

Waveland Park News

FALL 2023 | DES MOINES, IOWA



STARS IN OUR EYES

BY ANN HINGA KLEIN



You've probably seen the Observatory Night sign that pops up at Polk Boulevard and University in spring, summer, and fall.

You might have even attended the stargazing sessions at the Drake Municipal Observatory just west of the tennis courts off Polk at Observatory Road.

But did you know that Waveland Park residents

once helped save the copper-domed observatory on Waveland Golf Course?

The story begins in 1896, when Drake University purchased a state-of-the-art telescope. Founded 15 years earlier, the university had established a respected astronomy department

and built an on-campus Science Hall, where the telescope was installed.

One of the program's early students was Daniel Morehouse. He was dapper, well liked, and a member of a championship football team, according to a 2019 observatory history compiled by Drake scholars Kaley Wresch and Deborah Kent, with additional research by Janis Winter and Wayne Orchiston.

After graduating in 1900, Morehouse began teaching physics and astronomy at Drake. It was then he identified the perfect place for an observatory: a knoll "in the middle of a beautiful public park" near what is now the 17th hole on Waveland Golf Course. It's one of the highest points in the Des Moines, and was away from the smoke, streetcar vibrations, and lights of the city.

Morehouse's career took him to Chicago (where, in 1908, he discovered a comet that still bears his name) and California, but he returned to Drake and brokered a deal to finally move the university's telescope. The City of Des Moines agreed to provide the site at Waveland Park, finance an observatory, and maintain the outside

of the building if Drake would equip it, maintain the building's interior, and offer public programs.

The Drake University Municipal Observatory was completed in 1921—the middle of the 1910 to 1930 building boom that created the Waveland Park neighborhood.

The tidy facility was constructed of Bedford stone, also known as Indiana Limestone. The Grecian architecture honors the contributions of ancient Greeks to the arts and sciences, and decorative motifs throughout the building celebrate various cultures, "each of which contributed its part to the science to which this

building is dedicated," Morehouse said at the building's opening ceremony.

Above its massive entry door, sculpted images depict the winged sun and cobras often used on Egyptian monuments, said to represent the smallness of an individual within the vast universe.

Columns on either side of the door contain raised panels depicting the 12 signs of the zodiac. And just inside, a rotunda floor crafted of sky-blue marble files showcases inlaid images of

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FALL WALKING TOUR

Featuring the Waveland Golf Course Clubhouse and Glendale Cemetery **BY MARK JOHNSON**

One of the preeminent public buildings of our neighborhood is the clubhouse on the Waveland Golf Course grounds. This building was erected in 1938 using a Works Progress Administration federal grant of \$23,000. The Tudor-style building features the classic combination of brick walls, steep roof lines, thick wood beams, and rustic stonework.

Join us October 7 at 10 a.m. to learn more about the history and architecture of this beautiful building. We are to start at the golf course clubhouse, then cross the street to review some cemetery architecture. Our guest speaker again will be Tom Wollan—bring your questions and your walking shoes!

SATURDAY, 10/7 • 10:00 AM • WAVELAND GOLF COURSE CLUBHOUSE • 4908 UNIVERSITY AVE.



“Stars In Our Eyes” CONTINUED

planets in a map of the solar system as it was known at the time.

A 150-person lecture room north of the rotunda was ringed with display cases depicting observatories, celestial bodies, and comets, including Comet Morehouse.

To the rotunda’s west, the Transit Room housed a telescope that provided the official time for the City of Des Moines and the railroad.

A spiral staircase took visitors to the structure’s pinnacle: an 18-foot-diameter Dome Room housing the university’s prized refracting-style telescope, which uses an 8.25-inch lens to collect and focus light from objects in space, forming their images.

A massive oak astronomer’s chair, which could be rotated using an electric motor, was attached to a wall-mounted rail encircling the room. Made of wood and clad in copper, the dome also rotated and opened along a central slot covered by shutters that could be moved aside using a system of ropes and pulleys, opening the room to the night sky.

Morehouse was named president of Drake in 1923, and after he died in 1941, his ashes were entombed in the rotunda wall. Soon after, however, the astronomy department at Drake began to decline. In addition to the void where Morehouse’s reputation and recruiting panache had been, World War II likely contributed to the slide, Wresch and Kent wrote. By 1951, Drake’s astronomy program

reportedly had just 13 students.

As funds and oversight lagged, Morehouse’s beloved observatory slid into disrepair. From the 1960s through the 1980s, vandals broke in, smashing displays and instruments, spraying fire extinguisher foam, stealing telescopes, and destroying irreplaceable books.

