

# The New York LDS Historian

## Various Times and Sundry Places:

### Buildings Used by the LDS Church in Manhattan

*Written and Illustrated by Ned P. Thomas*

At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is actively acquiring real estate and constructing new buildings for its expanding membership in New York City. The structures are a visible measure of the Church's commitment to the city and seem to say that Latter-day Saints feel at home in New York. However, members haven't always been so fortunate.

Since the earliest days of the Church in the city, members have searched for a home of their own, usually meeting in private homes and rented halls. A lull in city church activity followed the westward trek in 1846 and 1847, and for most of the nineteenth century, no organized branches met—at least so far as the records show. But near the end of the nineteenth century, not long after the Eastern States Mission was organized, Latter-day Saints began worshipping again in New York on a regular basis. From that time on, the search for better or larger facilities has been a perpetual challenge.

#### Early Meeting Places

Following the organization of the first branch in July 1837, Church members were "accustomed to meet with two or three other people in a small upper room on Goerck Street."<sup>1</sup> Parley P. Pratt, a member of the Quorum of Twelve Apostles who was living in New York, recorded that they had "hired chapels and advertised, but the people would not hear, and the few who came went away without being interested."<sup>2</sup>

Discouraged, Pratt determined to leave New York City but was prompted to stay by an outpouring of the Spirit at a prayer meeting held prior to his departure. Elder Pratt was subsequently invited by

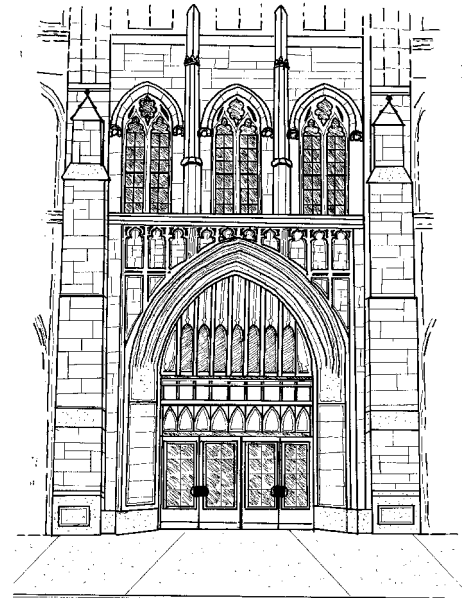
the Free Thinkers to give a course of lectures on Mormonism in Tammany Hall, and soon the members had secured "fifteen preaching places in the city, all of which were filled to overflow."<sup>3</sup>

In 1840, Elders Brigham Young, Heber C. Kimball, George A. Smith, and others arrived in New York City en route to England as missionaries. They held many "precious meetings" with the Saints, including a general Conference in the "Columbian Hall" located a few doors east of the Bowery on Grand Street.<sup>4</sup> During this period, regular church meetings were held at 31 Canal Street, near the intersection with Cortlandt Alley (1841-42); 29 Canal Street (1842-43); and 263 Grand Street, between Forsythe and Eldredge (1843-44).<sup>5</sup>

Records for 1845 indicate that the East River Branch was located at the intersection of First and Houston.<sup>6</sup> On May 26, 1844, Elder C. W. Wandle, direct from Nauvoo, lectured on Mormonism at the Marion Temperance Hall, 183 Canal Street.<sup>7</sup> Local branch leaders also met every six months for General Conference in a hall at 245 Spring Street.<sup>8</sup>

Between 1840 and 1890, New York City served primarily as a portal through which Mormon immigrants passed on

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*2166 Broadway at 76th Street  
(1928-1944)*

#### The New York LDS Historian

is the quarterly newsletter of the New York, New York Stake LDS History Committee. This newsletter contains articles about and notices of the research of the Committee.

More detailed research results are found in our monograph series Monographs will be announced in future issues of the New York LDS Historian.

#### Current research projects:

20th century overview of the history of the Church in New York City.

