

# The Trenton Masonic Temple

## Preservation Plan

### III. DEVELOPMENTAL HISTORY

#### Methodology And Sources

The research for the developmental history section of this Preservation Plan was conducted primarily at two locations. First, the reference materials of the Trenton Masonic Temple were consulted. Mr. Robert N. Stutz, the current Historian for Mercer Lodge No. 50, has compiled a preliminary history of Trenton's Freemasons (soon to be available at [www.mercer50.com](http://www.mercer50.com)) and he was very helpful in fleshing out the development of Freemasonry in Trenton and throughout New Jersey in general. Many of the Masonic publications were consulted, as well as the few documents such as contracts and equipment schedules that remain in the Masonic archives from the period of construction. The second largest source of relevant information was the Trentoniana collection at the Trenton Public Library. This provided newspaper clippings on the architects of both the second and third Masonic temples, and additional articles written at the time of the building's opening.

#### Historical Background

##### Trenton's First Masonic Temple

The first lodge of Free and Accepted Masons was officially founded in England in 1717. Members of the fraternal organization soon spread worldwide. A number of freemasons came to the American colonies, and as early as 1730 Masonic lodges assembled in Philadelphia. There is evidence that on June 5, 1730, the Grand Master of England appointed Daniel Coxe as provincial Grand Master for the colonies of New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania.<sup>1</sup>

New Jersey's first Masonic lodge, St. John's Lodge No. 1, was organized in Newark in 1761. Like so many others, this lodge was alternately

active and dormant throughout the following decades, particularly during the turbulent years of the Revolutionary War. During the next twenty years a total of six lodges were formed in the state. On December 18, 1786, 33 representatives from these lodges met at the White Hall Tavern in New Brunswick with the purpose of forming a Grand Lodge for New Jersey.

Elected as the first Grand Master of New Jersey Freemasons was David Brearley. Brearley had served in the Revolutionary War as a Lieutenant Colonel. As a civilian he had acted as the Chief Justice of the State of New Jersey and also as the first Judge of the Federal District Court. Brearley had been the first person in the colonies to be elected as a delegate to the First Constitutional Convention, and he was a signer of the Constitution.

Following the war, American Freemasonry entered a period of steady growth. In December 1787, at the Second Annual Communication of Grand Lodge, warrants were issued for the formation of two additional New Jersey lodges, of which Trenton Lodge No. 5 was one.

Trenton 5 met in a number of temporary locations throughout the city until March, 1793, when a plot of land on Barrack Street was donated to them by Mark Thompson of Newton, New Jersey. A plan for a building with an estimated cost of £376.15.10 was presented to the Masons,<sup>2</sup> and on August 26, 1793, the cornerstone was laid for Trenton's first Masonic Hall. The two-story stone building was constructed on the southwest corner of West Front and Willow Streets, very near its present location.

Throughout the nineteenth century New Jersey freemasonry continued to grow, and in 1858 a second lodge, Mercer 50, was formed in Trenton. The first man from this lodge to be presented with the three degrees of Masonry was Major Robert Anderson who became widely known as the commander of Fort Sumter at the start of the Civil War. Trenton's third lodge was formed in 1866,

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<sup>1</sup> Delmar Darrah, *History and Evolution of Freemasonry* (Chicago: The Charles T. Power Company, 1979), 229.

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<sup>2</sup> *The Old Masonic Lodge Building*, unpaginated

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with the fourth and fifth lodges following shortly thereafter.

### Trenton's Second Masonic Temple

The Masons met in the old stone building until 1867 when that structure changed ownership. In 1885, a magnificent new building was erected for their use at the corner of State and Warren Streets. The architect for the second Masonic Temple was Trenton's own William A. Poland. When he received the commission for the temple building, Poland was relatively new to the practice of architecture. However, even at that early date he was a skilled and creative designer who would produce a number of Trenton's better-known buildings in the ensuing years. Included among those still standing are the first YMCA, Bethany Presbyterian Church and the seven rowhouses on West State Street that were built for Ferdinand Roebling and are known as the "pride of lions".<sup>3</sup>

The cornerstone for the new Masonic Temple was laid with much fanfare on July 15, 1884, in a ceremony that was attended by hundreds, if not thousands, of citizens from Trenton and the surrounding towns. Photographs of the celebration show the streets thronged with people - - observers crowd the roofs of the surrounding buildings and hang from nearby windows.<sup>4</sup> It was a day-long spectacle with three brass bands accompanying the various lodges in the parade that preceded the ceremony.

