

Eken Park Fact Sheet
Compiled by Burr Angle 2012

Sometime between 1890 and 1911 the Eken brothers purchased 120 acres of almost perfectly level land in the southern portion of section 31 in the Town of Burke. The southern edge of their farm ran along the north side of present Commercial Avenue, which is the border between the Town of Burke and the Town of Blooming Grove. In Wisconsin Townships are called Towns and Towns are called Villages.

The family farmstead was located at an address given for many years as 801 Mayer Street. The 1870 farmhouse survives at the present address of 710 Dexter Street.

In 1924 the Eken brothers converted 21 acres of the farm to the Eken Park subdivision whose borders were the south side of Coolidge Street on the north, the north side of Commercial Avenue on the south, North Street on the west, and about 2826 Coolidge near present Oak Street on the east.

The Capital Times reported on July 14, 1924 that 65 of the 120 lots platted on April 24 had been sold and 16 houses had already been built. The area was served by the North Street streetcar line. Major nearby employers were the Oscar Mayer Packing Company and the new Chicago and North Western Railway roundhouse on Commercial Avenue near Sherman Avenue.

The Eken Park Subdivision was annexed to the City of Madison on June 24, 1927.

In 1927 a group of Madison businessmen purchased 88 acres of Eken land bordering the north side of Coolidge Street to be used as the Madison Airport, a private firm that operated from this site from about 1928 until about 1942. Army Air Mail planes and others had used this area then known as Eken Field since at least 1921.

The airport land was also frequently used by touring entertainment companies such as the Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey Circus.

The Wisconsin State Journal, June 7, 1935, reported that Selma Eken, daughter of Thomas Eken, had donated vacant land owned by her on North Street between Dahle Street and Coolidge Street for playgrounds. This is now the City of Madison Eken Park, area 2.48 acres.

Sometime in the 1930's the Ekens built a structure at 602 North Street at the northwest corner of North Street and Commercial Avenue that contained living quarters for some or all of the family as well as the Eken Park Grocery Store that was operated for eight years by Selma Eken Rinder. Sekma died in 1940.

In late May of 1939, a fire at the Eken farmstead destroyed a large tobacco barn that contained many bales of hay belonging to a neighboring resident.

In 1942 or 1943 John W. Tilton, owner of the Leader Construction Company of Rochelle, Illinois, who had by then built hundreds of single-family houses for war workers in northern Illinois and southern Wisconsin, bought some or all of the land owned by the Madison airport, which had ceased operations because of the war. This became the John W. Tilton subdivision.

In 1943 Tilton built forty 1.5 story four-room expandable Cape Cod houses for war workers on the north side of Coolidge Street east of North Street. They begin at 2502 Coolidge at the eastern corner of North Street and end at 2862 Coolidge which was probably the eastern edge of the Eken/Tilton property. The houses were on 45 x 110 foot lots, had full basements, and had 696 square feet of living area. The attic could be

converted to living space. The sales agent was the Paul E. Stark Company. The houses were sold only to war workers.

In 1947 Tilton returned to Madison and built 120 houses, all almost the same as the 1943 Cape Cods, on the north side of Coolidge Street west of North Street and on both sides of Myrtle Street from about 2300 Myrtle almost to Oak Street. At first these were sold only to veterans. As in 1943, the sales agent was the Paul E. Stark Company.

In an article in the Wisconsin State Journal on June 1, 1947, Tilton said that the 1943 houses had sold for \$5,650; by 1947 essentially the same house was selling for about \$8,690, with less profit to the builder.

The 1947 Tilton houses begin at 2302 Coolidge Street and go east to 2426 Coolidge at the western corner of North Street. The 1947 Tilton houses on Myrtle Street begin at about 2301 Myrtle and run east on both sides of the street almost all of the way to Oak Street.

Myrtle Street is named for Myrtle Dexter, wife of Luzerne Dexter (as in Dexter Street), the developer of the 1920's Woodland subdivision east of the Oscar Mayer plant.

An article in the Wisconsin State Journal on March 9, 1948 reports on a meeting between owners of the new houses on Myrtle and Coolidge Street about defects in the houses. A number of owners attended this meeting as did Tilton, an assistant district attorney, an FHA representative, and an agent for the Harnischfeger Homes Company of Port Washington, Wisconsin, that had provided the partially prefabricated house kits.

Tilton and the Harnischfeger agent promised that all legitimate complaints would be dealt with promptly. According to the son of an owner who attended the meeting, most of the defects were soon fixed.

By late 1947, Tilton was already at work on a \$2,000,000 apartment complex near the Yahara River at Sherman Avenue that he called Tilton Terrace. It soon became known as the Sherman Terrace Apartments.

Tilton later became perhaps the largest builder of single-family houses in north-central Illinois during the 1950's and 1960's.

From the 1920's onward a number of developers such as Clyde A. Gallagher as well as individual owners built many small to medium size single-family houses elsewhere in the Eken Park subdivision. The area was basically filled by 1950.

The Wisconsin State Journal and The Capital Times newspapers contain many articles on the Eken Park area from the 1920's through the 1940's. These can be read on digitized copies of the microfilmed newspapers on the Newspaper Archive database.

The East Side News, a weekly newspaper published in Madison beginning in 1924 also contains much information on the area. The East Side News can be read on microfilm at the Wisconsin Historical Society Library in Madison.