

# 223 NORTH WORTH

Italian Renaissance Revival  
Built 1923



**T**his house was designed by prominent Elgin architect Ralph Abell for himself, his wife and two daughters in 1923.

Ralph, born in 1880, was the son of famous Elgin architect William W. Abell. The two became partners for a number of years. The senior Abell concentrated on residential architecture, while Ralph primarily designed commercial and institutional buildings. He specialized in school buildings, including portions of the old Elgin High School, now the District U-46 headquarters, according to an Aug. 10, 1997 Elgin Courier News column by historian E.C. "Mike" Alft.

Other Ralph Abell buildings in Elgin include the former Crocker Theater (razed several years ago) on South Grove Avenue in 1923, the Masonic Temple on East Chicago Street in 1925 and the Wolf (now Laird) Funeral Home on South State Street in 1940.

The Masonic Temple building stands today, though without its Masonic symbols. The previous owner removed them. The remnants of those symbols that survived are now stored at the Elgin History Museum.

Another Ralph Abell home is open to the public in Arlington Heights. Abell designed the Arts and Crafts-Style Banta House in 1915. The house now belongs to the Arlington Heights Historical Museum; its exterior and interior are on the museum's regular tour.

Ralph and wife Ida sold the house in 1940 to Joseph and Vylia Neil. They owned Neil's Inc., a longtime paint and decorating store in downtown Elgin.

The Neils sold to Jack and Jane Lawson in 1967. Jack was in real estate and Jane a teacher at several Elgin public schools. The Lawsons lived in the house into the 1980s.

Jack died in 1984 and Jane sold the house to William and Bette Fetter in 1988, after a year of vacancy. William was in sales for O.C. Tanner Co., and Bette, an art educator, founded the Young Rembrandts drawing program. The Fetters owned the home until 2005.

Caroline Oswald and Doug Rockar became the fifth family to own 223 N. Worth. They cemented their feelings for each other and the house by being married in the backyard in June 2005.

Doug and Caroline, who share an interest in architecture, looked at many houses across Elgin, but this one was their favorite; they also loved the neighborhood. The couple, who describe themselves as “project people,” moved in with plenty to tackle. They set a goal of restoring the original architectural integrity of the house, to “pay Ralph Abell homage,” Caroline says, and to bring out the building’s Italian Renaissance Revival character.

The couple refinished all of the hardwood floors, and installed a new marble hearth and fireplace surround. They stripped a lot of wall-paper and had most of the upstairs walls replastered. Multiple layers of linoleum were removed to reveal the original tile floor in the upstairs bathroom.

They also removed an enclosure over the second-story porch, restoring it to its original open-air form. Then they had its drainpipes blown out to remove years of built-up dirt.

Caroline, a law firm research analyst, previously lived in an 1890s house on Liberty Street in Elgin. She said she could “feel the volume” of the house when she walked in. She likes this period’s architecture, and at one time was a commercial interior designer with the prominent Chicago architecture firm Holabird & Root.

Doug, a telecommunications fiber-optic technician, had lived in Libertyville and always liked old houses. Before living here, he said his oldest

house was from the 1960s, however.

Doug has restored the original flagstone patio off the first-floor sunroom, removing years of built-up dirt. The sunroom also had a fountain at one time; Doug kept that idea but changed the location. He built a fountain in the backyard, finishing it the morning of the couple’s wedding.

### ***Architectural Notes***

Architect Ralph Abell based the design of his own home on the Italian Renaissance Revival Style. This style was popular from about 1890 to 1935, but is seldom seen in this area.

Abell’s adaptations took the home away from being a “pure” example of the style to a more personal interpretation. He used a low-pitched hip roof and masonry wall finish – features common to most Italian Renaissance Revival homes. He retained the style’s element of the first-floor windows being larger and more dramatic in appearance than the second-story ones. He also incorporated a belt course between the first and second floors, but made this feature larger and more detailed than is typically found. Abell eliminated the large brackets often found under the eaves, and also the arched tops for the first-floor windows. He also positioned the front doorway on the side of the building, which is very unusual in a style that values symmetry and usually places the main entry front and center.

In 1923, this home was groundbreaking for Elgin, and it remains one of the city’s unique residences.

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