The handsome brick building served Trenton's Masonic community for the next thirty-three years. Constructed in the Romanesque style with Moorish details, a large portion of the five-story building was given over to the use of the Trenton Business College, the precursor of Rider University. A newspaper article of the day noted:

"Nearly one-half of the third floor of the building is devoted to the College proper, suitably divided into Reception Room,

Library, Office Theory, Advanced Theory and Practical Departments, Lecture Room, Ladies and Gents' Toilet Rooms, &c. &c. The fourth floor is devoted to the College Gymnasium, Society Room, &c...The whole building is heated by steam, and with the most perfect light and ventilation."<sup>5</sup>



Figure 1. William Poland's 1884 Masonic Temple

It was in the Masonic Temple that the first National Basketball Association game was held on November 7, 1896. At that game the local team, known simply as the Trentons, defeated the team from the Brooklyn Y by a score of 16 to 1. The game was held in the third floor social hall which had been converted to a basketball court for the occasion. For the first time an admission fee was charged (25 cents for a seat on the newly-built bleachers, 15 cents for standing room), and the players were paid for their efforts.<sup>6</sup>

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century William Fisk Sadler was responsible for the establishment of the Masonic Historical Association of Trenton. This group was responsible for purchasing, moving and restoring the original 1793 structure for use as a museum. The move and the restoration of the stone building were completed in time for the Annual Communication on April 21, 1915, when the deed for the Old Masonic Lodge Building was presented to the Grand Lodge.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Sally Lane, "Then and Now," *Sunday Times*, January 27, 1985

<sup>4</sup> Sally Lane, "Time and Again," *The Sunday Trentonian II*, Sept. 13, 1987

<sup>5</sup> *The Star Gazette*, October 9, 1926.

<sup>6</sup> [www.capitalcentury.com/1900.html](http://www.capitalcentury.com/1900.html)

<sup>7</sup> *The Old Masonic Lodge Building* pamphlet

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**Figure 2. The relocation of Trenton's first Temple.**

In 1884, when the Trenton Masonic Temple was constructed, the Masons had organized a stock company and sold shares to members. As each shareholder died, however, the estates gradually sold the non-dividend paying securities. In 1916 the Masons learned that the Trenton Banking Company had been steadily buying the shares and that it had gained a controlling interest in the State Street property.<sup>8</sup> Following their acquisition of the building, the Trenton Banking Company demolished the Hall in order to construct a new bank building.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Marc. P. Dowdell (*Trenton Sunday Times-Advertiser*, Sunday March 4, 1928)

<sup>9</sup> Although subsequent articles indicated that the Masons were surprised by the bank's takeover of their property, in *A History of The Trenton Banking Company*, Paul Tomlinson wrote that "It is interesting to note, in connection with the new banking house, that the site of the new building did not actually belong to the Trenton Banking Company until some time after the building was completed and occupied. Legally the property was still owned by the Masonic Hall Association, but the officers of this association were also officers of the Trenton Banking Company..." It seems somewhat unlikely, therefore, that the Masons were caught entirely off-guard with regard to the bank's intentions. p. 63

### Trenton's Third Masonic Temple – Planning and Fund-raising Efforts

Although temporary quarters were found for most of the lodges in the Trent Theater Building, the loss of their building was a blow to the Masons. In order to rectify their homeless situation, on April 25, 1917, the Trenton Masonic Temple Association was incorporated to discuss the construction of a new building. Having lost one building, the Masons were determined that the same thing would not happen again. Therefore, each of the seven Incorporators held one share of Founders Preferred stock in perpetuity for \$2,000 for his Lodge, to ensure that the new Temple would never leave Masonic ownership.<sup>10</sup>

A 108' by 158' lot on the southeast corner of Willow and Front Street opposite the Old Barracks was chosen for the new temple. This particular site was thoroughly acceptable to the Freemasons for three reasons: first, because of its nearness to the center of the city and its accessibility to all trolley lines; secondly, because of its surroundings, which at the time included Stacy Park, which would ensure an open space and an unsurpassed view to the front of the building; and lastly, because of the site's historic value as the exact spot where the first Masonic body had met in Trenton.<sup>11</sup>

By May of the following year, \$125,000 had been raised for the new temple, primarily through gifts and the sale of mortuary bonds. However, with America's entry into World War I, all thought of construction was postponed. No further action was taken until June 4, 1921, when the committee reconvened and it was unanimously decided to proceed with fund-raising. The second campaign brought the total amount of cash and pledges to \$400,000, making the dream of construction a reality.

