Clarence Wesley (Cap) Wigington (1883-1967), Architect

From E Nebraska History
Omaha, Nebraska, 1902-1914; St. Paul, Minnesota, 1914-1949; Los Angeles, California, 1950-1963

Cap Wigington was one of America’s great architects. He was the country’s first black municipal architect, as well as one of Minnesota’s first black registered architects. He designed several of St. Paul’s most iconic fetes of architecture, such as the Highland Park Water Tower and the Harriet Island Pavilion (renamed the Clarence W. Wigington Pavilion). Though he is most well-known for his work in Minnesota, he started his career in Omaha.[2][7][8]

Wigington was born April 21, 1883, in Lawrence, Kansas. Following his birth, his family moved to Omaha.[4][8] While there, he quickly showed a talent for drawing; at the 1899 Trans-Mississippi World’s Fair, he won three first-place awards. A family friend, recognizing Wigington’s intelligence, offered to pay for him to go to dentistry school, but Wigington declined. Instead, he became a clerk for the formidable Omaha architect Thomas R. Kimball in 1902, moving up to student draftsman and then junior draftsman. In 1908, Wigington started his own firm, and during this time he designed the Isaac Bailey house, thereby earning the distinction of being the first black architect to design a house in Omaha. The following year, Wigington packed up his practice to move to Wyoming, where he hoped to find more work. However, business was scarce, so Wigington moved back to Omaha in 1910. Sometime in this period, Wigington married Viola Lessie Williams. Their first daughter, Muriel Elizabeth, was born in 1911, and their second daughter, Sarah Mildred, was born in 1912.

Meanwhile, the Great Migration was just getting underway, causing a lot of growth in St. Paul, Minnesota. These circumstances created demand for architects in the city. Seeing opportunities there, Wigington moved with his family to St. Paul in 1914. At his wife’s suggestion, Wigington sat for the exam to become an architectural draftsman on May 25, 1915. He had the highest score of all the people who took the exam the same day and was thereafter appointed to the City Architect’s Office. After briefly leaving Minnesota to work as a designer for some companies in Davenport, Iowa, Wigington returned to St. Paul’s City Architect’s Office in 1916. Two years later, as America formally entered World War II, he tried to join the Minnesota National Guard, but was refused. Wigington responded by creating the Home Guards of Minnesota, giving black men an opportunity to join the war effort. It was at this time that he got the nickname “Cap”, as he was the group’s captain.[7] Wigington continued to be a leader for black communities by becoming a founder of the instantly-popular Sterling Club, a social group for black men.[7][8]

In 1922, Wigington resigned from the City Architect’s Office to start his new firm, The Complete Service Co., Architects and Engineers. Unfortunately, this was a short-lived enterprise, and, later the same year, Wigington returned to the City Architect’s Office, where he stayed for nearly thirty years, designing well over 100 commissions.[2][7] He also designed several ice palaces, traditional attractions for the St. Paul Winter Carnival, in the late 1930s and early 1940s. He set his eyes on a sunnier locale during the late 1940s, travelling to California to research architecture. Then, in November 1949, Wigington moved with his wife to Los Angeles, where he continued to practice architecture until he was eighty. He did not retire until 1963, when he and his wife moved in with their daughter Muriel, at her house in Kansas City. Wigington died July 7, 1967.[5][7]
This page is a contribution to the publication, *Place Makers of Nebraska: The Architects*. See the format and contents page for more information on the compilation and page organization.

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**Compiled Nebraska Directory Listings**

**Omaha, Nebraska, 1911-1915**

**Educational & Professional Associations**

1902-ca. 1907: draftsman, Thomas Rogers Kimball, Architect, Omaha, Nebraska.[a]

1911: architect, 507 Barker Block, Omaha, Nebraska.

1912: architect, 412-413 Karbach Block, Omaha, Nebraska.

1913-1915: architect, 220 S. 13th, Omaha, Nebraska.

