
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 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.³ 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
Woodmen of Union Bath House	Malvern Ave. at Gulpha	Hot Springs	AR	1924	Now National Baptist Hotel

Walter T. Bailey



Walter T. Bailey (1882-1941) became the first African-American to graduate with a Bachelor of Science in Architectural Engineering at UIUC in 1904 (Fig. 3). In 1910 he received an honorary Master's Degree in architecture from UIUC. Bailey hailed from Kewanee, Illinois, where he attended Kewanee High School. He arrived on campus in 1900. Following his graduation, he worked briefly for Harry Eckland, an architect in Kewanee, and for Spencer & Temple, an architectural firm in Champaign. During that time he assisted in planning Colonel Wolfe School in Champaign (1905). That same year, he was appointed Head of the Mechanical Industries Department at Tuskegee Institute in Tuskegee, Alabama, where he also supervised the planning, design, and construction supervision of all new campus buildings. While at Tuskegee he designed White Hall (1908), a girls' dormitory, as well as two churches in Montgomery, Alabama (1910, 1912). He remained at Tuskegee until 1916 when he opened an office on Beale Street in Memphis, Tennessee, a street nicknamed "a main street of Negro America."

The Knights of Pythian, a large national fraternal order of African-Americans formed in the post-Civil War era, comprised a significant clientele for Bailey. It provided programs for recreation, racial and social advancement, life insurance, and death benefits; as well as aid to the sick, persons with disabilities, elderly, orphans, and widows. During Bailey's career in Memphis, he designed the Mosaic State Temple Building (1922) and the Pythian Theater Building (1922-23), both in Little Rock, Arkansas. He also designed the Pythian Bath House and Sanitarium in Hot Springs, Arkansas (1923), a recreational facility exclusively for African-Americans (Figs. 4-5). Ironically, although many African-Americans served as laborers in Hot Springs' elaborate bath houses, they were prohibited from using them. The Pythian Bath House provided a respite from the oppressive world of Jim Crowe.

In 1924 Bailey moved his practice to Chicago, site of two of his major projects: The National Pythian Temple (1927), and the First Church of Deliverance (1939). Both served as icons of African-American achievement and power on Chicago's South Side, a region then commonly referred to as Bronzeville or Black Metropolis and a destination for those escaping the South during the Great Migration. When it was completed, the National Pythian Temple, an eight-story building with a steel frame, yellow brick facing, and decorative terra cotta reliefs, was one of the tallest buildings in the area. It provided an auditorium for large gatherings, commercial and office space for African-American businesses, as well as residential apartment units. Bailey's design for the First Church of Deliverance expansion, also on Chicago's South Side, became an Art Moderne landmark. The church was known for its gospel music and radio broadcast ministries, and its architectural style was a reflection of these new religious mediums. In response to its radio broadcasts, the congregation swelled and needed expansion.

Bailey died of pneumonia in 1941. Although his work was overlooked for decades, he was rediscovered as the subject of a 2002 Masters' thesis as well as one of two UIUC African-American architecture alumni featured in the 2004 publication, *African American Architects: A Biographical Dictionary 1865-1945*.

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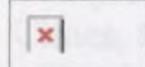
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Faces from the past

by **Kara Walton**

Daily Illini reporter



In honor of Black History Month, the University has taken steps to recognize the importance of celebrating African-American culture — this has not always been the case.

Dianne Pinderhughes, director of the Afro-American Studies and Research Program, said Black History Month helps give the community perspective on discriminatory events that have occurred in the past concerning African-American students and staff.

“We have a long way to go to interact with the black population in this state,” said Pinderhughes. “Black History Month is a little stimulus to get people thinking.”

The University first opened on March 2, 1868. Nearly two decades later, in 1887, African Americans were finally admitted to the but were not allowed the same types of freedoms as the rest of the students.

For example, blacks were not allowed to eat in the Illini Union or most of the campus restaurants. They also had segregated restrooms and were not allowed to live on campus.

However, these prejudices and setbacks only made them strive harder for excellence.



Walter T. Bailey
Illinois' first licensed African-
American architect
1904 University graduate

In 1900, William Walter Smith became the first black graduate of the University. He received his bachelor's degree in civil engineering and was also the first black editor of the Illini newspaper, now The Daily Illini, during 1899 and 1900.

Another outstanding student, Walter T. Bailey, became Illinois' first licensed black architect. After graduating in 1904, he constructed a building called the Pythian Temple. According to the Chicago Sun Times, the building — actually a corner office building that cost \$850,000 — was the largest structure ever financed and designed by a black person during that particular time period.

Another great accomplishment was made by University alumnus St. Elmo Bradley, who in 1916 was the first African American in the United States to receive a doctorate in chemistry, according to Alumni News. Bradley continued his work and headed four chemistry departments during his lifetime.



**William Walter Smith
University's first African-American
graduate**

During the beginning years of African-American admittance, the number of black students compared to white students at the University drastically differed.

In 1900, there were two black students, and only one of them graduated — the total number of students was 2,505. The number of black students continued to remain small, as did the graduation rates, according to the University of Illinois Negro Student, Location, History and Administration papers by Arthur C. Willard.

It was not until after 1907 that the graduation and enrollment rates began to increase. By 1910 the first master's degree was awarded to an African American and in 1916, the first doctoral degree was earned by a black student.

However, according to the Greybook of Enrollment Tables: First semesters in the 1945-1955 annual report of the director, black enrollment did not continually rise over the years.

For example, in 1945, there were 60 black students and the total number of students was 7,906, but in 1955, there were only 17 black students compared to an enrollment of 18,075 students.

Before the 1960s, African Americans were not able to use many campus facilities — from the local Steak 'n; Shake to barber shops.