In 1923, a design competition was opened to New Jersey, New York and Philadelphia architects who were also members of the Masonic order. Seven architects entered the competition which was

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<sup>10</sup> Dowdell

<sup>11</sup> "Let's Finish the Job", unpaginated

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conducted in strict accordance with the rules of the American Institute of Architects--in other words, none of the drawings were signed or gave any indication of the name of the architect. Two of the judges were nationally known architects in their own right: Thomas Hastings of the New York firm Carrere and Hastings, and Charles Z. Klauder of Philadelphia. The third judge was Public Utility Commissioner Frederick W. Gnichtel of Trenton.

On June 15, 1923, the first place prize was awarded to Harry Armstrong Hill of the Trenton architectural firm of Hill and Gollner. Hill, a Trenton native, had a life-long interest in art and architecture, and at the age of seventeen he had gone to work as a carpenter. Hill's father, however, was concerned that the young man would never succeed in that field, and so set him up with a bakery of his own. Later, despite being 32 years old and having a family to support, Harry sold that business, and with the proceeds moved to New York to pursue his dream of studying architecture, with the encouragement of his wife Mary. Hill attended the New York School of Art and Architecture, the precursor of Columbia University's Architecture department, and upon completion of his degree the family returned to Trenton.<sup>12</sup>

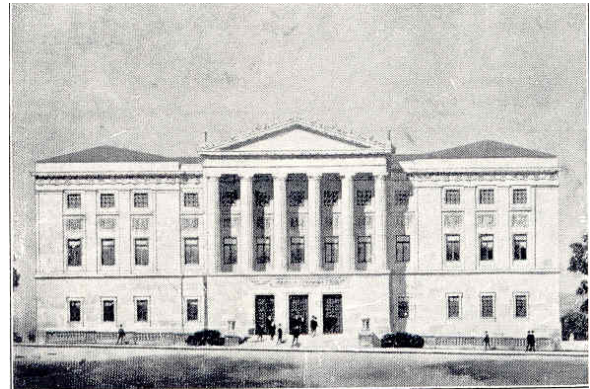
After practicing for a few years with W. W. Slack, Hill formed his own architecture firm with a new partner, Ervin Gollner. At the time of the Masonic Temple competition, Hill was 69 years old and had been practicing architecture for three decades. Among his other Trenton commissions were the Hill dormitory at Princeton, the old Hildebrecht Hotel, the Hostess House at Fort Dix and many Trenton schools, including the Harrison and Carroll Robbins buildings.

The jury commented that Hill's design was:

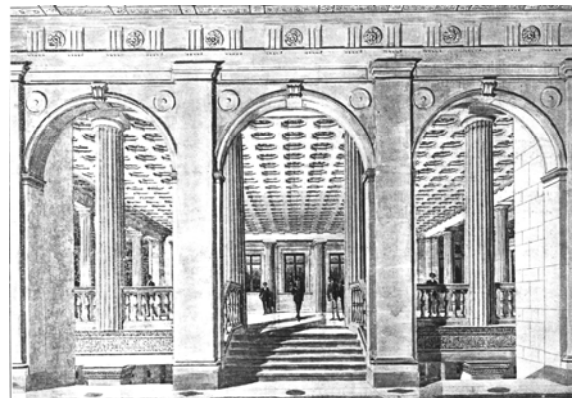
"lasting in merit and well conceived as to detail and proportion... As regards the design of the exterior, aside from the arrangement of the interior, the jurors feel

that [the] design has all the elements which would lead, with such refinements as may be anticipated from further study, to a very dignified building—quiet, restrained, in good taste, and in no way obtrusive and pretentious. While it is based upon the traditions of the Italian Renaissance, it is sufficiently free in treatment not to be archeological but quite modern in character."<sup>13</sup>

Hill and Gollner were subsequently authorized to proceed with the completion of working drawings.



