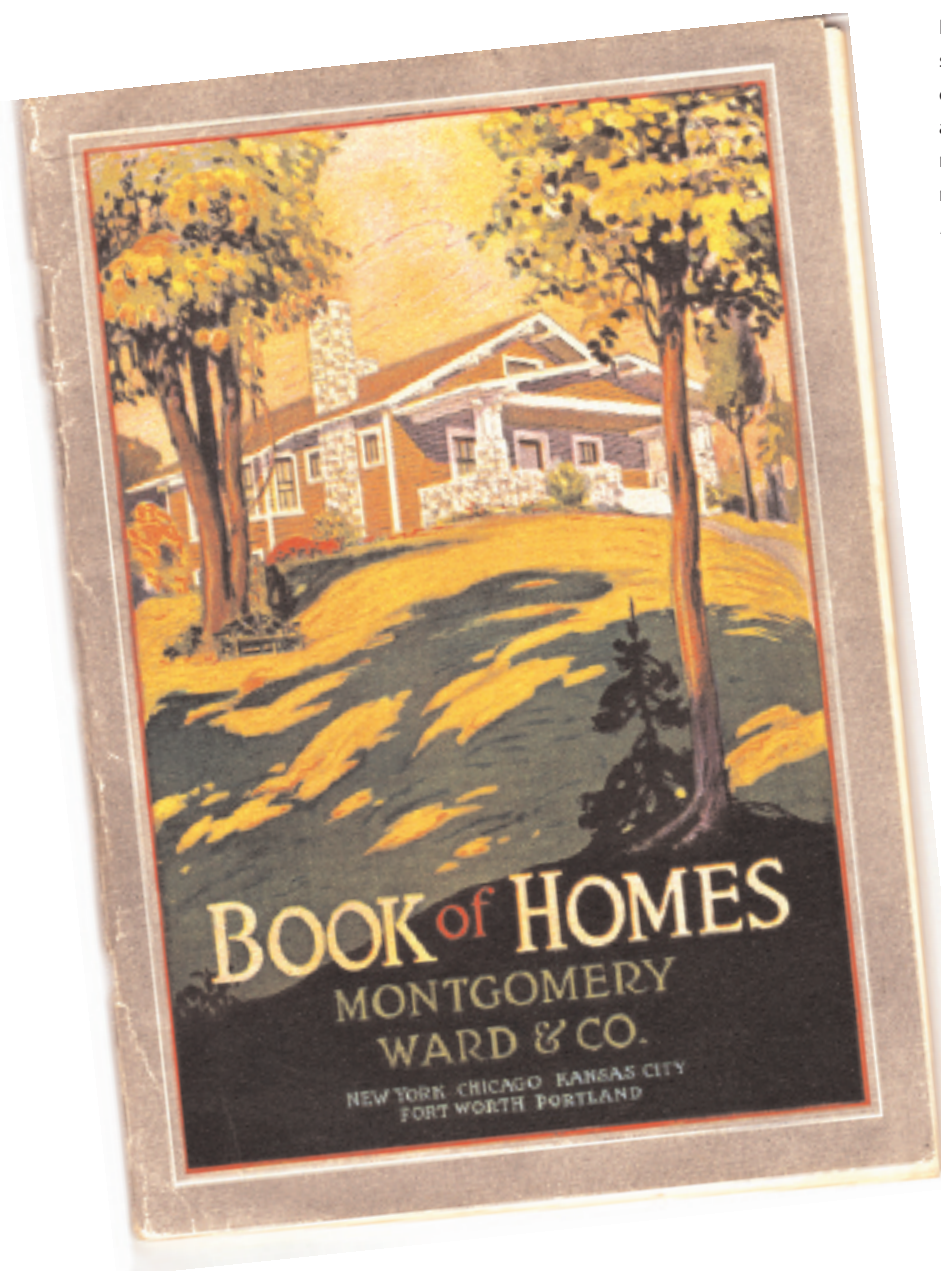


# The House that Ward Built

Discover the early bungalows of Montgomery Ward, a Chicago-based rival to Sears.

BY ROBERT SCHWEITZER



This catalog cover from 1916 illustrates a stylish bungalow home sitting on an idyllic hill with large shade trees and an expansive lawn. Most bungalows were actually built on small city or suburban lots.

POST-CIVIL WAR AMERICA WAS THE PERFECT setting for business opportunity. The decades of the 1860s and '70s saw a growing population and a quickening of western territorial settlement. Large waves of immigrants brought millions of new citizens into towns and farms. All Americans—both citizens and newly naturalized it seemed—needed access to housing and home goods. Technological changes in lumber harvesting and transportation opened up vast new markets for entrepreneurs to fill those needs.

