

Audio Tour of Fabyan Villa Museum

Geneva, Illinois

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Museums with small budgets and few staff often are unable to open to the public for more than a few hours a week. Because of these limited hours, such museums create a barrier to visitors and thereby cannot maximize the fulfillment of their mission. Providing “physical and intellectual access to the museum and its resources” is a core standard for American museums.¹ Regardless of financial or staffing circumstances, museums must do what they can to expand access and educational opportunities for the communities they serve. This audio tour project provides access to some of a museum’s educational opportunities when the museum is closed, attracts new visitors when the museum is open, and obtains more accurate visitation counts in order to gather greater community support.

The Fabyan Villa Museum in Geneva, Illinois is a 1907 Frank Lloyd Wright-designed home built for George and Nelle Fabyan located in a 235 acre public park. The property is operated by Preservation Partners of the Fox Valley (PPFV), a small, local non-profit historic preservation advocacy organization which opens the museum for tours from May to September on Wednesdays and Sundays, 1-4pm. Since the Villa is located in a popular public park, of which the home is an attractive centerpiece, the public can explore the exterior of the building at any time. This fact provides an opportunity for PPFV to extend the educational opportunities the Villa offers by providing an engaging program year-round from dawn to dusk. Inspired by an audio tour created during the COVID-19 pandemic at Naperville, Illinois's outdoor museum, Naper Settlement, this project will provide visitors an audio tour of the Villa accessed through QR codes placed on seven signs posted at interest points around the Villa. The audio tour

¹ “Core Standards for Museums: Public Trust and Accountability,” American Alliance of Museums, accessed August 12, 2021, <https://www.aam-us.org/programs/ethics-standards-and-professional-practices/core-standards-for-museums/>.

describes some of the unique architectural design elements by Wright and provides a brief history of the Fabyans, gardener Susumu Kobayashi, acoustic engineers Wallace and Paul Sabine, and cryptographer Elizabeth Friedman. Because one of the significant achievements that occurred on this property was breaking codes for the U.S. government during World War I, a codebreaking activity is included in the audio tour.

Aside from providing education of the museum beyond the hours it is open, this audio tour project will attract more visitors and supply PPFV with invaluable marketing information from those accessing the QR codes. Whether specifically coming to look at the Villa or casually passing by, visitors will get to learn more about its history and be inspired to return for a tour. The codebreaking activity will attract more casual visitors, educate the community about this significant Fabyan legacy, and bring more attention to the museum on social media. Each view through the QR code can be tracked and the numbers used to show stakeholders a more accurate number of visitors to the Villa. Currently, the only visitors counted are ones who come on a tour, but that number does not reflect the real value the museum has for the community.

The content following is the locations for the signs, a footnoted transcript, and example images of the signs for the audio tour of the Fabyan Villa Museum, details about the coded message and its solution, and a bibliography. The QR codes in the example images of the signs are active and can be used to access each stop of the audio for the tour or you can listen to the entire audio tour at <https://soundcloud.com/al-watts-527853840/sets/audio-tour-of-fabyan-villa/s-UDwp5SYRzyJ>.

Sign Locations for Audio Tour of Fabyan Villa Museum



Transcript for Audio Tour of Fabyan Villa Museum



Welcome to the Fabyan Villa designed by Frank Lloyd Wright!

You have arrived at the monkey stop of the Fabyan Villa audio tour. Ahead of you is the front door of the Villa. The imposing six foot four mustached Colonel George Fabyan and his wife Nelle, nearly six years his senior and a foot and a half shorter, bought this property in 1905 and named the grounds

"Riverbank." Over the following three decades, the Fabyans amassed approximately 350 acres of which 235 now makes up the Fabyan Forest Preserve. For the Fabyans, Riverbank was a place to retreat from the noise and chaos of downtown Chicago where Colonel Fabyan ran the textile and dry goods empire he inherited from his father.