**Figure 3. Rendering of the façade of the proposed Masonic Temple.**



**Figure 4. Original rendering of the interior, looking from the Lobby to the Lounge.**

In late 1924, the Masonic Temple Association prepared a pamphlet entitled "Let's Finish the

<sup>12</sup> *State Gazette*, March 12, 1941

<sup>13</sup> "What Trenton Makes in Building," *The State Gazette*, October 9, 1926

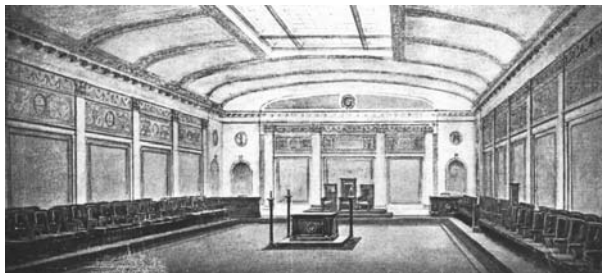
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Job” with the purpose of raising the additional \$350,000 that was required to start construction. The brochure, which was distributed throughout Trenton’s Masonic community, contained floor plans, architectural renderings of the proposed interiors and exterior, photographs of the site, and a written description of the building as it was then envisioned.



**Figure 5. The Ionic Room as originally envisioned by Hill and Gollner. Note the tile floor , which was ultimately changed to carpet.**



**Figure 6. The Corinthian Room as shown in the competition drawings. Note the vaulted ceiling, which was not installed.**

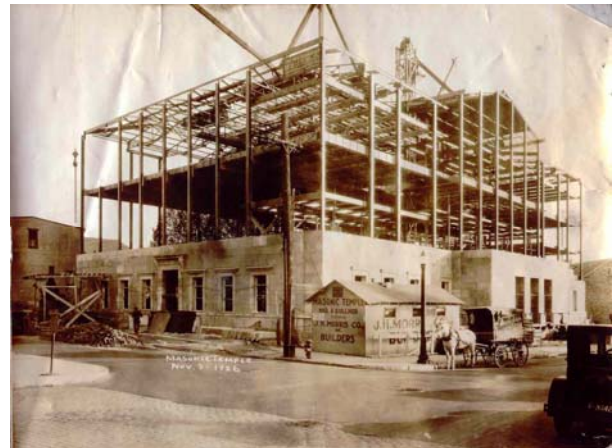
### Construction of the New Masonic Temple

Following the successful completion of the Masons’ fund-raising efforts, the James H. Morris Company was awarded the contract for the construction of the new Temple. Morris, who had been a member of Trenton Lodge No. 5 since 1901, was a successful builder who had completed construction of numerous local banks, schools, theaters and municipal buildings. Included among his projects were the Trenton City Hall, Trenton Fire Quarters, Hamilton Township High School, the Strand Theater and the Morrisville Bank. His brief proposal to furnish “all labor and materials required for the construction, complete, of the Masonic Temple Building...for the sum of: six

hundred ten thousand one hundred eleven dollars” was accepted on April 1, 1926.

One month later, on May 8, ground was broken in a ceremony that was lead by Adam Exton and attended by more than a thousand Master Masons. Five months later, work on the building had progressed sufficiently to allow for the laying of the cornerstone. That ceremony, held on October 9, 1926, was doubly significant to Trenton’s Masons because the cornerstone from their former home, the 1884 Temple designed by William Poland, was being reused in the new building.

The smooth white limestone block, which had been the first piece of Indiana limestone to be imported into Trenton, had been salvaged in 1917 when the second Temple was being razed. It had been carefully stored throughout the nine year period of planning and fund-raising. The contents of the iron box that had been placed in the cornerstone on July 15, 1884, were reinstalled in a new copper box, along with several additional items.<sup>14</sup>



**Figure 7. A photograph taken on November 3, 1926, shows Morris’s work shed in the foreground.**

A newspaper article published at the time noted that of the numerous firms involved in the construction of the Masonic Temple, many were based in Trenton. The excavation work was completed by Joseph Taylor and N.A.K. Bugbee & Company furnished and erected the structural

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

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steel. Royle-Brock, Inc. furnished the exterior marble and completed the ornamental plastering. The “largest Copper Roof that was ever laid in Trenton” was supplied and installed by Fred F. Scheich, as was all of the sheet metal including skylights and Kalamein work. The tile and slate work was completed by a local firm, as was the



Figure 8. Construction progresses, December 1926.



Figure 9. Exterior construction nears completion, January 1927.

millwork. The plumbing and heating were installed by Piper Brothers, Carr & Schultz finished the electrical work, and the ornamental iron work was completed by Ornamental Iron Works. The newspaper article went on to note that the painting was done by J.D. Margerum & Company.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.mercer50.com>

An article in the *State Gazette* published in 1926 described the building as it would appear once construction was finished.

“Impressive by its dignity and simplicity, the new Masonic Temple when completed, will be one of the most beautiful buildings in the East. Its stateliness and serene beauty will personify the augustness of the age-old Masonic order.

