

RAMSEY COUNTY
History
A Publication of the Ramsey County Historical Society

Romance, Melodrama,
Mayhem in Not-So-
Fictional St. Paul

Page 10

Spring, 1993

Volume 28, Number 1

. . . *'And A Sprinkling of Jews'*

Work, Faith and the Jewish Merchants Page 4



The Swadelsky family in the 1890s, Zlotah Rivkah Swadelsky (second from left) settled with her husband and family on the West Side after emigrating from Russia. She was one of those unsung women of history. Pious herself, she led religious services for the women of B'nai Abraham Synagogue on State Street. She ran a Shelter House for strangers passing through the Jewish community, and organized a Women's Free Loan Society that provided loans without interest to immigrant women to help them buy furniture for their new homes. Photo from the Jewish Historical Society of the Upper Midwest. See article beginning on page 4.

RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY

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What's Historic About this Site?

The Highland Park Water Tower And Its Architect, Clarence Wigington

Editor's Note: This is the thirteenth in a series of articles on Ramsey County's historic sites.

Perhaps the Highland Park Water Tower, constructed in 1928, has the highest profile on St. Paul's skyline of any of the designs of draftsman-architect Clarence W. Wigington, but it has become increasingly clear that the genius of this African American architect touched every area of the city, and other parts of the country as well.

The tower, at 1570 Highland Parkway, stands at the northwest corner of the 265-acre city park—the second highest point in St. Paul. It is significant historically as a vital part of the city's water system and architecturally as an important work designed by one of St. Paul's few known black architects. Designated an American Water Landmark by the American Water Works Association in 1981, it was by 1984 one of ninety-eight such landmarks throughout the United States and Canada. The tower also is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Clarence Wigington was born in Lawrence, Kansas, April 21, 1883. After high school in Omaha, Nebraska, he attended architectural school for a year, then began working for Thomas R. Kimball, at that time president of the American Institute of Architects and a nationally recognized architect. Wigington worked for Kimball for six years while studying architectural drafting at "Professor Wallace's Western School of Art"—the T. Lawrence Wallace Institute in Omaha, Nebraska. He then worked for Omaha architect Elfred Turgni for two years; for architect Thomas Kilgohart for six years; and for architect Gordon Van Dyne in Davenport, Iowa, for a year.



Clarence Wigington. Minnesota Historical Society photo.

Returning to Omaha, he married Viola Williams on June 21, 1910. They had two daughters, Mildred and Mabel.

Before moving to St. Paul in 1913, Wigington, by this time working on his own, had received commissions to design a church and two apartment buildings in Omaha. And he had won the competition to design an administration building and two dormitories for the National Religious Training School in Durham, North Carolina, now North Carolina Central University at Durham.

In St. Paul Wigington received commissions to design, among other buildings, creameries at Elk River and Northfield, Minnesota. Then he took a civil service examination for the position of architectural draftsman in the St. Paul Parks, Playgrounds and Public Buildings Department. He passed the test with a score of 84.78, the highest grade anyone had ever received on the examination.

On April 23, 1915, he began working for the department as an architectural draftsman and designer. He was the first African American architect ever employed by a municipal government in America, Jack Travis has written in his *Chronology of American Black Architects*. Wigington would remain with the department for the next thirty-four years.

In 1918 Wigington won praise from City Commissioner Hyland and City Architect Charles Hausler for the plans he drew up for the Homecroft School, as well as for other buildings assigned to him. That year, also, finding that racial prejudice prevented him from joining the Minnesota National Guard during World War I, Wigington organized the famed Colored Home Guards of Minnesota. His guards were organized into two companies, and included many of the luminaries of St. Paul's black community. Wigington himself commanded Company A; Dr. Earl Weber, a dentist, was first lieutenant, and J. Homer Goins was second lieutenant. Fred McCracking served as the unit's recruiting officer. Captain Jose H. Sherwood, St. Paul's first African American postal supervisor, commanded Company B. Serving under him were Orrington Hall as first lieutenant; J. W. Stepp, the city's first black electrician, as second in command, and attorney Hammond Turner as recruiter. Uniforms were provided by the state adjutant general's office. A drum and bugle corps served both companies for parades and ceremonies.

In the fall of 1922, Wigington took a leave of absence from the department to design St. James AME Church (since remodeled), located on the corner of Dale Street and Central Avenue and home of one of the city's oldest black congregations. The church opened its doors on January 17, 1926.