A young Chicagoan, Aaron Montgomery Ward, and two partners thought they could undercut the prices of local retailers by selling directly to those in rural and small-town America via a mail-order system. In 1871, Ward sent out his first mailing, a one pager, advertising a range of household goods, and by 1872 his catalog had grown to 32 pages. The Great Fire of 1872 destroyed his inventory but Ward persisted, and in just three years his sales topped \$100,000. Sales continued to grow rapidly, and by the late 1880s sales were close to \$2 million annually.

From the available evidence it appears that Ward moved into the housing business in the early years of the 20th century by selling lumber and house plans. These were possibly contract arrangements with companies like Gordon Van Tine, a large lumber producer in Iowa. Early house plans look similar to those offered by William Radford, a Chicago architect who sold his by mail. Ward did not sell "kit" homes (precut and numbered parts) until

about 1917, making it one of the last to enter that particular housing field.

Early Ward homes were definitely more upscale than other companies' models, such as Aladdin or Van Tine. The 1912 catalog was 80 pages



long and contained homes in Tudor Revival, Colonial Revival, Foursquare, bungalow and even several Victorian holdover styles. There were 10 bungalow plans shown, and anyone could purchase these and material specifications for a home for just \$1. If they subsequently bought \$10 of lumber or millwork, that dollar was applied to their first order. The ad copy proudly stated that Ward had been serving millions of customers for more than 40 years and offered a satisfaction guarantee on all it sold. This was not a common practice at the time. Potential homeowners could buy the

plans and then purchase all the necessary materials to complete the house from Ward. The homes were modern, attractive and labeled "Beauty at a Moderate Price." One model contained an oak-beamed living-room ceiling, with a footprint of 31 by 42 feet and a price of \$992. For \$78 more, you could add a forced air heating system or, for \$187, a steam heating plant.

Ward's *Building Plans for Modern Homes* catalog grew to more than 100 pages in the next several years. The influences of modern advertising began to appear with covers that showed a young couple holding hands over a



Above: This introduction speaks to the family dream of home ownership. All family members are included in the illustration of creating the dream, and the text suggests that you "Make Your Dream a Splendid Reality."

Top left: An early issue of Ward's plans and lumber catalog shows a builder/contractor on the cover, telling us that professionals were likely the major clients. Later editions switch to potential homeowners.

Left: An illustration of the main Montgomery Ward retail store in Chicago in the early 20th century. The company's annual sales were well over \$2 million a year at this point.

house plan with their dream bungalow in a dream cloud directly behind them. The caption reads: "Why We Can Do It Easily Now."


Catalogs in the late 1910s and early '20s offered the customer not only a house but paint, wallpaper, light fixtures, carpet and furniture—so there was no reason to shop beyond your friendly Ward's catalog. If you bought materials for a house, you could save, according to the ad, 20% to 40% off your local price and have it shipped to your local railroad station in five to seven days. From there, you were on your own for hauling and storing it.



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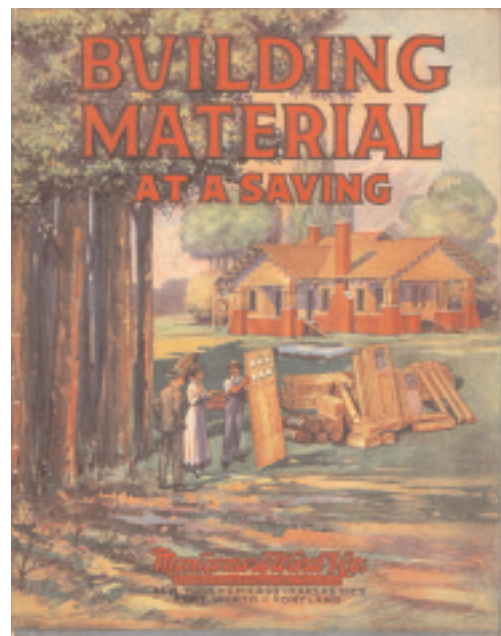
One 1915 bungalow ad noted that this home was “nothing freakish, nothing extravagant!” It was just practical and appealed to the love of the bungalow aesthetic.

By the early 1920s, Ward homes had garnered the title Wardway and were produced by Gordon Van Tine in Iowa. Much of the work was contracted to various established lumber and house-manufacturing companies rather than being done by Ward employees in Ward-owned facilities. The Great Depression signaled the end of Ward’s home business, as the last known catalog was issued in 1931.

Tens of thousands of Ward homes remain standing. The company shipped to every state, every day. It sold plans, plans and lumber, and kit houses on a large scale for nearly three decades, helping families acquire their dream home. 