Drawn after the general Grecian style of architecture the structure will combine the best of the three orders of that style, Ionic, Doric and Corinthian.”<sup>16</sup>

The article, which took most of its information directly from the Masons’ promotional pamphlet, described the building as it had been originally planned. Prior to the start of construction, a number of major and minor changes were made to the design that were not reflected in the written description. For instance, major spatial changes to the original plans provided for more lodge rooms and eliminated a large auditorium space that was determined to be unnecessary. The Willow Street façade which was 156 feet long and 70 feet high, had “broad steps leading to three large bronze doors richly adorned with Masonic symbols.” Those doors were subsequently completed in oak rather than bronze.



Figure 10. The first and third Trenton Masonic Temples in 1928. Courtesy of the Trenton Times.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

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Following the opening of the building on February 28, 1928, thousands of Masons and curious local residents took advantage of the four-day open house to view the completed building. What they found was a beautiful Neo-classical building constructed of Indiana limestone on a gray granite base. Six massive Doric columns supported the central tympanum of the entry portico with symmetrical wings flanking either side.

The interior contained three floors of serviceable space, with an unfinished fourth floor that contained adequate space should additional lodge rooms become necessary. The 15 by 50 foot foyer had walls and arches of Botticino marble which “typify the age and solidity of the Masonic order.” The foyer floor was of Travertine marble inset with Solomon’s seal and other decorative designs of significance. Emblems of the Fraternity also decorated the frieze, and painted allegorical figures of Justice, Fortitude, Prudence and Temperance adorned the walls.

A spacious (70 by 70 foot) Lounge occupied the central portion of the first floor and opened onto the Billiard Room, Library and Club Rooms. The Lounge walls were painted to resemble creamy white Caen stone, and were topped with a painted frieze. The ceiling was of ornamental colored plaster, and the floor was covered with Travertine tile. The schedule of furniture for the Lounge described the items as upholstered in linen frieze, chaise mohair or wool tapestry. Ordered for the room, at a total cost of \$594.00, were 7 sofas, 2 writing desks, 1 table, 4 banquettes, 18 arm chairs, 8 pillar chairs, 6 smoking stands and 2 desk chairs.

The Billiard Room was located on the Front Street end of the building. Its large size (46 by 40 feet) easily accommodated the three pool tables and billiard table that had been donated by the family of William R. Thropp, for whom the room was named.

The Joseph O. Stokes Library (38 by 40 feet) was located on the southeast corner of the building, overlooking the Delaware River. The Club Room (later to become the office of the Grand Lodge) was located in the southwest corner, adjoining the



**Figure 11. The Lounge with original furnishings. Courtesy of the Trenton Times.**



**Figure 12. The Billiard Room as it appeared in 1928. Courtesy of the Trenton Times.**



**Figure 13. The Library as it originally appeared. Courtesy of the Trenton Times.**

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Library. The trim throughout the first floor, including the paneling in the Billiard and Club rooms and the library book cases, was of American black walnut. The walls were stenciled and Persian carpets covered the floors.

The opening day description also noted that:

“The semi-basement is devoted to a great banquet hall which may be closed by folding doors into three sections or used as a unit with a capacity of 760 diners. A main kitchen is equipped like that of a modern hotel with a battery of gas ranges, steam tables, hot closets, and dish washing machines. Supplementing this is a smaller buffet kitchen... Under the main entrance on Willow Street is the ventilating system. Two huge fans drive either heated or cooled air all over the building and at the same time exhaust vitiated air. Stuffy lodge rooms are a thing of the past here.”

The second floor was described in this way:

“The Lodge rooms, designed in the different periods of architecture for which they are named, Doric, Corinthian and Ionic, are supplemented with tylers’, preparation, examination, committee and dressing rooms. The Ionic room, a magnificent example of the Roman period, has walls of Travertine marble<sup>17</sup> and large columns which support balconies on three sides of the room. Large paintings depicting Faith, Hope, and Charity adorn the wall in the east and the fumed oak beamed ceiling is decorated in color. Ornamental wrought iron lighting fixtures, fumed oak furniture with chair seats upholstered in blue velour and a Persian floor covering woven in colors and motifs corresponding with the ceilings and side wall furnish a subdued touch of color. The Doric room had decorated stone walls<sup>18</sup> [topped] with the

frieze of the Craft. The ceiling is decorated in gold leaf and colors and mural paintings representing Relief, Brotherhood and Truth occupy the east. The balcony in the rear of the room and wood finish is of walnut and the room is appointed with furniture of the same wood upholstered in red velour. The wall space of the Corinthian room is divided by pilasters ornamented with acanthus leaves. The ceiling is decorated in gold leaf with a subdued suggestion of color. Mural decorations depicting Justice, Truth and Love occupy the east. The room is richly appointed in red velour and walnut.”