During the early 1930s, he designed a number of public schools for St. Paul, including Marshall, Wilson, Monroe, and Cleveland Junior High Schools, as well as Randolph Heights and Como Elementary schools. He designed the administration building at Holman airport in 1938 and the clubhouse at Keller Golf Course that same year.

Wigington drew up the plans three years later for the famous Harriet Island Pavilion, which became the center for much of the city's summer entertainment festivities and celebrations during the next decade. In 1941, he was chosen to design one of several ice palaces in connection with the St. Paul Winter Carnival. One was unique. Built into its structure was a postal station where official Carnival stamps were issued.

St. Paul's Sterling Club honored Wigington in April of 1941 "for his twenty-five years of distinguished service to the field of architecture." When a permit was first sought to construct a building on the corner of Rondo and Dale Street for this black social club, the request was turned down by the City Council for reasons not entirely clear. Wigington, who had designed the building, had to re-design it as a private dwelling in order to acquire the necessary building permit.

The following year, Commissioner Fred Truax lauded him both for his extraordinary talent and his dedicated service, and the City Council designated him the city's Architectural Designer. The title of City Architect continued to elude him, however, and he resigned in 1949, disappointed but not discouraged. Before leaving for California, he designed St. Philip's Episcopal Church in Minneapolis. For the next five years, Wigington designed buildings and homes in Los Angeles and San Diego, and his fame as an outstanding architect continued to grow. As a registered architect, he was a member of the American Institute of Architects and the National Engineering Society. In St. Paul he was active in the Urban League, the Sterling Club, the Elks Lodge, and St. Philip's Episcopal Church. When he died in Kansas City, Missouri, on July 7, 1967, he left a legacy of beauty and form not only



Highland Park Water Tower, about 1940. Donaldson Photo Co., Minnesota Historical Society.

to St. Paul but also to cities on the West Coast, as well. In 1991 a Clarence Wigington Memorial Scholarship was established to encourage St. Paul students of African American descent to pursue studies in mathematics, science, and the visual arts at Lakewood Community College. The scholarship provides money for tuition, course fees and materials, books, and transportation.

Ironically and unfortunately, the Highland Park Water Tower does not bear his name. Numerous sources have listed Frank X. Tewes, city architect in 1928, as its designer. This was customary at that time, but to this day, Tewes' name still appears on the plaque attached to the building.

The Highland Park Water Tower remains a monument to Clarence Wigington and his years as an architect for the city of St. Paul.

—Arthur C. Mc Watt

Jewish Merchants from page 9

found as most conspicuous was "the low ratio of Jewish names among the owners of department stores." Unusual, in that in St. Paul most of the major department stores at one time were owned by Jews. But, he continued, "by and large, it may be said that in the last four decades, the Jewish community has achieved a fairly rapid adaptation to the industrial and general economic structure of Minneapolis."

One could argue, and this writer does, that it was not the Jewish community that achieved adaptation to the "industrial and general economic structure of Minneapolis," but rather that fifty years after the Jewish people first settled in Minneapolis, the city's leaders finally began to "achieve adaptation" to the idea that an individual's abilities were not dependent upon religion.

At the threshold of the twenty-first century, the barriers that restricted areas of work on the basis of faith have been dismantled. But faith remains an important force in their lives. This is evident by the fact that more than 65 percent of the people in the Twin Cities who identify themselves as Jews are affiliated with a synagogue. The Jewish people did not lose their faith when it limited them in the work they could do, nor did they lose it when the freedom of choice was open to them.

Work and faith have an impact on all of us in different ways. This is the story of one group who emigrated to the New World to find the freedom to worship and work as they chose. That they did find it speaks well for the American Dream.

Marilyn Chiat is co-director of the Center for Documentation and Preservation of Places of Worship, which is affiliated with the National Conference of Christians and Jews. She holds a doctorate in art history from the University of Minnesota. This article is adapted from a paper she presented in February, 1992, as part of the Ramsey County Historical Society's lecture series, "Have Lunch with an Historian."



Murder most foul! Colonel Hankins draws on local lore, circa 1868, for his colorfully imaginative "history" of St. Paul's early years. See the article on novelists and not-so-fictional St. Paul beginning on page 10.

R.C.H.S.
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