

**Sandwiching in History  
Mosaic Templars State Temple  
906 South Broadway, Little Rock  
February 1, 2019  
By Ralph S. Wilcox**



**Intro:**

Good afternoon, my name is Ralph Wilcox, and I am the National Register and Survey Coordinator with the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program. Thank you for coming, and welcome to the “Sandwiching in History” tour of the Mosaic Templars State Temple. I’d like to thank the staff of the Department of Arkansas Heritage for allowing us to tour the building today. This tour is worth one hour of continuing education credit through the American Institute of Architects. Please see me after the tour if you’re interested.

## Little Rock History

Settlement in the Little Rock area began shortly after the turn of the nineteenth century.

Although surveying land and offering it for sale did not begin until 1815, a few settlers were in the area prior to then. When the Arkansas Territory was created in 1819, the state's first capital was at Arkansas Post. However, it was not the best location since it often flooded and was far away from the majority of the territory's population. In 1820, a new centrally-located site for the capital was chosen on the south bank of the Arkansas River at the Little Rock.<sup>1</sup>

Initial settlement and development in Little Rock was focused on the river. The original plat of Little Rock consisted of 88 square blocks stretching south from the river to what is now Eleventh Street. By the 1860s, however, the city began to expand beyond the original plat, notably with the platting of the Woodruff's and Masonic additions on the city's east side, the Wright's Addition on the south side, and the Capitol Hill Addition on the west side. Apparently, building sites on the city's west side were popular. An announcement in the November 21, 1872, issue of the *Arkansas Gazette* stated that "This property consists of twenty-seven full and fractional blocks, overlooking the Cairo and Fulton railroad as it leaves the city. ...This is a fine property, and from its geographical position, will soon become a portion of the city. Upward of one hundred lots in the addition have already been disposed of, and are at this time being improved."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Roy, F. Hampton, Sr., and Charles Witsell, Jr., with Cheryl Griffith Nichols. *How We Lived: Little Rock as an American City*. Little Rock: August House, 1984, pp. 12-14.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 19, 104.

## **Ninth Street Corridor**

By 1880, Pulaski County's population was 32,616 people, which included 17,667 whites, 14,921 blacks, 12 Chinese, and 16 Indians. In Little Rock, and also within the city's original plat, 9<sup>th</sup> Street became the center of African-American life and culture. The character of the corridor developed in the late nineteenth century as the dwellings along 9<sup>th</sup> Street began to be replaced with commercial buildings and lodge halls. However, the heyday of the corridor came during the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>3</sup> By the 1920s, the center of the 9<sup>th</sup> Street commercial core was between Broadway and Chester streets.<sup>4</sup>

One source that gives a good idea of the types of businesses that could be found in the 9<sup>th</sup> Street corridor is *The Negro Motorist Green Book*. Throughout its publication run, *The Green Book*, which was a travel guide that catered to African-American travelers, listed many places along 9<sup>th</sup> Street, or just off of the corridor on the side streets, that catered to African-American travelers. From hotels and tourist homes and restaurants to beauty parlors and barber shops and night clubs, African-Americans could find everything that they needed on 9<sup>th</sup> Street. One could dine at restaurants like the Brown Bomber or the Pic-A-Rib and then relax at the Lafayette or Shangri-La night clubs. If one overdid it partying, the right medicine could probably be found at the Floyd or Children's Drug Store before you headed back to your room at the Graysonia Hotel or

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<sup>3</sup> Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps for Little Rock, Arkansas, 1892, 1897, 1913, 1939 and 1950.

<sup>4</sup> Love, Berna J. *Temple of Dreams: Taborian Hall and its Dreamland Ballroom*. Location Unknown: Lightning Source US, Ltd., 2012, p. 31.

The Marquette Hotel or the tourist homes operated by Mrs. F. F. Boone or Mrs. T. Thomas, among others.<sup>5</sup>

Although the 9<sup>th</sup> Street corridor in Little Rock was the center of the city's African-American community, and in certain respects the center of the state's African-American community, it wasn't strictly due to the presence of businesses that catered to African-American travelers. Others businesses existed in the 9<sup>th</sup> Street area, and along Broadway, that were significant to the state's African-American population, most notable of which was the Mosaic Templars of America.

### **Mosaic Templars of America**

The Mosaic Templars was founded by two former slaves, John Edward Bush and Chester W. Keatts, in 1882 and incorporated in 1883. With respect to the founding of the organization, the *History of the Mosaic Templars of America* states:

As the purpose was only to correct local conditions [of African Americans in Little Rock], plans were laid and with a little band of thirteen persons the first lodge was organized known as Zephro Temple No. 1, on May 21, 1882, at Little Rock, Arkansas...

