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Clarence Wigington

A Diamond in Omaha's Architectural History

December 15, 2016 by [Ashley Wegner](#)

Photography by [Bill Sitzmann](#)

When she lived a block away, Linda Williams would pass the Broomfield duplex at 25th and Lake streets almost every day. That was a little more than a decade ago.

As she walked past the duplex, she remembers thinking, “There is something interesting about that building... something I really like.” She liked the diamond shapes inside the top border, the hints of classical style in the columns in the front, as well as the rhythm and symmetry in the arched windows.

She did not know what made the building so special until a 2002 trip to the Great Plains Black History Museum.



It turned out that the Broomfield duplex, built in 1913, was indeed special. In 1909, it won first prize for “best two-family brick dwelling” in a national competition sponsored by *Good Housekeeping* magazine. The duplex’s 2502-2504 Lake St. address was listed on the National Register of Historic Places, too.

But what made it particularly significant was that it was one of many residential structures in the area designed by Nebraska’s first African-American architect and also the nation’s first African-American municipal architect—Clarence W. “Cap” Wigington.

Williams was shocked. She had a Bachelor of Science in design from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln’s College of Architecture, and this was the first time she had ever heard about Wigington.

“I thought, ‘If I’m educated and I don’t know about him, there are a lot of other people who don’t know about him,’” Williams says. “So ever since then, I’ve been spreading the word about him.”

Williams, who works in the architecture field, has spent the last several years working to shine light onto Wigington’s work. She has

presented seminars about Wigington for the Douglas County Historical Society and currently leads Restoration Exchange Omaha’s North 24th Street Walking Tour, which highlights three of Wigington’s significant Omaha buildings.

Wigington was born in Lawrence, Kansas, in 1883 and his family moved to Omaha shortly thereafter. Wigington graduated from Central High School (then Omaha High School) at age 15 and worked for the prominent Nebraska architect Thomas Kimball for six years before opening his own office. While he was in Omaha, he designed almost a dozen homes by independent commission, mostly in his North Omaha neighborhood. In 1914, he and his family moved to St. Paul, Minnesota, where he served as a senior designer for the City of St. Paul for 34 years. He designed several municipal buildings as well as monumental ice palaces for the St. Paul Winter Carnival in the 1930s and 1940s. He passed away in Kansas City in 1967 at age 84.

While Williams highlights several structures on her 24th Street tour, including Kimball's Black History Museum and the Jewel Building (designed by F.A. Henninger), she spends a significant amount of time and effort explaining the three buildings on the route by Wigington.

She talks about the Broomfield duplex and the fact that it was actually one of two identical duplexes on the corner designed by Wigington. The second, called the Crutchfield duplex, was destroyed by a fire in the 1980s. Williams talks about Zion Baptist Church at 2215 Grant St., another structure on the National Register with big classical columns, original stained glass windows, and a cornerstone with Wigington's name. And she talks about the prairie style and craftsman elements of St. John's African Methodist Episcopal Church at 617 N. 18th St., which Wigington helped remodel.

"I thought, 'If I'm educated and I don't know about him, there are a lot of other people who don't know about him. So ever since then, I've been spreading the word about him.'" -*Linda Williams*

Williams' dedication has so far caught the attention of architecture and preservation aficionados in Omaha and nationwide. In 2015, she won a diversity scholarship through Historic New England and she was recently named a Diversity Scholar by the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

Another recent honor was particularly significant to Williams, even though it was not even for her. In October, the Central High Alumni Association inducted Wigington into their hall of fame. Since no one from Wigington's family was able to accept the award, Williams was asked to accept on their behalf. Williams plans to deliver the award to the family, who live in Chicago, this year.

It was a humbling honor to accept the award and a humbling duty to continue sharing Wigington's legacy with everyone who will listen. She says it is important for people to know not only what he did, but that he accomplished so much during a time in history when black men faced significant challenges.

"When you think about that particular time and era, there was Jim Crowism going on," says Ethel Mitchell, current owner of the Broomfield duplex. "To have this black man do what he did and design this type of building was just unheard of. It's hard to put words to that—it's just outstanding."

Visit restorationexchange.org/events/walking-tours to learn more.



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