

Weeks family builds Mormon temple

Sheboygan Press

7-16-2016

Turn around in Sheboygan and you'll bump into a historic building built by a member of the Weeks family. Four-generations of builders and architects, they were instrumental in the creation of scores of structures over a 150-year period.

The Weeks family arrived in America from Middlesex, England, now the greater London area, sometime prior to 1650 and settled in the east. Two hundred years later Arvin Weeks left Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts, where his father, James, was an architect and builder.

Arriving in Sheboygan in 1848, Arvin went to work immediately. His early work included the old 1868 county courthouse, torn down to make room for the present structure. Arvin's son, William C., was responsible for the design of the Detling home on Huron Avenue and the Henry Jung home at Fifth and Ontario. Nephew William F. Weeks graduated from the Chicago Institute of Technology, and was the executive architect of the present Sheboygan County Courthouse. His son, William F. Weeks Jr., a Harvard graduate, brought Modernism to Sheboygan in the Plastics Engineering headquarters on North Fifteenth Street in 1971.

But, there was another Weeks star among the family. Arvid's younger brother, William, born in Massachusetts in 1813, also followed in the family business, but in a rather more unusual way. A bit of an adventurer, William departed from his Quaker upbringing while working in the south. He became a follower of Joseph Smith and the Church of Latter Day Saints or Mormons.

The Mormon movement began about 1830 founded by Joseph Smith, a farmer from the region of western New York known as the "burned-over district" because of its persistent religious enthusiasm. It was felt the area had been so heavily evangelized as to have no "fuel" (unconverted population) left over to "burn" (convert).

But, the Mormons had trouble with neighbors wherever they lived. To avoid confrontation with New York residents, Smith and his followers fled to Missouri and then Illinois where they lived for a few years. Nauvoo, situated on a wide bend of the Mississippi River, was a settlement originally called Venus and then Commerce. In late 1839, arriving Mormons, 15,000 strong, bought the small town of Commerce. In April 1840, Joseph Smith renamed it Nauvoo, a Hebrew word meaning beautiful place. It was here that church founder or Prophet Joseph Smith Jr. announced many of his revelations that became cornerstones of the Mormon faith.

It was in Nauvoo that William Weeks made a name for himself. A priority was the construction of a temple for worship. Weeks and other architects submitted designs. William's nephew, F. M. Weeks, recalled William telling him that "when William went in and showed his plans, Joseph Smith grabbed him, hugged him and said 'you are the man I want.'"

The original Nauvoo Temple was a masterpiece of architecture and craftsmanship. Built in the Greek Revival style, Weeks' design made use of distinctive Mormon motifs, including Sunstones, Moonstones, and Starstones.

Mormon tradition has it that Joseph Smith directed the work and was considered the chief architect, receiving instruction by revelation, but it was William Weeks who translated those directions into reality.

Weeks took issue with things that strayed from the rules of order for architecture, seeking to build a more perfect building, yet most often was overruled by Smith.

Tensions between Mormons and non-Mormons again escalated to the point that in 1844, Smith was killed by a mob, precipitating a change in leadership. This is the point where Brigham Young became the new prophet or leader and moved the group to Utah Territory.

Weeks and his family were sent west with the first group in 1846. He never saw the Nauvoo temple to completion. Sadly, within two years the Weeks' temple was partially destroyed by fire and then a tornado completed the act.

William Weeks was to begin work on a new temple as soon as the travelers were settled, but this never happened. Shortly after arriving in the Salt Lake Valley in September of 1847, the family left the Church. They were excommunicated in 1848, and went back east for about five years, taking the original plans for the Nauvoo temple with them. The source of the conflict is uncertain, but William's nephew believed it was an objection to polygamy that caused the rift.

By 1853, the family returned to Utah, in time for ground breaking of the Salt Lake City temple. But, Weeks' expertise and knowledge were not needed or wanted.

The family moved to California in 1857, where William turning instead to farming for a living.

William Weeks died in California on March 8, 1900 at the age of 87.

Weeks kept his drawings of the Nauvoo Temple and passed them down to his daughter, Caroline Weeks Griffin. She in turn passed them on to her son, Leslie, who after a chance meeting in 1848 with Mormon missionaries, returned them to the church. Years later, in 1999, those same drawings were instrumental in rebuilding the Nauvoo Temple. A second temple now sits overlooking the Mississippi River on the same three-acre site as the 1840 temple.

William Weeks, though he never really reached his full architectural potential because of political wrangling, regarded the Nauvoo temple as his greatest masterpiece. His entire family always took great pride in the structure, especially his brother Arwin, a legend in his own right in the world of architecture.



A very early image of the Nauvoo Mormon Temple in Nauvoo, Illinois designed and constructed by William Weeks.



Front elevation of the Nauvoo Temple, drawn by architect William Weeks.



Gravestone of William and Caroline Weeks in Angeles Rosedale Cemetery, Los Angeles, California.



A sunstone from the original Nauvoo temple designed by William Weeks. The sun breaking through clouds symbolized the coming of light to illuminate a dark earth. Above each sun are two hands holding trumpets, heralding the dawning of the gospel.