While his Chicago business made the Fabyans one of the wealthiest families in the United States, they were much more interested in other matters they explored at Riverbank. His biographer Richard Munson wrote, "Fabyan's chief passion throughout his life was the Riverbank think tank. Making money selling cloth and clothes was only a means to explore questions that interested him."² From acoustics to zoology to code breaking to crop genetics to levitation to x-rays, Riverbank was host to the first independent interdisciplinary scientific research campus in the world.³ Here, in Geneva, Illinois, some of the most consequential breakthroughs in science in the early twentieth century occurred because of Colonel Fabyan's intense curiosity.

² Richard Munson, *George Fabyan: The Tycoon Who Broke Ciphers, Ended Wars, Manipulated Sound, Built a Levitation Machine, and Organized the Modern Research Center* (North Charleston, S.C.: Porter Books; CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2013), 4.

³ Munson, *George Fabyan*, 4.

There are seven stops on the Fabyan Villa audio tour marked by some of the different animals and plants that lived here. Also, be on the lookout throughout your tour for a coded message you are invited to solve. Feel free to explore this audio tour in any order you wish. Please join us for a tour of the interior on Wednesdays and Sundays 1-4pm from May through September or contact us for a private tour any time of the year at www.ppfv.org. The Fabyan Villa is a Preservation Partners of the Fox Valley operated museum.⁴



Welcome to the Fabyan Villa designed by Frank Lloyd Wright!
You have arrived at the cow stop of the Fabyan Villa audio tour.
In 1907, Colonel George Fabyan hired a rising architect named Frank Lloyd Wright to remodel this farm house into a modern home. Original shaped like the letter L, the villa was transformed by Wright into a cruciform shape by adding a south wing (the right half of the house as you are viewing it). The design of the home included many signature features of Wright's Prairie style architecture: overhanging roof, an abundance of windows to allow in natural light, sharp lines, and the use of geometric shapes. One signature feature you may notice missing is a roofline parallel to the ground. This home was one of the last Wright built with a gable roof rather than a flat roof.

Inspired by the Wisconsin prairie where he spent much of his youth, Wright designed homes to integrate nature with its exterior and interior experience. Wright was one of the first architects to focus on the interior of a home and mould the exterior around the interior he

⁴ Music by Gillicuddy, "Adventure, Darling," ...*Plays Guitar Again*, 2013, 2:02, Free Music Archive, https://freemusicarchive.org/music/gillicuddy/Plays_Guitar_Again.

envisioned. And, for his time, the interiors he envisioned were radical. Following his three principles when designing a residence - simplicity, unity, and nature - Wright removed walls separating rooms, did not extend some walls to the ceiling, installed more windows, eliminated doors, and installed built-in furniture to offer more flexibility. Many of these same features are in the open floor concepts of homes today.

All of these features and more are visible inside the Fabyan Villa which you are invited to visit May through September on Wednesdays and Sundays 1-4pm or anytime of the year for a private tour at www.ppfv.org. There are six other stops on the Fabyan Villa audio tour marked by some of the different animals and plants that lived here. Also, be on the look out throughout your tour for a coded message. There are two words in the message for you to solve. Check your answer at www.ppfv.org/codebreaker and receive a free Instagram filter for solving the code!

The Fabyan Villa is a Preservation Partners of the Fox Valley operated museum.⁵



Welcome to the Fabyan Villa designed by Frank Lloyd Wright!

You have arrived at the snake stop of the Fabyan Villa audio tour. For a moment we ask you to turn around and peer over the stone wall, across Highway 31, you may be able to catch a glimpse of a five-story stucco building resembling Lego blocks.

Inside that building, Riverbank Laboratories, one of the most significant achievements of World War One occurred due to a young, hazel-eyed English

Literature graduate of Hillsdale College named Elizebeth Smith. She, along with over a dozen

⁵ Music by Krackatoa, "Noahs Stark," *Noahs Stark*, 2015, 4:17, Free Music Archive, https://freemusicarchive.org/music/krackatoa/Noahs_Stark.

other women, was brought to Riverbank Laboratories in 1916 by Colonel Fabyan to help him prove the conspiracy theory that William Shakespeare's plays were actually written by English Philosopher Francis Bacon, one of many unusual curiosities of the Colonel. Francis Bacon developed a bilateral cipher system similar to 1s and 0s of today's computer code. Two of anything - letters, symbols, or font styles - could be put in groups of five to represent one letter of the cipher. For example, using A's and B's, AAAAA would represent the letter A, AAAAB would represent the letter B, BBBB would represent the letter Z.

