

JULIE MCCULLOUGH | WEDNESDAY, APRIL 18, 2018

This place in history: Ten Downtown buildings with stories to tell



Universal Life Insurance Company, built 1949. (Houston Cofield)

Memphis exhibits an architectural landscape as varied as its people. These buildings can reveal a storied past and their redevelopment into new uses can speak to the city's future.

According to historic-memphis.com, Memphis is No. 6 in the nation for the number of properties listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The following are a hodgepodge of Downtown Memphis structures with pasts as interesting as their architecture.



Burch, Porter & Johnson, PLLC (formerly the Tennessee Club), built 1890.

1. BURCH, PORTER, & JOHNSON OFFICES (FORMERLY THE TENNESSEE CLUB)

Quite possibly one of the most unique structures in the city, the Tennessee Club is an eclectic mix of Victorian, Romanesque, and Moorish styles and was designed by Ohio architect Edward Terrell. Its bulging dome, corner turret, horseshoe arches, and geometric and floral elements add to its irregular façade. Except for the removal of a set of balconies over the main entrance, the exterior has

remained well-preserved.

The Tennessee Club was founded as an organization to promote civic and social pride. It housed a library, an art gallery, and a basement devoted to discussions on philosophy, business, law, and supposedly the gossip of the day. The Club hosted such presidents as Ulysses S. Grant, William Howard Taft and Theodore Roosevelt. In 1931, the Commercial Appeal reported, "To have free access to it, to be of the company that gathers there daily for lunch, bridge, or to loaf and read, is to have 'arrived' in Memphis."

The building now houses the Burch, Porter, & Johnson Law Firm, which represented Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. during the Memphis sanitation workers' strike of 1968. The building is located at 130 North Court Avenue and is adjacent to Court Square.



Lincoln-American Tower (formerly Columbian Mutual Tower), built 1924.

2. LINCOLN-AMERICAN TOWER (FORMERLY COLUMBIAN MUTUAL TOWER)

Built in 1924 as a smaller replica of New York City's Woolworth Building, this gleaming white terra cotta tower was one of Memphis' first steel frame skyscrapers. Designed by St. Louis architect Isaac Albert Baum, the structure is considered Late Gothic Revival in style, has Tennessee pink marble in the lobby, and the 22 floors of the steel frame are encased in concrete for fire protection.

Unfortunately, this did not prevent fire damage from occurring on the top few floors of the building in 2006, when embers from a major fire at the

First Methodist Church flew by from several blocks away.

The tower was originally built for the Columbian Mutual Insurance Company whose president, Lloyd Binford, later became the infamous head of the Memphis Censor Board, which he ran from the top floor of the building. Known as an unwavering advocate for family values, Binford cut portions of movies and even banned entire movies from Memphians he deemed inappropriate. Sometimes, it wasn't just the content of the movies, but the conduct of the stars themselves that prompted Binford to ban a movie. In

1950, Ingrid Bergman's films were banned from Memphis due to her reported affair with Roberto Rossellini. Charlie Chaplin's films were also banned due to his loose morals.

The building's name was changed when Columbian Mutual Insurance became Lincoln American Insurance, and it is now a mixed-use building with commercial offices and apartments. This historic landmark was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1978. It can be found at 62 North Main Avenue.



YMCA BUILDING, BUILT 1844

3. YMCA BUILDING

George Williams organized the first Young Men's Christian Association in London in 1844. Its purpose was to be a refuge of bible study and prayer for young men of all social classes seeking an alternative to life on the streets. The Memphis YMCA was established in 1855, but from the late 1860s, became inactive due to the Civil War and the local yellow fever epidemics. In 1907, a capital campaign was started and within a few years, Memphians had raised \$200,000 for a seven-story building to be constructed at the corner of Fourth Street and Madison Avenue. The

majestic structure features open arches and a row of gargoyles. Today, the top four floors house condos as the YMCA Lofts. The lower floors function as the Downtown Fogelman YMCA.

President William Howard Taft attended the building's dedication ceremony on October 27, 1909, along with governors from 27 states, and most of the city's 131,105 population. Madison Avenue was paved just in time for the President's arrival. Today, the Y serves the community as an exercise facility. In 2008, President Barack Obama made a low-key visit for some midnight

basketball after a debate in Oxford, Mississippi. The building is located at 245 Madison Avenue.



Masonic Temple, built 1914

4. MASONIC TEMPLE

The Neo-Classical style Masonic Temple at the corner of Court Avenue and Fourth Streets was built in 1914 by architects Walk C. Jones and Max Furbringer. At the turn of the century, the Masonic Fraternity grew rapidly in the U.S. and emphasized self-improvement, social betterment, and philanthropy. Masons also supported public education and started orphanages and homes for widows.

The building has secret passageways and chambers. According to Historical Haunts Memphis, this particular location known as the Desoto Lodge, is said to be haunted. Apparitions

have been seen and voices and footsteps heard. One notable ghost story involves Uncle Billy, a custodian who lived on the property. Before his death, he whispered into a friend's ear: "Hidden treasure is buried under one of the tiles in the foyer." It can be found at 272 Court Avenue.

