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Walter Thomas Bailey



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Walter Thomas Bailey (1882–1941)



Courtesy of the University of Illinois Archives

Walter Thomas Bailey was born in Kewanee, Illinois, on January 11, 1882. He was the son of Emanuel and Lucy Reynolds Bailey. A graduate of Kewanee High School, he entered the University of Illinois in Champaign in September 1900. He undertook studies in the architectural program and was a member of the student "Architects' Club." He married Josephine L. McCurdy on October 15, 1904, and they had two daughters—Edyth Hazel born in 1905 and Alberta Josephine born in 1913.

After graduating from the University of Illinois in June 1904 with a bachelor of arts in architecture, Bailey returned to Kewanee, where he worked as a draftsman in the office of architect Henry Eckland. By February 1905 he had returned to Champaign, where he briefly worked in the architectural office of Spencer & Temple. A turning point in Bailey's career came in September 1905 when he went to work for Booker T. Washington's TUSKEGEE INSTITUTE, where he headed the school's Mechanical Industries Department and also supervised the architectural and planning aspects of the campus.

Bailey left Tuskegee Institute in 1916 to open his own office in Memphis, Tennessee, where he maintained a successful practice specializing in churches. While in Memphis Bailey obtained beneficial business contacts through the lodges of the Knights of Pythias, an African American fraternal organization.

These contacts resulted in many commissions. Most notably, this connection netted

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Bailey the largest project of his career and one of the major African American building projects of the early twentieth century—the 8-story National Pythian Temple in Chicago. Conceptualized in 1922, the building was planned to be the headquarters of the Knights of Pythias and to house the lodge’s combined national offices, numerous meeting halls, and rent-producing stores and offices. The site was in the heart of Chicago’s thriving Bronzeville “city-within-a-city” Black business community on the South Side, which already had several major commercial buildings that were developed and built with Black capital during the 1910s and 1920s. Estimated to cost over \$1 million dollars, it was bragged about as “the largest building financed, de-signed and built by African Americans” and towered above its more modestly scaled neighbors.¹

When construction began in 1924, Bailey moved his architectural practice to Chicago, where he was the first licensed Black architect in the city. He rented an office in the Overton-Hygenic Building, a Black-owned office building near the construction site. Financial difficulties caused construction to proceed slowly. By 1928 the massive, yellow brick exterior enlivened by terra-cotta ornaments with Egyptian motifs had been completed, but the interiors remained unfinished. Bailey relocated his architectural office to a space in the mostly vacant building. The lodge eventually lost ownership of the property, and it was finally built out as multi-family housing as part of a Works Progress Administration project. Abandoned in the 1970s, the building was demolished in 1980.

Despite the fact that Chicago’s Black business community was noted for its sponsorship of new buildings during the 1920s, Walter Bailey had few substantial commissions—aside from the ill-fated Knights of Pythias Temple—during this period. His subsequent architectural practice was largely devoted to smaller commercial, church, and remodeling projects. With the onset of the Great Depression, his practice shrank significantly, paralleling the widespread financial collapse of Chicago’s African American business community as a whole.

Bailey’s final major project was the design for the First Church of Deliverance (1939) in Chicago, a streamlined *Art Moderne* church that radically broke with established traditions of ecclesiastical architecture. The unconventional design was undoubtedly guided by the forward-thinking ideas of its pastor, Reverend Clarence Cobbs, who was among the pioneering Black ministers to broadcast his sermons on the radio. The project was an extensive rebuilding and extension of a factory building that Reverend Cobbs had previously remodeled for the church. Instead of the soaring verticality of typical churches, Bailey’s design hugged the ground with horizontal ribbons of glazed terra cotta, alternating with expanses of glass block. Inside, a wide expansive sanctuary had a low acoustically treated ceiling that allowed the space to double as a broadcast studio, complete with all the modern radio technologies. Clearly, Cobbs and Bailey collaborated to redefine the form and needs of the modern African American church. The building still stands, but was modified in December 1945 following a fire. The alterations involved the addition of a canopy and double towers on the facade as well as modifications to the interior. The building was given protective “Chicago Landmark” status on October 5, 1994.

On February 21, 1941, Walter Thomas Bailey died in Chicago at the age of fifty-nine.² The cause of death was pneumonia caused by complications from



Knights of Pythias Building, *Chicago Historical Society*

heart disease. According to his obituary, Bailey was working on

two projects at the time of his death. The first was the interior remodeling of the Olivet Baptist Church, one of the most prominent of Chicago's African American churches. Bailey also reportedly was working on the Ida B. Wells Homes, a large public housing project for African Americans on Chicago's West Side; it was dedicated the year of his death. However, Bailey is not listed as one of the official architects of the project and therefore most likely worked on the Ida B. Wells homes in a secondary capacity.

Notes

1. Lee Bey, "Black Designer All But Forgotten," *Chicago Sun Times*, 9 February 1998, p. 13.
2. "Architect Aids on Col. Wolfe School Dies," *Urbana Courier*, 3 February 1941, p. 4.
3. Commission on Chicago Landmarks, *First Church of Deliverance*, (Chicago: Commission on Chicago Landmarks, Department of Planning and Development, 1994), p. 4.

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TIM SAMUELSON, CITY OF CHICAGO HISTORIAN

BUILDING LIST

Name	Address	City	State	Year	Comments
Alabama Agricultural Fair Negro Bldg.	Fairgrounds	Montgomery	AL	1906	
Colonel Wolfe School	4th & Healey Sts.	Champaign	IL	1905	
First Church of Deliverance	4315 S.Wabash Ave.	Chicago	IL	1939	Alterations
Fraternal Savings & Trust Bank	Beale St. at Church Park	Memphis	TN	1924	Demolished
Ida B. Wells Homes	38th St. & Rhodes Ave.	Chicago	IL	1940	
Knights of Pythias Bath House & Sanitarium	358 Beale Ave.	Hot Springs	AR	1923	
Knights of Pythias Bldg.	3737 S.State St.	Chicago	IL	1924	Demolished
Knights of Pythias Bldg.		Nashville	TN	1924	
Momence Country Club	Along Kankakee River	Momence	IL	1928	Plans only
Mosaic State Temple Bldg.	9th & Broadway	Little Rock	AR	1922	
Mt. Moriah Lodge No. 28 Free & Accepted Masons	1223 Emerson St.	Evanston	IL	1929	
Olivet Baptist Church	3101 S.King Jr. Dr.	Chicago	IL	1941	Alterations