In order to help the women find this mysterious code, Fabyan instructed William Friedman, a plant geneticist from Cornell tasked with proving Fabyan's theory that crop yields are better if planted at full moon, to photograph and enlarge pages of the manuscript. William soon became much more interested in Elizebeth and codebreaking than genetics. Within a year, Elizebeth and William were married.

While Colonel Fabyan's title was honorary and never served in the military, he was intensely patriotic. Because of his wealth he was also well-connected. In April 1917, shortly after the U.S. entered the Great War, "Fabyan offered the services of the Friedmans and their Riverbank colleagues to the U.S. military...no charge."⁶ Elizebeth and William Friedman were among the handful of Americans with any experience in codebreaking and the War Department quickly accepted the Colonel's offer. Within days captured coded messages were streaming into Riverbank.⁷ Jason Fagone, author of *The Woman Who Smashed Codes*, remarked that for the next

⁶ Munson, *George Fabyan*, 124.

⁷ Jason Fagone, *The Woman Who Smashed Codes: A True Story of Love, Spies, and the Unlikely Heroine Who Outwitted America's Enemies* (New York: Dey Street Books, 2018), 67-69.

eight months "Riverbank would become ground zero for military codebreaking in America, a de facto government agency."⁸

In October 1917, the War Department sent nearly 80 officers to Riverbank for a 6-week crash course on codebreaking taught by the Friedmans. At the end of the course, Elizebeth and the officers posed for a photo, a copy of which is displayed in Colonel Fabyan's bedroom of the Villa. In the photo, some of the officers are looking at the camera and some off to the left creating a bilateral coded message.

There are seven stops on the Fabyan Villa audio tour marked by some of the different animals and plants that lived here. Also, be on the lookout for a coded message you are invited to solve. The message consists of two words. One word is in code, a method using symbols to substitute for letters or words and the other word is a cipher, a method of altering letters to disguise a letter, word, or message. Feel free to explore this audio tour in any order you wish. Please join us for a tour of the interior on Wednesdays and Sundays 1-4pm from May through September or contact us for a private tour any time of the year at www.ppfv.org. The Fabyan Villa is a Preservation Partners of the Fox Valley operated museum.⁹

⁸ Fagone, *The Woman Who Smashed Codes*, 69.

⁹ Music by Scott Joplin, "Ragtime Dance," *The Ragtime Dance Two-Step*, 1902, 3:37, Free Music Archive, https://freemusicarchive.org/music/Scott_Joplin/Piano_Rolls_from_archiveorg.



Welcome to the Fabyan Villa designed by Frank Lloyd Wright! You have arrived at the dog and rose stop of the Fabyan Villa audio tour. This southern side of the Villa includes the section added on by Frank Lloyd Wright and includes Nelle Fabyan's bedroom and bathroom. Nelle grew up in Wisconsin, coincidentally not far from Madison where Frank Lloyd Wright spent much of his youth. She married the younger, fast-talking traveling salesman George in 1890 when he was estranged from his father and his sizable textile business.¹⁰ Within a decade, George reconciled with his father and took over the company's Chicago operations, solidifying his status as among the most wealthy Americans.

Retreating here to Riverbank with her husband, Nelle was able to explore some of her passions. In particular, she raised show dogs, prized livestock, and flowers in two large greenhouses she had built on the sprawling grounds. Her favorite were roses, especially Columbia and Killarney varieties.¹¹ Nelle's flowers were popular and were sold regularly to hotels and restaurants in Chicago.

Nelle and George had no children. After their deaths they wanted to leave Riverbank to be enjoyed by the Geneva community they loved. Approximately 235 of their 350 acre estate was donated to the county park district, forming the Fabyan Forest Preserve. Also, Nelle set up the Fabyan Foundation following her death to make annual education grants in Geneva. Nearly

¹⁰ Munson, *George Fabyan*, 20.

¹¹ Munson, *George Fabyan*, 60.