The organization of this lodge formed the nucleus around which has been built the now magnificent institution. The

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<sup>5</sup> *The Negro Motorist Green Book*. 1936 – 1963/64 editions found at <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/collections/the-green-book#/?tab=about&scroll=16>.

formation of this branch, however, does not mark the beginning of the business career of the institution, because one year lapsed before the Articles of Incorporation were filed and the charter granted to do business, which was May 24, 1883. The date of filing of the Articles of Incorporation was on May 22, 1883. And we can therefore feel safe in saying that the Mosaic Templars of America began business as a fraternal society on that date.<sup>6</sup>

The Mosaic Templars organization offered illness, death, and burial insurance to African Americans at a time when white insurers did not treat black customers equally. The name derived from the name of Moses and the Mosaic Templars' purpose was linked to Moses' leadership role in leading the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt. The founding of the organization in 1882 is also likely linked to an 1881 study carried out by Prudential that showed that African Americans had a higher mortality rate, and subsequently led to many insurance companies charging higher rates or refusing to insure African Americans.<sup>7</sup>

The Mosaic Templars manifested a larger fraternal movement that developed during the late nineteenth century. Thousands of people, both men and women, black and white, joined a number of organizations that offered insurance benefits and friendship and fellowship to their members. However, due to the fact that white fraternal organizations in the United States

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<sup>6</sup> Bush, A. E., and P. L. Dorman. *History of the Mosaic Templars of America – Its Founders and Officials*. Little Rock: Central Printing Company, 1924, pp. 133-134.

<sup>7</sup> Wintory, Blake, and Ashan R. Hampton. "Mosaic Templars of America." *The Encyclopedia of Arkansas History and Culture*. Found at: <http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/entry-detail.aspx?search=1&entryID=1186>.

refused to issue charters to black groups, they either had to get a charter from an organization's European counterpart or create a new and separate fraternal organization. The Mosaic Templars was an example of an independent African-American fraternal organization not based on a white counterpart.<sup>8</sup>

As an organization that provided illness, death, and burial insurance to its members, the Mosaic Templars consisted of several departments that provided several different types of services, including endowment, monument, analysis, uniform rank, recapitulation, records, and a juvenile division. The monument department, for example, gave every member at the time of their death a custom-made 'Vermont marble marker' engraved with the Mosaic Templars of America logo.<sup>9</sup>

The governance of the Mosaic Templars was carried out by an executive committee of seven chief officers, which included National Grand Master, National Grand Scribe/Treasurer, National Chief Grand Deputy, National Grand Medical Examiner, National Attorney General, National Grand Auditor, and National Monument Secretary-Treasurer. John Bush, one of the Mosaic Templars founders, served as the National Grand Scribe/Treasurer until his death in 1916 and Chester Keatts, the other founder, served as the National Grand Master until his death in 1908. After Bush's death, his sons, Chester and then Aldridge, served as the next two National Grand Scribe/Treasurers.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Wintory, Blake, and Ashan R. Hampton. "Mosaic Templars of America." *The Encyclopedia of Arkansas History and Culture*. Found at: <http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/entry-detail.aspx?search=1&entryID=1186>.

<sup>9</sup> Wintory, Blake, and Ashan R. Hampton. "Mosaic Templars of America." *The Encyclopedia of Arkansas History and Culture*. Found at: <http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/entry-detail.aspx?search=1&entryID=1186>.

<sup>10</sup> Wintory, Blake, and Ashan R. Hampton. "Mosaic Templars of America." *The Encyclopedia of Arkansas History and Culture*. Found at: <http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/entry-detail.aspx?search=1&entryID=1186>.

The establishment of the Mosaic Templars Headquarters at 9<sup>th</sup> and Broadway began in 1911 when the organization purchased land at the southwest corner of the intersection. The first building built on the site was the National Grand Temple, its national headquarters, which was designed by Little Rock architect Frank M. Blaisdell and built by the Windham Brothers Construction Company of Birmingham, Alabama. Blaisdell was born in Boston, Massachusetts, on September 17, 1855, and came to Little Rock from Fort Smith in 1911 when he was hired as a civil engineer to lay out the State Capitol grounds. It is not known where Blaisdell got his architecture training, but a 1917 advertisement noted that he could “supply plans for public buildings, colleges, schools, churches, banks, theatres, and artistic bungalows.” Blaisdell died at his home in Pulaski Heights on November 16, 1921, at the age of 66 after becoming ill at the dinner table.<sup>11</sup>

