

Historical Tidbits—Mount Zion in the 1900s

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Mount Zion congregation undertook yet another building project. Two changes in the membership itself made this task necessary. In the 1890s, temple leaders realized that the building was inadequate to serve the increasing number of families, many of whom were immigrants from Eastern Europe. Just from 1899 to 1902, membership grew from 90 to 119 families. With that fact in mind, the board set up a sinking fund for new construction.

The other change involved the mobility of the congregants. Downtown St. Paul was no longer a desirable place to live because businesses were expanding in Lowertown. Families moved west to the area of St. Anthony Hill, along Summit and Dayton Avenues. Therefore, the congregation decided to leave the old location at Tenth and Minnesota and find a building site closer to where families were now living. The location selected was at the corner of Holly and Avon.

The process of finding an architect and constructing the building came about in an unplanned way. Two temple members, Joseph and William H. Elsinger, had proposed in 1902 to donate a chapel costing \$6,000.00 to the Mount Zion congregation. The architect they chose was Clarence H. Johnston who had already designed a house for William Elsinger in 1898 at 701 Summit. The connections with Johnston went even deeper. The Elsinger brothers were partners with Jacob Ditttenhofer in the Golden Rule Department Store; Ditttenhofer was president of Mount Zion from 1903 to 1921. Johnston had overseen remodeling of the store in 1902; he would carry out five more such projects by 1926 as well as design a house for Ditttenhofer's son Samuel at 807 Summit in 1906–08. Not incidentally, Johnston worked with Leo Giterman, a temple member and owner of another department store, on remodeling the store in 1905 and building a house at 986 Summit in 1904.

These were not the only projects Johnston undertook in the early decades of the century. He designed dozens of business buildings and residences and carried out numerous projects for the state of Minnesota, such as buildings at state hospitals, state schools, state universities, and state correctional institutions. In St. Paul his commissions included the Minnesota Club, Central High School, the Minnesota Historical Society, and buildings for St. Joseph and Miller Hospitals. For the University of Minnesota, he was the architect for Folwell and Morrill Halls, Walter Library, and Williams Arena. Elsewhere in Minnesota, he designed the Chester Congdon house in Duluth and St. Mary's Hospital in Rochester. One of his unbuilt plans was for the Minnesota State Capitol competition in 1895; he came in fourth.

The Elsinglers' chapel project hit a snag when the temple board insisted on reviewing all expenditures over ten dollars. Consequently the Elsinglers bowed out. The project then took on new life and became the third temple building, with Johnston remaining the architect. The building was a classical brick and terra-cotta structure with a pillared portico and a shallow dome, which may have echoed Johnston's design for the Capitol. The cornerstone was laid on Shavous in 1903. Dedication of the new temple took place on Friday and Saturday, May 6–7, 1904. Johnston's records list the building's cost as \$48,000.00, but temple records show a sum of \$80,000.00; the larger figure probably includes furnishings and other equipment.

The old temple at Tenth and Minnesota was sold to the Sons of Abraham for \$7,500.00. It has since been razed, and a high-rise condominium occupies the site.