

# Alleys through the ages

**2500 B.C.:** New settlements in India and Egypt are the first to be laid out in a rectangular pattern, setting the stage, much later, for alleys.

**432 B.C.:** First known use of back alleys as part of a city grid takes place at Olynthus in Greece.

**1100-1300 A.D.:** A burst of city-building at the end of the Dark Ages in France, Spain, Germany, England and Wales results in about 400 new towns, called bastides. The bastides are walled fort-resses with a grid-pattern interior, often with six-foot-wide alleys, called ruelles or ruelles.



▲ A 1248 plan for the bastide Monpazier, France, shows horizontal alleys bisecting residential blocks.

**May 20, 1785:** Congress passes the Land Ordinance, which divides the nation in the mile-square sections for future development. This fosters the use of the street grid in new U.S. towns and, indirectly, alleys, which are included in plans for new American cities such as Memphis, Indianapolis and Detroit.



▲ An 1821 plan for Indianapolis shows alleys bisecting city blocks horizontally and vertically.

**1830:** James Thompson makes alleys an integral part of Chicago's development grid when he lays out the new settlement for the Illinois & Michigan Canal Commission.

An 1834 plan of Chicago designs alleys into the blocks near the Chicago River.



**1913:** In an indication of how alleys are falling out of fashion, most of the entries to an urban planning design competition by the City Club of Chicago don't include them. In his proposal, Frank Lloyd Wright endorses "the abolition of all alleys."

**1938:** The Federal Housing Administration promulgates regulations that prefer subdivisions without alleys. Developers follow its lead. The result: generations of new alleyless suburbs.



▲ This 1938 FHA plan for community development is entirely devoid of alleys.

**Mid-1960s:** Richard J. Daley orders the installation of 42,500 lights in alleys at a cost of more than \$4 million (the equivalent of about \$23 million in present-day dollars). Not coincidentally, the job is finished in late March 1967, two weeks before Daley is up for re-election.

**Late 1980s:** The New Urbanism school of city planning begins urging a return to alleys, but few developers follow the advice.



Photo by Laura Smith

▲ **The latest in alley design:** This curving alley in the New Urbanism-inspired Victorian Harbor community in California features trees, setback garages and spaces for social interaction.

Sources: Dr. John W. Reys, Cornell University; Dr. Michael David Martin, Iowa State University Chicago Tribune