1915-1916: municipal architect, City Architect’s Office, St. Paul, Minnesota.[7]

1916-1917: designer, Davenport, Iowa.[7]

1918-1922: municipal architect, City Architect’s Office, St. Paul, Minnesota.[7]

1922: building inspector, City Architect’s Office, St. Paul, Minnesota.[7]

1922: architect and principal, The Complete Service Co., Architects and Engineers, St. Paul, Minnesota.[7]

1922-1942: senior architectural draftsman, City Architect’s Office, St. Paul, Minnesota.[7;43]

1937: Registered Professional Architect, St. Paul, Minnesota.[7;47]

1942: architectural designer, City Architect’s Office, St. Paul, Minnesota.[7;43]

1949-1963: architect, Los Angeles, California.

**Buildings & Projects**
Dated

Issac Bailey House (1908), 2816 Pratt St., Omaha, Nebraska.[1] (DO09:0229-002)

Remodel (1911), Church, Atlanta Georgia.[9]

Apartment Building for Dr. Jennie M. Laird (1911), 24th & Woolworth St., Omaha, Nebraska.[9]

Bungalow for Fred Earley (1911), 27th & Pratt St., Omaha, Nebraska.[9]

Dr. L.E. Britt House (1912), 2519 Maple St., Omaha, Nebraska.[1] (DO09:0223-023)

Thomas Peterson House (1912), 3908 N. 18th St., Omaha, Nebraska.[1] (DO09:0144-005)

Broomfield Apartments (1913), 2502 Lake St., Omaha, Nebraska.[1][6] (DO09:0223-002)

Crutchfield Apartments (1913), 2510-12 Lake St., Omaha, Nebraska.[1] (DO09:0223-019)

G. Wade Obee House (1913), 2518 Lake St., Omaha, Nebraska.[1] (DO09:0223-004)

Zion Baptist Church (1913), 2215 Grant St., Omaha, Nebraska.[6][7][b]

Duplex (1914), 125-127 S. 38th, Omaha, Nebraska.[1] (DO09:0319-031)

Multiple Dwelling (1914), 1232-34 S. 11th St., Omaha, Nebraska.[1] (DO09:0117-031)

House (1914), 1820 Lothrop St., Omaha, Nebraska.[1] (DO09:0142-037)

Homecroft School (1918), St. Paul, Minnesota.[7][c]

Northfield Creamery for the Twin City Milk Producers Associations (1921), St. Paul, Minnesota.[7][c]

Log shelter (1924), Battle Creek Park, St. Paul, Minnesota.[7][c][d]

Highland Park Water Tower (1924), Highland Park, St. Paul, Minnesota.[7][8][c][f]

John Marshall Senior High School (1925), St. Paul, Minnesota.[7][c][d]

Woodrow Wilson Junior High School (1925), St. Paul, Minnesota.[7][c][d]

Washington High School (ca. 1925), St. Paul, Minnesota.[7][c][d]

Monroe Junior High School (ca. 1925), St. Paul, Minnesota.[7][c][d]

Five Ice castles for the St. Paul Winter Carnival (1936-ca. 1940s), St. Paul, Minnesota.[6]

Holman Field Administration Building (1938-1939), St. Paul, Minnesota.[6][7][8][c][d]

St. Paul AAA Clubhouse remodel (1962), St. Paul, Minnesota.[7][e]

Undated

Como Park Elementary School (n.d.), St. Paul, Minnesota.[7]
Clarence W. Wigington Pavilion (n.d.), Harriet Island, St. Paul, Minnesota.[8]

Keller Golf Course Clubhouse (n.d.), St. Paul, Minnesota.[8]

Honors & Awards

1965: Lifetime Membership as a Professional Associate, AIA, St. Paul Chapter.[7]

Notes

a. First Omaha directory listing, 1902.

b. Wigington was the designer for the rebuild of this church, which had been destroyed by a tornado in 1913. The Zion Baptist Church had the largest black congregation in Nebraska at the time.[7]

c. This was a project done on behalf of the City Architect’s Office.[7]

d. Wigington was lead architect.[7]

e. Last known project.[7]

f. Wigington received posthumous credit for this building in 1976.[8]

g. Not found in federal census in Nebraska in 1910.

References

1. City of Omaha Planning Department, Landmarks Heritage Preservation Commission, Database, Query on Architects, May 20, 2002; courtesy of Lynn Meyer, Preservation Planner.


5. Social Security Death Index online; http://ssdi.rootsweb.ancestry.com/


Additional Sources


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