The lock on the Dome Room door kept intruders from reaching the main telescope and its accessories, but nature also took a toll, warping the dome, which in turn allowed bats, rain, and snow to enter the building. Foundation leaks added to the moisture problem.

In 1978, the *Des Moines Register* reported that Drake had quietly discontinued the lecture

series, citing a lack of funding, despite attendance that still averaged around 60 people per session. And while the series was later reinstated, the structure continued to decline.

In August of 1998, Drake graduate Patti Johnson wrote a moving letter to the editor of the *Des Moines Register*. A resident of Waveland Park, she had taken an astronomy class her senior year that sparked a lasting interest in the observatory and its Friday night programs.

In the letter, entitled “Who Will Save This Shrine to Truth?,” Johnson described caving plaster, vandalism that had never been repaired, and air so musty it was difficult to breathe.

A philosophy and religion major, she also eloquently described the building as “a humanistic temple to the broadening of mental horizons and all the truths that can

be investigated” and told readers what she found riveting about the observatory: the “peculiar dream of the people who built it” and a time in history when an astronomer could persuade a city to build an observatory and give it to a school so it could, in return, offer free astronomy lessons to the public.

One of the people who read that letter was David Huston, then vice president of the Waveland Park Neighborhood Association, pictured *far left*. Huston, who lives on 48th Street just a mile north of the observatory, had never seen the structure. “But,” he recalled recently, “I thought, I ought to check this place out.”

Huston went to the next scheduled Observatory Night, and left convinced that Johnson was right: The historic building was worth saving. And while he had a busy career, he made a commitment: “I would be one of the people who helped do it—or tried to help do it.”

Huston assumed the role of WPNA president the following year and helped lead a grassroots movement to persuade the city and the university to step up to their responsibilities to the historic structure.

Huston was able to get the attention of *Register* reporter Tom Suk, who wrote an article in October of 1999 about the decaying facility. “The observatory isn’t even listed on the city’s 2020 planning vision map,” Huston was quoted as saying. “Glendale Cemetery and its duck pond made it on the map, but this magnificent structure didn’t.”

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“Stars In Our Eyes” CONTINUED

The article also laid out challenges to the facility’s restoration, including an obligation to make it compliant with the Americans With Disabilities Act, which would add about \$225,000 to the cost of repairs to the foundation, dome, and interior, estimated at nearly \$1.2 million in a report the city had commissioned that year.

The WPNA worked to keep the issue top of mind for Des Moines and its leaders, providing citizens with postcards to send to then-mayor Preston Daniels and members of the city council, urging them to fund the critically needed work.

The association hosted an open house in April of 2000 to show community members the building’s problems, including deteriorating carvings, missing light fixtures, inoperable systems for the roof shutters and astronomer’s chair, and extensive damage throughout the interior.

Huston recalls that time as a whirlwind. He and other observatory advocates enjoyed a moment of encouragement when the city added the facility to its Capital Improvements Program budget, but became deeply concerned when then-Drake President David Maxwell proposed severing ties with the observatory altogether to cut its financial losses.

An article in the *Drake Times-Delphic* in October of 2000 described the community’s response, reporting that an estimated 300 people attended the next Friday night event at the

observatory and 200 signed a petition pressing Maxwell to honor the university’s commitment to the facility.

“It’s not just a neighborhood thing,” Huston told the reporter. “There’s citywide support and interest in it.”

To that point, the Des Moines Astronomical Society had joined the WPNA’s efforts, and one of its members, Joanne Hailey, approached several businesses for support. Her efforts secured commitments from Mid-Iowa Environmental Group Inc. to donate asbestos removal; from Waldinger Corporation to donate a new HVAC system; from Mid-American Energy to donate a gas line; and from ABC Electric to update electrical systems.

Around that time, Madelyn “Maddie” Levitt, a community leader and philanthropist, became aware of the controversy.

The following month, Levitt—who had raised \$320 million for Drake as two-time chair of its national capital campaigns—announced that she would make a personal \$150,000 gift to support the immediate repairs Drake was responsible for.

Levitt said at the time that she had consulted her children, who all said they remembered school trips to the observatory. “I’ve always been a dreamer,” she told the *Des Moines Register*. “Dreamers look to the stars. When I heard that we were having trouble finding help for the observatory, I knew I had to help.”

“It was a surprise to me, and what a pleasant

surprise,” Huston recalled. It was also a turning point for Drake’s commitment to the project, which continued into early 2004, when the portrait of Dr. Morehouse was rehung in the lecture room, signifying the project’s completion.