\$2 million has been distributed: \$1.2 million for Geneva Public Schools and \$700,000 for the Geneva library.¹²

We invite to learn more about Nelle, Riverbank and the Villa by taking a tour May through September on Wednesdays and Sundays 1-4pm or anytime of the year for a private tour at www.ppfv.org. There are six other stops on the Fabyan Villa audio tour marked by some of the different animals and plants that lived here. Also, be on the lookout for a coded message. A hint for discovering one of the words of the message is that, despite the appearance, nothing of Roman origin is involved. Check your answer at www.ppfv.org/codebreaker and receive a free Instagram filter for solving the code! The Fabyan Villa is a Preservation Partners of the Fox Valley operated museum.¹³



Welcome to the Fabyan Villa designed by Frank Lloyd Wright!
You have arrived at the bear stop of the Fabyan Villa audio tour.
If you turn around and look down the hill you will see the Fabyans' Japanese Gardens. To the south, or right of the garden, is now a picnic shelter that held the two black bears, Tom and Jerry, the Fabyans owned. Now, turn around and look up the hill and toward Highway 31. Across the highway is Riverbank Laboratories where some of the most unique scientific discoveries were made. One of those was incredible advancements in the

¹² Munson, *George Fabyan*, 143.

¹³ Music by Podington Bear, "Associations," *Carefree*, 2017, 2:53, Free Music Archive, https://freemusicarchive.org/music/Podington_Bear/Carefree/Associations.

science of acoustics from the Sabine cousins. And it all began from another of Colonel Fabyan's eccentric curiosities: building a levitation device.

English philosopher and Fabyan idol, Francis Bacon, designed a levitation device in the seventeenth century and the Colonel hired engineers to build it. The design centered on the use of sound waves from musical strings to create a force strong enough to defy gravity. When the device failed, Fabyan hired Harvard physics professor Wallace Sabine, the foremost expert in acoustics, to properly tune the strings believing this to be the missing element to making the device levitate. It was not. Sabine then convinced Colonel Fabyan to build the first-of-its-kind acoustics lab with a reverberation chamber.¹⁴ When Sabine passed away shortly after the lab was completed in 1919, Colonel Fabyan hired Paul Sabine, a distant cousin of Wallace's who also happened to be an expert in acoustics from Harvard. With the acoustics laboratory, Paul Sabine was able to precisely measure sound and develop tuning forks and sound absorption materials still in use today.

Six other stops await you on the Fabyan Villa audio tour marked by some of the different animals and plants that lived here. Also, be on the lookout throughout your tour for a coded message you are invited to solve. Feel free to explore this audio tour in any order you wish. Also, please join us for a tour of the interior on Wednesdays and Sundays 1-4pm from May through September or contact us for a private tour any time of the year at www.ppfv.org. The Fabyan Villa is a Preservation Partners of the Fox Valley operated museum.¹⁵

¹⁴ Bonnie Hackendahl, "Riverbank Laboratories," National Register of Historic Places Registration Form (Washington, D.C.: United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service, July 2003), 23, National Archives Catalog, <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/28893210>.

¹⁵ Music by Broke for Free, "Summer Spliffs," *Petal*, 2014, 4:37, Free Music Archive, https://freemusicarchive.org/music/Broke_For_Free/Petal/Broke_For_Free_-_Petal_-_02_Summer_Spliffs.



Welcome to the Fabyan Villa designed by Frank Lloyd Wright! You have arrived at the alligator stop of the Fabyan Villa audio tour. Behind you, down the hill, you can see the one acre Japanese Gardens, originally designed by Taro Otsuka around 1910. Five years previously, in 1905, President Theodore Roosevelt sent Colonel Fabyan to assist in negotiating a treaty to end the Russo-Japanese War. The Treaty of Portsmouth, for which Roosevelt was given the Nobel Prize for Peace, proved beneficial to Japan by recognizing its claims over Korea and Manchuria. For his efforts, the Colonel was awarded Japan's highest civilian honor, the Order of the Rising Sun.¹⁶

In around 1918, Susumu Kobayashi, a young Japanese immigrant who learned gardening in Yamato Colony in Florida where Otsuka began his career, was hired to maintain the Fabyans' Japanese Gardens. He only stayed for about 13 months before returning to Yamato to start a farm of his own. However, in 1925, Colonel Fabyan offered Kobayashi a job in the Fabyan greenhouses. Kobayashi sold his farm and moved his wife and daughter to Geneva where he remained until Nelle Fabyan's death in 1939. The Kobayashi family then moved to California but were "evacuated" soon after Pearl Harbor and sent to Topaz, Utah, one of many internment camps set up to imprison Japanese descendants the U.S. government falsely believed could become spies for the Japanese. After the war, Kobayashi started a gardening and landscaping company in Philadelphia.¹⁷

¹⁶ Munson, *George Fabyan*, 1-3.

