of a vertical wooden cylinder strung with piano wire that when spun would levitate itself or a corresponding 2 piece shell. Not surprisingly it did not work. Fabyan contacted a Harvard physicist, Wallace Clement Sabine, who agreed to consult on the device

Apparently he was unable to make the device work, as no more is ever heard about it! Fabyan, always curious, inquires at length about Sabine's research. He is a pioneer in architectural acoustics, and describes his middle of the night experiments, due to noise from the street his "laboratory" is on in Cambridge. Fabyan reportedly tells him "Design what you need and we'll build it out here on the prairie where there isn't any noise!" Sabine agrees, and the Acoustic Laboratory is built in 1918, although Sabine never had the chance to use it, as he died in 1919. A distant cousin—also an acoustic physicist—continued Sabine's research and operated lab. From the first Sabine's work, he developed acoustic measurement formula, sound absorbing plaster ("Sabinite") and acoustic tile.

Still operational, one of three sound chambers in the U.S., it is run by Alionscience and does testing for the building industry.

Engineering Building (Wedding Cake) designed by Fabyan using cigarette boxes. 15 foot steel beams acquired in unclaimed freight shipment were used as framing for building (ship doors also used inside). Fabyan was early recycler!

Used for other R & D in machinery improvements, radio improvements, X-ray development, hearing aid development and more. Started tuning fork factory in building as offshoot of research and development in acoustics; tuning fork company occupied building until 2003, then relocated elsewhere in Geneva. Now houses recording instruments distributor.

COLONEL'S BATHROOM

Bathroom original to Wright remodeling, but fixtures date from about 1930s to 50s.

Note door to sleeping porch.

WEST BEDROOM

Nelle's father occupied from 1918 – 1925.

Belle Cumming's room later years – 1930s through 1940

Victorian Bedroom set, once owned by Fabyan's, unsure if it was in the house. 4 pieces total all Walnut in a Victorian style. Made by George Croome and Company, a well known Boston based furniture maker.

Amazing window echos gable roof, with decorative polygon mullions- from outside looks smaller, dwarfed by gable and projecting eaves