The Mosaic Templars Headquarters building’s cornerstone was dedicated on May 18, 1913, and the building was finished by October 15, 1913, when Booker T. Washington delivered the dedication speech. However, as the Mosaic Templars organization grew, another building was needed and a two-story annex was built to the south of the headquarters in 1918.<sup>12</sup>

Although the Annex was built in 1918, it was only a couple of years until a third building, the Mosaic Templars State Temple, was built in 1921. The fact that the organization had real

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<sup>11</sup> Witsell, Charles, and Gordon Wittenberg, with Marylyn Jackson Parins. *Architects of Little Rock, 1833-1950*. Fayetteville: The University of Arkansas Press, 2014, pp. 70-71.

<sup>12</sup> Wintory, Blake, and Ashan R. Hampton. “Mosaic Templars of America.” *The Encyclopedia of Arkansas History and Culture*. Found at: <http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/entry-detail.aspx?search=1&entryID=1186>.

property in the form of the national headquarters, annex, and state temple was highly unusual for an African-American fraternal organization. As noted in the *History of the Mosaic Templars of America*:

#### NATIONAL PROPERTIES

The success of the Order is not only reflected in its great accession of a membership of 108,000, but it stands out singularly from other fraternal organizations of the race in the accumulation of large reserves in real properties. Its national headquarters located in the city of Little Rock represents a total outlay of \$200,000.00, having upon these premises two elegantly appointed and modernly equipped office buildings. The annex building, a two-story structure, serves only for the purpose of housing the various national departments of the organization. The main building, a four-story edifice, contains rented office suites, store-rooms, and a spacious auditorium. ...

#### STATE PROPERTIES

The erection of the National Temple was only the beginning of the plan to erect such buildings in each State jurisdiction. Since the inception of the idea, the States of Arkansas, Alabama, and Louisiana have purchased sites and erected buildings that are creditable to any institution. The States of Texas, Tennessee and



Oklahoma have also purchased sites and plan the early erection of suitable buildings.

These various “temples” are used for the housing of the State officials, as well as producing a revenue to each respective jurisdiction. In order to finance the building operations of these structures, a per capita tax was assessed and in this way no outside aid has ever been solicited. The combined cost of the real estate and buildings belonging to these various jurisdictions represent an investment of \$280,000.00, which is included in the total assets of the Order.<sup>13</sup>

### **Walter Thomas Bailey**

The Mosaic Templars State Temple was designed by African-American architect Walter Thomas Bailey who was born in Kewanee, Illinois, on January 11, 1882, to Emanuel and Lucy Reynolds Bailey. After graduating from Kewanee High School, Bailey began studies at the University of Illinois in Champaign in September 1900. Bailey studied in the architectural program at the University, and he was also a member of the students “Architect’s Club.” Bailey graduated from the University of Illinois in June 1904 with a Bachelor of Arts degree in architecture, and on October 15, 1904, he married Josephine L. McCurdy. The couple would have two daughters, Edyth Hazel, born in 1905, and Alberta Josephine, born in 1913.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Bush, A. E., and P. L. Dorman. *History of the Mosaic Templars of America – Its Founders and Officials*. Little Rock: Central Printing Company, 1924, pp. 174-176.

<sup>14</sup> Wilson, Dreck Spurlock, ed. *African American Architects: A Biographical Dictionary 1865-1945*. New York: Routledge Books, 2004, p. 15.

Bailey's professional career began in 1904 when he worked as a draftsman in the office of Henry Eckland, and he had returned to Champaign by February 1905 when he worked for a short time with the firm of Spencer and Temple. However, his career really got a boost in September 1905 when he became the head of the Mechanical Industries Department as well as the supervisor of the architectural and planning aspects of the Tuskegee Institute.<sup>15</sup>

In 1916, Bailey opened his own architectural practice in Memphis, Tennessee, where he specialized in designing churches. He also landed many commissions through business contacts with lodges of the Knights of Pythias, a notable African-American fraternal organization, and it ultimately led to Bailey obtaining the commission for the National Pythian Temple in Chicago, an eight-story building that was planned to be the national headquarters of the Knights of Pythias. The building was estimated to cost more than \$1 million and it was touted to be "the largest building, financed, designed, and built by African Americans." As a result of the building's construction, Bailey moved his practice to Chicago in 1924.<sup>16</sup>

Even though the African-American business community in Chicago was known for sponsoring new buildings, Bailey received few large commissions during the period. Rather, his practice focused on smaller commercial, church, and remodeling projects. Bailey's practice shrank further during the Great Depression, and his last major design was the 1939 design for the First

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<sup>15</sup> Wilson, Dreck Spurlock, ed. *African American Architects: A Biographical Dictionary 1865-1945*. New York: Routledge Books, 2004, p. 15.