**Figure 14. The Corinthian Room at opening. Courtesy of the Trenton Times.**

### Gustave A. Brand

One of the most outstanding characteristics of the Temple, then as now, is the high quality decorative painting that appears throughout the interior spaces. All of the interior decoration, including the design of the carpets, has been attributed to the studio of Gustave A. Brand (also spelled Brandt in some references).

Born in Parchim, Germany, Brand studied art in Berlin, Munich and Dusseldorf. He was sent to the United States by the German government in 1891 in order to decorate that country’s pavilion at the Columbia Exposition. There he also exhibited a piece of his own work entitled “The Battle of

<sup>17</sup> This material is actually plaster treated to look like travertine marble.

<sup>18</sup> This is actually plaster painted to look like stone.

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Gettysburg.”<sup>19</sup> After the close of the exhibition Brand remained in this country and went to work as the head of Marshall Fields’ decorating department.

In 1903 Brandt formed his own company, which remained in business until 1932.<sup>20</sup> Although not well known outside of Chicago, Brand was responsible for hundreds of allegorical murals found in banks, public and fraternal buildings, churches and theaters throughout the United States. Among those are the Boston Public Library, the Roxy and Capital Theaters in New York and the Allentown, Pennsylvania, Masonic Temple. He is listed in *Who’s Who in American Art*.

It was his work in Allentown that probably brought Brand to the attention of Trenton’s Masonic order. A furniture schedule submitted for the Trenton temple noted that “All of the work would be of the same character and workmanship as that in the Masonic Temple, Allentown, which your committee visited”. That building, which was completed in July 1925, was designed by Chicago architect Richard Schmid. It is highly likely that Brand acquired the contract to complete the interior decoration through Schmid, a fellow Chicagoan. Although it is not known whether Brand was himself a Mason, his work included the decoration of numerous Masonic Temples and fraternal buildings throughout the country.<sup>21</sup>

In 1934 Brand was appointed Commissioner of Art by Mayor Kelly and he served as City Treasurer from 1935-1939. He died in Chicago in 1944.

### **Conclusion**

The amount of material used in the construction of the Masonic Temple was staggering, even by

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<sup>19</sup> Heather Becker. *Art for the People; the Rediscovery and Preservation of Progressive and WPA-era Murals in the Chicago Public Schools, 1904-1943*. Chronicle Books, 2002

<sup>20</sup> Yahoo <http://groups.yahoo.com>

<sup>21</sup> Draft copy of National Register application for the Allentown, Pennsylvania, Masonic Temple.

contemporary standards. Included were five hundred tons of steel, twenty-five thousand bags of cement, twenty-five thousand cubic feet of granite and limestone, four thousand cubic yards of reinforced concrete, forty thousand square yards of plaster, 700,000 bricks, and 60,000 square feet of flooring. The result was a majestic building that remains structurally sound and shows few signs of wear after nearly a century of use.

As time passed, fraternal organizations of all types have suffered significant drops in membership. During the 1960s and 70s many of Trenton’s Freemasons moved out of the city, relocating their lodges in the process. The result is that, today, only Mercer Lodge No. 50 continues to use the building regularly. Although the Lounge and Banquet Rooms are leased for catered functions, the imposing Masonic temple, with its magnificent interiors, remains largely unoccupied.

### **Recommendations For Additional Research**

In order to prepare the developmental history section of this Preservation Plan, all of the source material available at the Trenton Masonic Temple was consulted. Unfortunately, the original architectural drawings are no longer available, nor are the renderings that were submitted by Hill and Gollner for the architectural competition. It may prove interesting to locate the original drawings in order to compare the finished building with the architect’s original design. Also, the original specifications would undoubtedly be useful in the actual restoration of the building.

Only a very little information was available on Gustav Brand, and almost none of that was pertinent to Trenton’s Masonic Temple. Additional information may be available in Brand’s papers, the location of which has not been determined.

Because of the limited budget, the historical research concluded with the building’s grand opening. Additional research into the Temple’s use during the subsequent years would undoubtedly be of interest.

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