Mormon Poet Jon Beck Shank

Mormon exhibits at the 1964 New York World's Fair

New York's Hispanic Membership

If you are interested in volunteering for research, writing, archiving or historical activity planning, please contact Kent Larsen at (212) 927-7932.

## Buildings in Manhattan (continued from previous page)

their way West and from which Mormon missionaries departed. The city was also headquarters of the Eastern States Mission, but Church membership in the area grew slowly. Near the end of the nineteenth century, organized branches began meeting more frequently in rented halls and other public buildings.<sup>9</sup>

### Early 1900s

In the early 1900s, New York City Directories list a succession of addresses where Church members met. These addresses include: 70 West 125<sup>th</sup> Street (1900); 172 West 81<sup>st</sup> Street (1901-1903); 33 West 126<sup>th</sup> Street (1905); and Hawthorne Hall, 153 West 125<sup>th</sup> Street (1906).<sup>10</sup> The Eastern States Mission Home was also located at some of these addresses.<sup>11</sup>

In 1925, William Woolf, later to become third Bishop of the Manhattan Ward (1942 to 1948), moved to New York City to study electronics at Columbia University. At that time, the Manhattan Branch held its meetings in a “beer hall” on the east side of Broadway above 80<sup>th</sup> Street. While serving as Superintendent of the Sunday School, Brother Woolf said he would arrive early to “clean beer cans off the steps and straighten things up a little” and “get the place aired out of beer and cigar smoke” before the meetings began.<sup>12</sup> Other rented facilities used by the Manhattan Branch during the early 1920s included Steinway Hall at 109 West 57<sup>th</sup> Street, Carnegie Hall on 57<sup>th</sup> Street at 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue, and Stillman’s Gym, 316 West 57<sup>th</sup> Street.<sup>13</sup>

Then, in 1928, members moved to a long-lasting home in which history was made. From 1928 to 1944, the Manhattan Ward occupied the ground floor of a hotel located at 2166 Broadway between 76<sup>th</sup> and 77<sup>th</sup> Streets (see illustration, p.

1).<sup>14</sup> When the New York, New York Stake was organized on December 9, 1934, its offices were located in this building.<sup>15</sup> Although relatively common at the time, this arrangement ultimately proved unsuccessful because it was discovered that, like other lodgings in town, the hotel was not very profitable without a bar, and most churches (including the Mormons) were opposed to including one.<sup>16</sup> The hotel was later extensively remodeled and reopened as the Promenade Theater in 1969.<sup>17</sup> Today, the only evidence of the building’s historic significance as a religious structure is its original gothic façade.

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### 142 West 81<sup>st</sup> Street

When the Manhattan Ward finally left its meeting house on Broadway, temporary facilities were arranged in Steinway Hall, where the Church had previously rented space as a Branch. By this time, Church leaders had begun looking for an existing chapel to buy, but sentiment against the Mormons repeatedly caused other churches to withdraw from negotiations at the last minute.<sup>18</sup> A suitable structure was finally found at 142 West 81<sup>st</sup> Street. However, ward members were counseled that, if they went to look at the chapel,

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# The Brooklyn Building: First Chapel East of the Mississippi

by Mark Butler

At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Latter-day Saints in Brooklyn faced difficult challenges in their attempts to establish a branch of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. In 1898, the city of Brooklyn itself was absorbed into the five-borough metropolis of New York City. Similarly, two years later, the Brooklyn Saints ceased meeting on their own, and gathered instead with members in Manhattan.