<sup>16</sup> Wilson, Dreck Spurlock, ed. *African American Architects: A Biographical Dictionary 1865-1945*. New York: Routledge Books, 2004, pp. 15-16.

Church of Deliverance in Chicago, an Art Moderne church design that was radically different than most ecclesiastical buildings of the period.<sup>17</sup>

The career of Walter Thomas Bailey was cut short when he died at the age of 59 on February 21, 1941, from pneumonia that was the result of complications from heart disease. At the time of his death, Bailey was still working on two projects, the interior remodeling of the Olivet Baptist Church and a design for the Ida B. Wells Homes, a large public housing project in Chicago for African Americans.<sup>18</sup>

### **Mosaic Templars State Temple**

The contractor for the Mosaic Templars State Temple was Simeon “Sim” Johnson, a local black contractor in Little Rock. Johnson had already built at least one building of similar size in the area – the Taborian Hall at 802 West 9<sup>th</sup> Street – which was built between 1916 and 1918.<sup>19</sup> Interestingly, a notice in the November 17, 1921, edition of the *Manufacturers Record* also indicated that: “Ark., Little Rock – Sim Johnson will erect additional story to building at 802 W. 9<sup>th</sup> St., cost \$19,000.”<sup>20</sup> However, it is unknown if the work was ever carried out. Given the fact that Johnson was an African-American contractor that had already built at least one building of similar size and complexity in the area made him a perfect choice for the job of building the Mosaic Templars State Temple.

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<sup>17</sup> Wilson, Dreck Spurlock, ed. *African American Architects: A Biographical Dictionary 1865-1945*. New York: Routledge Books, 2004, p. 16.

<sup>18</sup> Wilson, Dreck Spurlock, ed. *African American Architects: A Biographical Dictionary 1865-1945*. New York: Routledge Books, 2004, pp. 16-17. The Wells Homes were dedicated the year of Bailey’s death and he is not listed as one of the official architects, so Bailey likely worked on the project in a secondary capacity.

<sup>19</sup> Groshong, Danny. “Taborian Hall.” *The Encyclopedia of Arkansas History and Culture*. Found at: <http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/entry-detail.aspx?entryID=6984>.

<sup>20</sup> *Manufacturers Record*. 17 November 1921, p. 91.

The building permit for the construction of the building was issued in February of 1921. The *Arkansas Gazette* reported on March 6, 1921, that “February was a good month for the builders, especially the home builders. The records at the Department of Public Works show that 173 permits were granted during the month for a total of \$185,070 worth of work...” Among the permits issued in February was a permit “...to Sim Johnson to build [a] two-story, fireproof building, 906 Broadway, \$88,774...”<sup>21</sup>

Once the permit was issued for the construction of the building, it was not long until the work began. However, reports on the construction of the building were few and far between in the newspaper. The next article on the building appeared in the May 22, 1921, *Arkansas Gazette*, which reported:

One of the largest building operations now well under way in Little Rock has been more than half completed with only slight notice having been given it. The Mosaic Templars of America, Jurisdiction of Arkansas, a negro fraternal organization, are erecting a building at Ninth Street and Broadway at a cost of \$100,000.

Construction was started about March 1 and workmen already are at work on the second story of the building. The structure will be a two-story brick building covering a lot 50 by

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<sup>21</sup> “Much Building Is Started In Month.” *The Arkansas Gazette*, 6 March 1921, part 2, p. 19.

140 feet. The building will contain office suites, storerooms and a large lodge hall. It is expected that the building will be ready for occupancy within 90 days.<sup>22</sup>

It is not known exactly when the building was completed or dedicated, but the organization likely moved into the new building by the end of 1921.

Although the Mosaic Templars State Temple was built in Little Rock, there had apparently been some consideration of constructing the building in Hot Springs several years earlier. An item in the October 1, 1913, *Hot Springs New Era* newspaper indicated that “If it can be arranged agreeably between all parties concerned, the property of B. F. Jenkins on the corner of Church and Cottage streets will probably pass into the hands of the Mosaic Templars for the erection of the State Temple of that order. Negotiations are now pending.” However, Jenkins did not sell the land to the Mosaic Templars, and the State Temple was never built in Hot Springs.<sup>23</sup>

During the 1920s, the Mosaic Templars reached its peak when it had a membership that was estimated at over 100,000 people. Chapters of the organization existed in 26 states, the Caribbean, and South and Central America. However, even with the phenomenal growth of the Mosaic Templars, the organization always kept its headquarters in Little Rock. Some of its holdings in Little Rock included the Mosaic National Building and Loan Association, the Mosaic

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<sup>22</sup> “Negro Lodge Puts Up Big Building.” *Arkansas Gazette*, 22 May 1921, part 2, p. 18.