¹⁷ Susumu Kobayashi, interview by Sumiko Kobayashi, June 5, 1965, transcript, Samuel Proctor Oral History Program, University of Florida, Gainesville, F.L., <https://ufdc.ufl.edu/UF00006633/00001/2j>.

We invite you to tour the Japanese Gardens and Fabyan Villa May through September on Wednesdays and Sundays 1-4pm or anytime of the year for a private tour at www.ppfv.org. There are six other stops on the Fabyan Villa audio tour marked by some of the different animals and plants that lived here. Also, be on the lookout for a coded message. A hint for discovering one of the words of the message is the symbols on each sign of the audio tour. The Fabyan Villa and Japanese Gardens are Preservation Partners of the Fox Valley operated properties.¹⁸



Welcome to the Fabyan Villa designed by Frank Lloyd Wright!

You have arrived at the ewe and lamb stop of the Fabyan Villa audio tour. From this vantage point, you have a spectacular view of the rear of the Villa in front of you and, behind you, the Fox River and beyond it, the Fabyan Windwill. The Fabyan Windmill, open for tours on select Sundays through the summer,

is one of many examples of the idiosyncrasies of wealthy textile tycoon George Fabyan. The sixty-eight foot Dutch-styled windmill was moved there from its original site in York Center, Illinois after it was purchased by Colonel Fabyan in 1914. He spent over \$1 million in today's dollars to have it rehabilitated.¹⁹ Below the windmill was a large building Colonel Fabyan called "Temple De Junk" which housed a plethora of contents from abandoned railcars he purchased. Throughout its 350 acres, Riverbank also included a variety of zoo animals from monkeys to alligators, experiments with crop genetics, cattle, each with a unique-sounded bell about its neck,

¹⁸ Music by The Kyoto Connection, "Hachiko (The Faithful Dog)," *Wake Up*, 2013, 3:05, Free Music Archive, https://freemusicarchive.org/music/The_Kyoto_Connection/Wake_Up_1957/09_Hachiko_The_Faithful_Dog.

¹⁹ Diane Larson, "The Fabyan Legacy: Riverbank Revisited" in *Geneva, Illinois: A History of its Time and Places*, ed. Julia M. Ehresmann (Geneva, IL: Geneva Public Library District, 1977), 171.

a Roman-styled pool, lighthouse, tennis courts, gardens, greenhouses, scientific laboratories and more.

Colonel George Fabyan inherited a textile and dry goods business at the end of the nineteenth century from his father and grew it to become one of the wealthiest men in Chicago. His purpose for establishing an estate along the Fox River in Geneva was to satisfy his ever-present yearning for knowledge. He once said "I stick to scientific experiments, spending money to discover valuable things that universities can't afford. You can never get sick of too much knowledge."²⁰ Fabyan believed strongly in the axiom from his hero, English philosopher Francis Bacon, "Knowledge is Power."

In his quest for knowledge, Colonel Fabyan was described as chaotic and impulsive by Elizebeth Friedman, a codebreaker who worked for him.²¹ He was also known to be a harsh authoritarian. Behind you a few hundred feet is a concrete Egyptian chair known by Riverbank employees as the "Hell Chair." From there, Fabyan was said to bark orders or deliver an angry tirade at someone who did not do as he wanted. The Colonel had a wry sense of humor, once publishing a book titled *What I Know About the Future of Cotton and Domestic Goods* which contained all blank pages. He could be generous, giving a \$10 gold coin to each baby born at Riverbank²² or donating to local hungry families.