But as the owner of any older home knows, ongoing maintenance is to be expected. And in 2021, the city again closed the dome and its historic telescope due to issues with the shutter doors and the railing around its outdoor decking. They remain unaddressed.

You might not know who puts up the Observatory Night signs before every Friday night event, but you can probably guess who it is.

And if you attend one of the lectures, you’ll likely see him among the others in the lecture hall’s wooden chairs or out on the lawn, peering into one of the telescopes if it’s a lucky night and the sky is clear.

On his walk back home under the stars, David Huston will pull up the sign and carry it home for next time.

AGUIDETO

OBSERVATORY NIGHTS

Sessions are offered on selected Fridays at 8 p.m. in spring, summer, and fall. This fall’s series includes:

Sept. 29: Mars: The Abode of Life?

Oct. 6: Jupiter: Bringer of Jollity

Oct. 13: Saturn: Lord of the Rings

Oct. 20: Uranus & Neptune: Discovered and Calculated

Oct. 27: Pluto: No Planet, No Problem

What to expect: A Drake professor will offer an astronomy lesson followed by stargazing on the lawn using assorted modern small telescopes. Admission is free. Children 15 and under must be accompanied by an adult. Accommodations are available by contacting Drake Physics & Astronomy.

How to get there: Take Polk Boulevard to the tennis courts and head west on Observatory Road, which runs along the north end of the tennis complex. The road leads into the golf course and to the observatory, where parking is available but can fill up rather quickly. It’s not a bad idea to walk or bike if you are able.

What to bring: Just your curiosity and a water bottle, if you’d like one.

Stay in the know: Lecture topics are announced on Drake University’s website; search “observatory” to find a complete list. Huston also manages a Facebook page called “Drake Municipal Observatory.”



An early round of golf played near the observatory. Courtesy of Waveland Golf Course.



OUR VERY OWN

Ace In the Hole

BY ANN THYE

Rolling hills, mature trees, incredible views: The Waveland Golf Course puts the “Park” in our neighborhood’s name. We poked around to learn more about its history, what’s on the horizon, and all the amenities you can take advantage of today.

THE PAST The golf course opened in 1901 with the city’s trolley line rolling players to their tee times and our homes growing up along the way. The most important fun fact, of course, is that early opening date: It makes Waveland Golf Course the oldest municipal course west of the Mississippi River—and it remains open to the public today.

But did you know the northeast corner once housed an Elk paddock? And the golf pro’s family had living quarters inside the current clubhouse.

THE PRESENT With it’s unique architectural character and space for 80 guests, you can rent the historic clubhouse for events, weddings, or parties. In fact, the WPNA enjoys holding its monthly meetings there October to April. All Waveland Parkers are invited to attend, ask questions, and contribute ideas.

April through October, you can dine in or carry out food from Fat Joe’s Pizza located inside. Walk up to the full bar and order from their menu which includes many delicious options in addition to pizza

(but let us recommend “The Wave” pie with pepperoni, sausage, capicola and mushroom.) Fat Joe’s is open until 7 p.m.

And as fall turns to winter, keep your eyes peeled for snow. Once the hills get four inches, it’s sledding season. Until then: Golfing! Book your tee time at golfwaveland.com, and pop by the pro-shop for golf apparel and gear.

THE FUTURE This spring, Ned Chiodo was a guest at a monthly WPNA board meeting. Ned

is CEO of C Corp, the company that manages the city’s three public courses. He shared some ideas to expand the Golf Course and Clubhouse businesses to help make the Waveland venue more neighborhood friendly—for golfers and non-golfers alike. A few ideas brainstormed so far: Expand the clubhouse to accommodate up to 200 guests, build a mini-golf course, add ice cream in the summer and warming huts and hot chocolate in the winter, expand parking, and create an amphitheater for live music.

Parks and Recreation is the City of Des Moines department that considers the ideas put forth. According to Deputy Senior Planner, Lee Wheelock, if given the budgetary green light, a robust public input process would precede any projects.

Bring your ideas to the WPNA Annual Meeting at the Waveland Clubhouse!

FRANKLIN LIBRARY:



Award-winning storyteller Toni Simmons's interactive sessions use creative drama with a variety of age-appropriate folklore to take the audience on a trip to different continents.

- 12:30 p.m. "Around the Table: Folk and Personal Food Tales" is aimed at teen/adult audiences and features three storytellers: Darrin Crow (a returnee from last year's inaugural event), Toni Simmons, and Nothando Zulu.
- 2:00 p.m. "Folk and Fairy Tales Retold," the second teen/adult session. Crow, Janice Del Negro, and Zulu will perform.
- 3:30 p.m. Toni Simmons, our featured headliner, will present "Stories Alive." Simmons's presentation will include stories, songs, and audience participation. This is a family/all-ages program.

