The Outsized Architectural Legacy of Clarence Wigington

By: Katherine Flynn

The 1916 Como Park Elementary School was built in the "Collegiate Gothic" style that was popular for educational buildings at the time.

Architect Clarence Wigington has been dead for 49 years, but his outsized footprint can still be found in the city of St. Paul, Minnesota, in the form of 60 meticulously designed municipal buildings. He was the country’s first African-American municipal architect, and his body of work is one of the most sizeable by any African-American architect to date.

By most accounts, Wigington was a modest and reserved man—two qualities not usually associated with prolific architects. Born in Lawrence, Kansas, in 1883, he spent the majority of his childhood in Omaha, Nebraska, where he graduated from Omaha High School at just 15. He attended an art school for the next few years before taking a position with area architect Thomas R. Kimball, who was then the president of the American Institute of Architects. Wigington would found his own office just six years later.

In 1910, Wigington was listed by the U.S. Census as being one of only 59 African-American architects and draftsmen in the country. In 1914, he and his wife, Viola, moved to St. Paul so he could take a position as a draftsman for the city, and by 1917, he had been promoted to the position of senior architectural designer. He never earned a formal degree in architecture, or any kind of certification.

“Wigington was a leader, and where possible he used his considerable influence to advance opportunities for black people,” writes Richard Dozier, a professor of architecture at Florida A&M University, in his introduction to Cap Wigington: An Architectural Legacy in Ice and Stone [Link: http://amzn.to/2enWPQZ] by David Vassar Taylor and Paul Clifford Larson.

It’s true that outside of his architectural work, Wigington was an engaged citizen and respected leader in St. Paul’s African-American community. He co-founded the Sterling Club social organization for railroad porters, bellboys, waiters, and drivers. He also created the Home Guards of Minnesota, an all-black militia that he formed after being denied entry to the Minnesota National Guard during World War I due to racial segregation. He was given the rank of captain in the Home Guards, and the nickname “Cap” stuck with him for the rest of his life.
Wigington also had a more creative side that he could rarely express in his designs for public buildings, and the whimsical and beloved ice castles that he carved for the Works Progress Administration’s annual St. Paul Winter Carnival in the late 1930s and ’40s allowed him to showcase it. Wigington retired in 1949.

Although Wigington’s legacy has frequently been overshadowed by other architects and prominent African-American public figures of his era, his buildings are still prized in the city of St. Paul. We’ve rounded up a few that showcase some of Wigington’s best work, typified by a “restrained moderne style” and largely built of Kasota limestone, native to the state of Minnesota.

**Como Park Elementary School**

Wigington was the draftsman for the 1916 Como Park Elementary School (pictured at top), one of two single-story elementary schools that Wigington worked on around this time. A new architectural style called “Collegiate Gothic” was all the rage for new academic buildings of this era, and its influence can be seen in this building’s high arched entryway and classical columns.

![Como Park Elementary School](image)

*photo by Allison Suhan, City of St. Paul*

The entrance to the Holman Airfield Administration Building at the St. Paul Downtown Airport.

**Holman Field Administration Building**

Designed and built between 1938 and 1941, this WPA structure serves as the control center for the St. Paul Downtown Airport and is named after Charles W. Holman, who won the U.S. air speed trials in 1930. It is one of three Wigington-designed buildings listed on the National Register of Historic Places (the other two are the Highland Park Tower and the Clarence W. Wigington Pavilion, below.)
The 1928 Highland Park Water Tower is still in use today.

**Highland Park Water Tower**

This 127-foot water tower, constructed in 1928 in the city’s Highland Park neighborhood, has a 200,000-gallon capacity, and is still used to supply water to the area today. Constructed out of Kasota and Bedford stone and a riveted steel-plate tank, the tower is topped with an observation deck and open to the public two weekends out of the year.

**Clarence W. Wigington Pavilion**

Located along the Mississippi River at the Harriet Island Regional Park, near St. Paul’s downtown, this pavilion regularly hosts receptions, parties, and weddings throughout the year. It was originally named the Harriet Island Park Stone Pavilion after Harriet Bishop, a Baptist schoolteacher from Vermont who opened the first school in the city, but was renamed in honor of Wigington in 1998.
The Clarence W. Wigington Pavilion, originally named the Harriet Island Park Stone Pavilion, was completed in 1941.

Hamline Park Playground Shelter

This two-story limestone playground shelter dating from 1938 combined Wigington’s love of picturesque skylines and arcade style-structures. It served as a parks building for its first 30 years, and was subsequently used as office space for various non-profits. It has been an art supply store, classroom, and studio since 2013.

The 1938 Hamline Park Playground Shelter has served as an art supply store and a classroom over its nearly 80-year history.
Katherine Flynn is an assistant editor at Preservation magazine. She enjoys coffee, record stores, and uncovering the stories behind historic places.

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