Many of his outlandish ideas, such as levitation and Francis Bacon being the true author of Shakespeare's works, provided opportunities for gigantic achievements in such scientific fields

²⁰ George Fabyan, quoted in Jason Fagone, *The Woman Who Smashed Codes: A True Story of Love, Spies, and the Unlikely Heroine Who Outwitted America's Enemies* (New York: Dey Street Books, 2018), 24.

²¹ Fagone, *The Woman Who Smashed Codes*, 52.

²² Munson, *George Fabyan*, 6.

as acoustics and cryptology. Unabashed patriotism led Fabyan to earn the honorary title of Colonel, Japan's Order of the Rising Sun, and the French Legion of Honour. In many respects, as author Jason Fagone has noted, the Colonel was a "half-crazed individual of unlimited funds and a split personality."²³ Yet, there is little doubt, according to his biographer Richard Munson, "The curious colonel changed his world, bringing science to acoustics and secrecy to war. He stimulated diverse research and achieved diplomatic success."²⁴

There are seven stops on the Fabyan Villa audio tour marked by some of the different animals and plants that lived here. Also, be on the lookout for a coded message you are invited to solve. Feel free to explore this audio tour in any order you wish. Please join us for a tour of the interior on Wednesdays and Sundays 1-4pm from May through September or contact us for a private tour any time of the year at www.ppfv.org. The Fabyan Villa is a Preservation Partners of the Fox Valley operated museum.²⁵

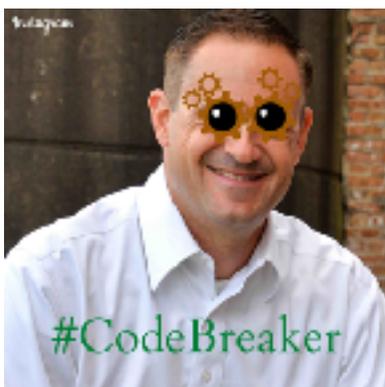
²³ Fagone, *The Woman Who Smashed Codes*, 51.

²⁴ Munson, *George Fabyan*, 14.

²⁵ Music by Audiobinger, "Hunger Pains," Single, 2015, 4:34, Free Music Archive, https://freemusicarchive.org/music/Audiobinger/single/Hunger_Pains.

Codebreaking Activity for Audio Tour of Fabyan Villa Museum

Along with facts about the Fabyan Villa and those who lived and worked at Riverbank, the Fabyan audio tour includes a codebreaking activity. The message consists of two words with each word encoded using a different method. The first is a code using symbols while the other is a bilateral cipher. Each of the signs placed around the Fabyan Villa for the audio tour will have a different graphic representing something that used to live at Riverbank. The seven graphics are: Snake, cow, rose and dog, alligator, monkey, bear, lamb and ewe. The first letter of each graphic spell out the word "Scrambled." The bilateral cipher consists of the letters "X" and "I." A series of five letters that represent a different letter of the code (XXXXX is A, XXXXI is B, etc) is on each sign. When deciphered, the code spells the word "Secrets." The code is IXXXI, XXIXX, XXXIX, IXXXX, XXIXX, IXXIX, IXXXI. The letters "X" and "I" are used to confuse some codebreakers into believing they are roman numerals rather than a cipher, making it a little more challenging to break.



Throughout the audio tour are a few hints to deciphering the coded messages. When the cipher is solved, the guest will send a message through the website with the correct message. If the message is correct, an automated message will be emailed to the guest along with their prize: an Instagram filter that says "#Codebreaker" (see picture at left). Guests are encouraged to post a picture of themselves with the #Codebreaker filter on Instagram so everyone is aware how smart they are and as a marketing opportunity for the Fabyan Villa Museum.

The Frank Lloyd Wright designed Fabyan Villa and the stories of the people who lived and worked at Riverbank, the Fabyans' estate, offer the public a glimpse at the many achievements that occurred there. Because of limited funding and staffing, the Fabyan Villa and its stories have very limited reach. The concept of an audio tour aims to extend the reach of these stories and their historic lessons beyond the scarcely available public tours. By extending the educational opportunities, the audio tour will attract new visitors to the tours, give Preservation Partners of the Fox Valley greater detail on guests interested in the Villa Museum, and provide greater funding opportunities for the museum.

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