

Fact Sheet

In 1939 Charles Gates Dawes approached Dr. Dwight Clark, president of the Evanston Historical Society (EHS) board, about giving his home to EHS to be used as a history center. It was Dawes' wish that his home be preserved for future generations. Dawes' personal collection of memorabilia from his service as a General during World War I and his time as Vice President of the United States, in addition to his family papers, which included significant American historical materials from the Revolutionary War and the establishment of the Northwest Territory, would form a substantial part of the collection of this new history center.

At the time EHS, founded in 1898, was occupying space in the Evanston Public Library. Its collection was small and its budget was approximately \$1000 per year with one part time staff person. In 1942 a deal was brokered by the EHS board for Dawes to deed the house and his personal collection to Northwestern University (NU), with EHS holding a lease for use of the house for its offices and collection. This deal was thought to be the only way EHS could afford to occupy and manage the house as a museum. It also ensured that the house would be preserved and that public access to the house would be granted to Evanston residents and visitors from around the world.

Dawes also established an endowment fund (informally called the Dawes Fund) for the care of the house and the collection. Since that time, Northwestern has owned the Dawes House and collection and has been charged with its maintenance and care. Many of the documents comprising the Dawes Collection are now housed in Special Collections at NU's Deering Library. However, much of the Dawes family collection, including artifacts and furnishings, remain on display at the house.

In the 1950s, fundraising efforts in the community added substantially to the Dawes Fund. This practice of the Evanston community helping to fund the care of the Dawes House was continued from that time to the present.

In 1960 a formal lease agreement was made between NU and EHS, and EHS moved into the Dawes House. At the time the EHS board sought assurances regarding its long term occupation of the house. The NU board stated in writing that its intentions were that the EHS would occupy the house "indefinitely" and if some emergency arose that made the house uninhabitable, NU would work to find other quarters for EHS and its collection.

Since that time, EHS (now the Evanston History Center, EHC) has worked with NU to maintain the Dawes House. In 1976, the Dawes House was designated as a National Historic Landmark. Necessary structural repairs have been made to the house, regular maintenance issues dealt with, and safety inspections have been regularly completed and issues resolved. Substantial restoration work (funded by community organizations and EHC donors in addition to the Dawes Fund) was completed at several points in the intervening years and regular maintenance of the house and grounds are substantial parts of the EHC budget.

The lease with NU has been renewed continuously since 1960. In 2007, for reasons unknown to EHC, NU informed EHC that it would not renew the lease. NU ordered significant and various inspections of the property and issues of repairs and life safety concerns were discovered by the firms hired by NU to conduct the inspections. It appears that plans for remediating these issues using the Dawes fund or other resources available to NU through fundraising efforts or national funding sources for landmark preservation were never considered by NU, and no solutions were offered to EHC concerning its possible role in resolving the issues.

In April of 2008, the EHC board was informed that NU would only renew EHC's lease of the Dawes House through June 2009. The EHC would then be required to vacate the Dawes House. The property would then be put up for sale at fair market value. NU would use the funds raised from the sale to care for the Dawes collection. NU stated that it would only provide financial support for EHC's move to a new location if EHC would agree to care for the Dawes collection that is currently housed in the Dawes House.

EHC was also informed that after April 16, 2008 the Dawes House would be closed to the public due to what NU described as "life safety issues." NU has offered no solution to remediate these issues, although as the owner of the Dawes house, many of these issues are clearly its responsibility.

The Evanston History Center board is carefully investigating the matter and considering several options. If EHC opts to stay at the Dawes House, it will involve a significant fundraising effort. If it is unable to raise the funds, it will need to move to another location and that will require additional funds also.

Not only is the future of the EHC at stake, but the future of the Dawes House is also under threat. For nearly fifty years, the Dawes House has been open to the public. School children, Evanston residents, and visitors from around the region and the world have cherished the opportunity to tour the 1896 mansion and encounter its vibrant, tangible history. As an historic house museum, the Dawes House has few peers in this region, and Dawes' intentions were that it remain open and available to the public.

For more information contact the Evanston History Center, 225 Greenwood Street, Evanston, IL, 60201; 847-475-3410.