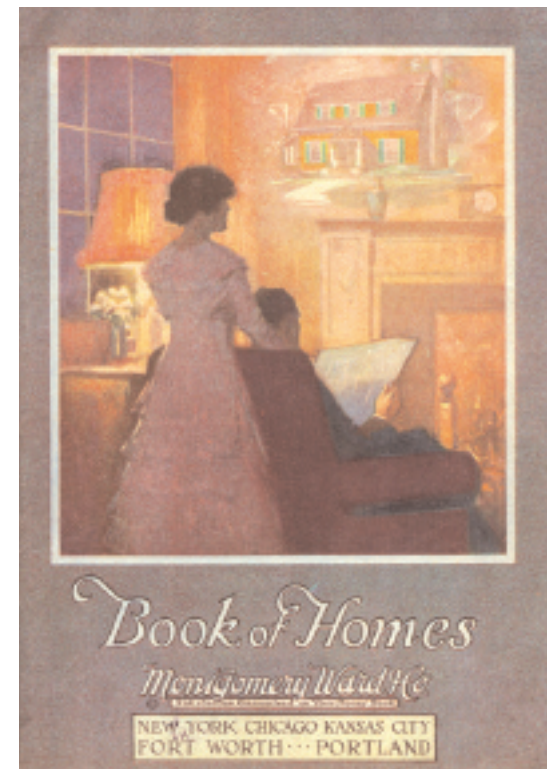
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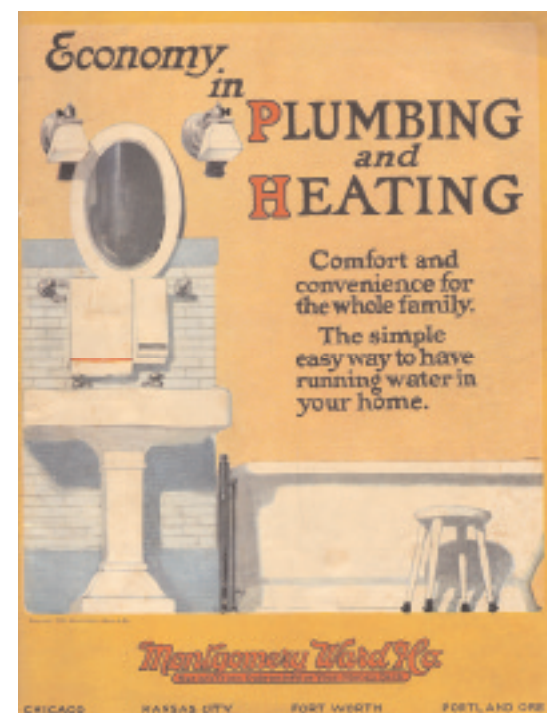


**Above:** Ward sold a large amount of building material through the mail via its Building Materials catalog. This service allowed customers in any part of the nation reachable by rail to receive high-quality millwork in a wide variety of sizes.

**Below:** This two-page illustration is intended to show potential customers the cozy but open feel of a Ward bungalow. A wood-beamed ceiling, Craftsman furniture, a warm fire and a family all present an idyllic view of middle-class American life.



Advertising that played to the emotions was just beginning to take shape in the U.S. when Ward offered up this romantic cover for their 1917 homes catalog. The idea that every couple could own a lovely new house was just beginning to come into play in the years after the first World War, and Ward was doing its best to help fulfill that dream.



Ward often included or sent customers catalogs for the many other home-related items they sold. This large colorful brochure provided options for ultra-modern heating systems and plumbing fixtures.

## The Wonderful World of Ward

For more information, consult these sources.

**Books & Research**

- *America's Favorite Homes* by Robert A. Schweitzer and Michael W. A. Davis, Wayne State University Press, 1990. Visit <http://wsupress.wayne.edu/books/409/Americas-Favorite-Homes>.

- *Wardway Homes, Bungalows, and Cottages 1925*, reprint of original catalog. Dover Publications 2004. Visit <http://store.doverpublications.com/0486433013.html>.

- The records of Montgomery Ward, 1849-1989, are held by the American Heritage Center at the University of Wyoming in Laramie. Included in the collection is a nearly complete run of Wardway Homes catalogs dated 1911 to 1931. Among the company's other records held by the center are a catalog of prefabricated farm buildings from 1935 and a *Wardway Homes Handbook* from 1929. Researchers can find contact information and a reference query form at: <http://ahc.uwyo.edu/depts/reference/request.htm>.

### Web sites:

- [arts-crafts.com/archive/kithome/wardwayhomes.shtml](http://arts-crafts.com/archive/kithome/wardwayhomes.shtml)
- [antiquehome.org/House-Plans/1925-wardway](http://antiquehome.org/House-Plans/1925-wardway)
- [wikihow.com/Identify-Kit-Homes](http://wikihow.com/Identify-Kit-Homes)



Do you live in a Wardway home? Share your photos! E-mail [editorial@cottagesandbungalowsmag.com](mailto:editorial@cottagesandbungalowsmag.com).