5. SILKY O'SULLIVAN'S (FORMERLY GALLINA EXCHANGE BUILDING)

The steel girders that support the patio façade of Silky O'Sullivan's are a beacon for Beale Street party-goers in



Silky O'Sullivan's patio (formerly Gallina Exchange Building), built 1891.

in 1980 damaged the majority of the building, and later a strong windstorm was its final demise. Surely Judge Gallina would approve of Silky's taking it over in the 1990s, thus continuing the tradition of lively merriment and antics in the heart of his beloved Beale Street. Silky's is open to patrons at 183 Beale Street.

search of quintessential Memphis libations and entertainment. Designed by architect B.C. Alsup for Judge Charles Gallina, the original building was completed in 1891. Typical for the time, it contains arched windows, a unique arrangement of stones, and bands of terra-cotta ornament. Known as the "Pride of Beale Street," Judge Gallina's building held a 24/7 saloon with a hotel, each room with a marble fireplace. He held court on the second floor and his entire family lived on the top floor. Over the years the building would become home to a pharmacy, clothing store, and dental office. A fire

6. KRESS BUILDING

In what would become a national chain, Samuel Kress opened his first five-and-dime store in Memphis in 1896 and moved to the Main Street location in 1927. Kress' team of architects designed each store to stand out like an art piece while also fitting in with the cityscape. Kress buildings were known for their unique coloring, lavish details, decorative terra-cotta facades and strong



Kress Building, built 1927.

established the Kress Foundation to restore monuments in Italy, provide scholarships in art history, and sponsor traveling exhibitions. Hundreds of art pieces were donated to museums and universities across the U.S. The Memphis Kress store became McCrory's in 1980, and closed in 1994. It is currently part of Marriot's Springhill Suites hotel and is used for meeting space. The building is located at 7 North Main Street.

7. TENNESSEE BREWERY

For over a century, the Tennessee Brewery has stood proudly guarding the South Main bluff of the mighty Mississippi. *Memphis: An Architectural Guide* calls it the finest industrial structure built in the city. "The Tennessee Brewery is a collection of great castles for the production of beer, which nineteenth-century



Tennessee Brewery, built 1890.

Memphians consumed in awesome quantities.” Its Romanesque style is evident in the heavy masonry piers, its irregular silhouette, and its signature large, round arches.

Completed in 1890, the brewery at one point employed over 1,500 workers and by 1903, production was up to 250,000 barrels a year, making it the largest brewery in the South. The most well-known beer produced at the brewery was Goldcrest, whose name was changed in 1938 to Goldcrest 51, to honor a successful 51 year-run in the brewing business. Operations ceased in 1954 and the building

remained abandoned for 60 years. A renewed interest in the brewery led to spring pop-up events held there in 2014 and 2015. The Tennessee Brewery has now been converted into an industrial-styled apartment community called The Brewery Memphis. It can be found at 495 Tennessee Street.



Universal Life Insurance Company, built 1949

8. UNIVERSAL LIFE INSURANCE BUILDING

According to *Memphis: An Architectural Guide*, Memphis has three Egyptian Revival commercial buildings, and the Universal Life Insurance Company building is the most modern example because its “Egyptian forms are handled with an Art Deco simplification.” Except for the central cornice, three-dimensional elements common to Egyptian Revival are represented two-dimensionally as lines cut into the stonework. Built in 1949, the structure was designed by African-American firm McKissack & McKissack. During a time of racial segregation, the insurance company was founded by Dr. J.E. Walker and grew to be one of the largest insurance companies in the South and the fourth largest in the U.S. This landmark building is reflective of the success and historic importance of the insurance company.

Vacant since 2001, the building's renovation has been spearheaded by Self + Tucker Architects, and was unveiled to the public on April 3rd, to coincide with festivities commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination. With historic preservation in mind, the newly

opened building will be used as the City of Memphis Business Development Center, contain headquarters and support services for black-owned private companies, and will also house a multipurpose space available for lectures, meetings, training and art exhibits.



Jolly Royal Furniture, built 1947.

9. JOLLY ROYAL FURNITURE (FORMERLY THE BLACK AND WHITE STORE)

When this Art-Deco building with its distinctive black and white tiles was built in 1947, it was the first all-new structure to be built on Main Street in 22 years. It was originally a Black and White Store, which was a chain of working-class department stores in the South that started in 1904 as Shainberg's Dry Goods Store. Jolly Royal took up shop in the 1970s and one day Elvis Presley's father Vernon did some browsing. Rumor has it that Vernon told his son the store had "the world's ugliest furniture." (Think faux-fur covered sofas and chairs, pieces with carved wooden snakes, and green shag carpeting). Elvis promptly came to the store and bought all the pieces,

simply to irritate his father. This is the furniture that can now be seen in the famous Jungle Room in Elvis's Graceland mansion.



Bank of Tennessee, built 1907.

10. BANK OF TENNESSEE (FORMERLY THE COMMERCIAL APPEAL AND WELCOME WAGON)

This gorgeous structure was built in 1907 and housed the Memphis Commercial Appeal newspaper from 1907 to 1933. As a department of the paper, WMC Radio, the precursor to WMC-TV/Action News 5, went on the air in 1923 from the top floor of the building. In 1928, Welcome Wagon took over the building. Founded by Thomas Briggs, the company hired women "hostesses," to welcome new homeowners to the area with the delivery of gift baskets and coupons from local businesses. Sharing a cup

of coffee, Welcome Wagon women would deliver personalized greetings and tell new residents all about the community. The building now serves as Bank of Tennessee's Downtown branch and is home to Daniel Law Firm and the Memphis Bar Association.



Read more articles by Julie McCullough.

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