Franklin Field

- 11:30 a.m. - 1:30 p.m. Children's activities including carnival games, literacy activities, and face painting with Queen Bee.
- 12:00 p.m. "Rosie Reader Bilingual Storytime," targeting a preschool/children audience. (Inclement weather location is the Northwest Community Center.)
- 5:30 p.m. The festival concludes with "Spooky Stories with Janice Del Negro with an Introduction by Maureen Korte." The first half hour will offer family friendly stories, while the second half will be aimed at adults. (Inclement weather location is the Franklin Avenue Library's Meeting Room.)

**Itinerary subject to change. For further information, visit dmpl.org*

ABOUT THE WPNA

Board Members

President: Nick Coleman

Treasurer: Richard Knapp

Secretary: Ann Thyne

Members at Large:

Chris LoRang

Megan Ross

Joe Wallace

Molly House

Matt Ohloff

Carol Lunde

Kathy Roate

John Smith

The "Community Table" Turns Two!

Join us around imaginary tables at the Library's second-annual **Community Table: Storytelling & Local Food Festival**, an all-day event on **Saturday, October 14**. Our featured storytellers share a diverse range of personal stories, folk tales, and fairy tales. Then, explore the food festival featuring a variety of local vendors outside in the library's west parking lot, and take part in children's activities outside at Franklin Field.

ITINERARY*

Franklin Avenue Library Meeting Room

• 10:30 a.m. Children's bilingual program "Journey Through Latin America with Calle Sur." The Panamanian-Colombian duo, musicians Karen Stein and Ed East, brings to life the rich diversity of Latin American music and challenges cultural preconceptions.

VOTE NOVEMBER



Help choose Des Moines's next mayor and vote to fill two City Council seats: One at-large seat and a special election to fill the Ward I seat (the part of our neighborhood north of University).

LOCAL CELEBRITY

Meet Humphrey, a four year old Sealyham Terrier who lives on 47th Street. "Our little Buckeye came from Granville, Ohio. It was love at first sight!" says his owner Alicia Snell. Keep your eyes peeled for Humphrey strolling in Glendale Cemetery, enjoying a cone at Snookies, or waiting in the Perkins parking lot for a food truck to appear.



The WPNA is a non-partisan nonprofit organization in which all meetings, programs, and events are free and open to the public. It is the purpose of the WPNA to enhance and maintain the quality of life in Waveland Park.

For questions, comments, or to become a member contact: Waveland Park Neighborhood Association, P.O. Box 30112, Des Moines, IA 50310

Email: info@wavelandpark.org

Web: wavelandpark.org

Facebook: /WPNAfb

Waveland Park Neighborhood Association

ANNUAL MEETING & CELEBRATION

Rub elbows with your fellow Waveland Parkers, learn what's new and next, eat free pizza, play games, and hit up the cash bar.

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 29

3-5 PM

**WAVELAND GOLF COURSE
CLUBHOUSE
4908 UNIVERSITY AVE.**



**COME ONE,
COME ALL!**



**FEATURING MUSIC
BY GUITARIST**

TIM EARP

2023 MEMBERSHIP DRIVE

Every fall, the Waveland Park Neighborhood Association encourages neighbors to update their membership. Your annual dues go toward the outings, parties, and tours that help our neighbors gather and experience the best of living between 235 and Franklin. Annual membership is inexpensive—just \$20 per household or \$75 for businesses. Your dues help us fund events and offer perks like this quarterly newsletter, streetscaping activities, Easter Egg hunts, Food trucks, and live music.

Simply complete this form, visit wavelandpark.org/membership, or sign up at our annual meeting on October 29.

Join the WPNA!

NAME/BUSINESS NAME _____
ADDRESS _____
PHONE _____
E-MAIL _____

MEMBERSHIP LEVELS

Note: Waveland Park Neighborhood Association is a nonprofit organization. Your membership could be eligible for a matching gift from your employer.

- Renewal
- \$20.00 Individual/Family Membership
- New Membership
- \$75.00 Business Membership

PAYMENT INFORMATION

Please make checks payable to WPNA and mail to:
WPNA P.O. Box 30112
Des Moines, IA 50310

Payment via PayPal is available at wavelandpark.org under MEMBERSHIP tab. Include your name, address, and email as a NOTE attached to your payment.