<sup>23</sup> McDade, Bryan. “In Pursuit of a Better Life in the Vapor City: Understanding the Contributions of the Mosaic Templars of America in Hot Springs, Arkansas.” *Garland County Historical Society: Record*, 2012, p. 6.8.

State Hospital (which also had a nursing school), and the *Mosaic Guide* newspaper, which was originally known as the *American Guide*.<sup>24</sup>

The Mosaic State Hospital, which was a thirty-bed hospital, was located on the second floor of the Mosaic Templars State Temple, and opened in 1927 after the failed attempt of the Mosaic Templars to construct a National Hospital in Hot Springs. The hospital was under the direction of Dr. John G. Thornton, but only lasted a short time, closing in 1932. The nursing school associated with the Hospital was chartered in 1929.<sup>25</sup>

However, the phenomenal growth and size that the Mosaic Templars achieved in the 1920s was short-lived. The 1930s brought the demise of the Mosaic Templars of America, which, like many organizations, felt the effects of the Great Depression. The organization went into receivership in 1930, but did resume operations later in the year as the Modern Mosaic Templars of America with Scipio Jones serving as the National Grand Scribe. However, by the end of the 1930s it appears that the organization had ceased to exist in Arkansas. Even so, the organization continued to exist internationally with a chapter of the British United Order of Mosaic Templars surviving in Jamaica until at least 1938 and the Grand United Order of Mosaic Templars of Barbados, West Indies, continuing to meet into the twenty-first century.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Wintory, Blake, and Ashan R. Hampton. "Mosaic Templars of America." *The Encyclopedia of Arkansas History and Culture*. Found at: <http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/entry-detail.aspx?search=1&entryID=1186>.

<sup>25</sup> McDade, Bryan. "In Pursuit of a Better Life in the Vapor City: Understanding the Contributions of the Mosaic Templars of America in Hot Springs, Arkansas." *Garland County Historical Society: Record*, 2012, p. 6.15 and 6.17.

<sup>26</sup> Wintory, Blake, and Ashan R. Hampton. "Mosaic Templars of America." *The Encyclopedia of Arkansas History and Culture*. Found at: <http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/entry-detail.aspx?search=1&entryID=1186>.

It is not entirely clear when the Mosaic Templars vacated the State Temple building. The 1939 Sanborn map for Little Rock indicates that the Mosaic Templars State Temple was being used for offices, but it is not clear if it was offices of the Mosaic Templars. However, by 1950, according to the Sanborn map, the building was a small animal hospital and it continued to be used in that capacity until at least 1992.<sup>27</sup> Most recently, the building was used as a medical clinic by Premier MRI before the purchase of the building by the Department of Arkansas Heritage in 2017. The Department of Arkansas Heritage renovated the building in 2018 and it now houses leased office space.<sup>28</sup>

Of the three buildings that the Mosaic Templars of America had at the corner of 9<sup>th</sup> and Broadway, the Mosaic Templars State Temple is the last surviving historic building on the site. The National Grand Temple, which was located at the southwest corner of 9<sup>th</sup> and Broadway, burned on March 16, 2005, and the annex, which was located immediately to the north of this building, burned in 1984. However, both the National Grand Temple and annex were rebuilt in 2007 and opened on September 20, 2008, as the Mosaic Templars Cultural Center, a museum of the Department of Arkansas Heritage. The survival of the Mosaic Templars State Temple makes it an important part of the legacy of the significant and prominent Mosaic Templars of America organization.

Today, feel free to explore the building. Thank you again for coming, and please join us for our next Sandwiching in History Tour at the Rock Island Railroad Bridge at the Clinton Center in Little Rock. Also, please join us on Saturday, March 9<sup>th</sup>, for our Walks Through History Tour of

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<sup>27</sup> Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps for Little Rock, Arkansas, 1892, 1897, 1913, 1939 and 1950.

<sup>28</sup> Information on the Mosaic Templars Grand Temple in the files of the Pulaski County Assessor's Office.

the Piggott Commercial Historic District in Piggott. Thank you again for coming and have a great weekend.