By 1904, however, the Brooklyn Branch was formed and the Saints began again meeting in Brooklyn for worship. From 1904 until 1918, the Brooklyn Branch met in a series of rented halls, homes, a Masonic Temple and a building housing the Junior Order of American Mechanics. Of one such meeting place, James Knecht, later the president of the Branch, wrote: "This was a vile place." Of others, he wrote "the only places we found were lodge halls over saloons, bowling alleys. The stench of stale beer and tobacco smoke was most offensive." Finally, in 1909 the church began meeting in a hall at the corner of Gates and Bushwick Avenues, described as "the first suitable meeting place" since the organization of the branch.<sup>1</sup>

In 1916 the Church acquired property at the corner of Gates and Franklin Avenues, at the edge of the Bedford-Stuyvesant section, and began planning for the construction of a chapel and a mission home for the Eastern States Mission (see illustration p. 4). However, building the chapel was not accomplished without opposition. President Knecht alluded to the difficulty of finding suitable halls to rent,<sup>2</sup> and the building's dedicatory prayer asked for the softening of the hearts "of those that are bitterly opposed to its erection here...."<sup>3</sup>

Despite the opposition, construction was completed in 1918, and the chapel was dedicated on February 16, 1919, by Elder Reed Smoot of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. This was a significant milestone for the Church, since the chapel and the mission home were the

first buildings erected by the Church east of the Mississippi since the Saints were driven from Nauvoo over 70 years earlier.<sup>4</sup>

The architecture of the chapel reflected familiar themes in other, more famous Church buildings—in particular the Laie, Hawaii Temple, which was constructed during the same period. The domed ceiling in the chapel approximated the more famous ceiling in the Salt Lake Tabernacle. On the mezzanine railing were familiar Mormon symbols, includ-

*The chapel and the mission home were the first buildings erected by the Church east of the Mississippi since the Saints were driven from Nauvoo over 70 years earlier.*

ing the beehive and the seals of the Relief Society and the Mutual Improvement Association, with their themes, "Charity Never Faileth" and "The Glory of God is Intelligence."

For over 40 years the Brooklyn chapel fulfilled "a memorable mission," as a center of worship and other activity for Latter-day Saints in Brooklyn, whether natives of the immigrants from "Europe's teeming cities" or the "children and grandchildren of the Western Pioneers."<sup>5</sup> The Brooklyn building was the place

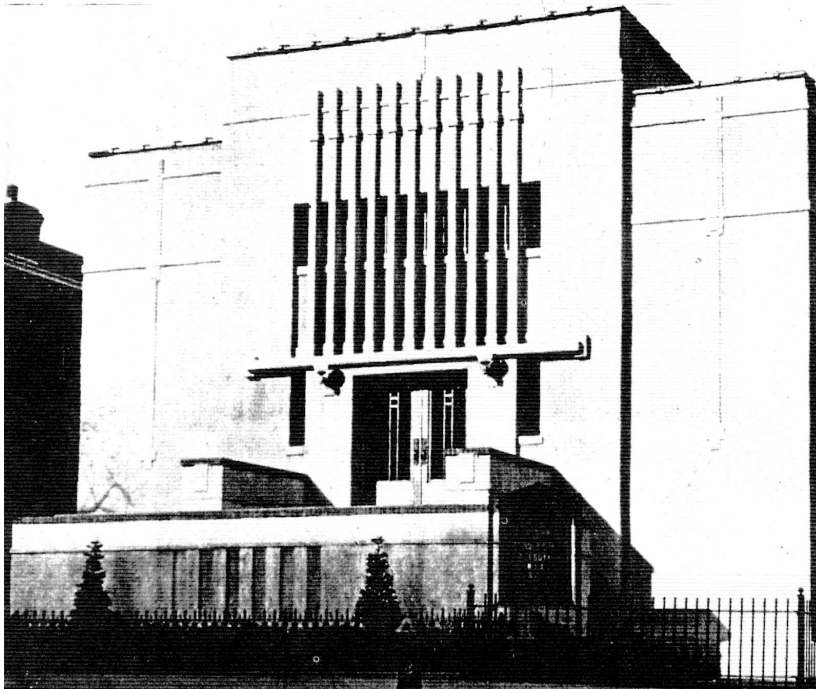
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## The Brooklyn Building (continued from previous page)

where European church members found “their first welcome, their first friends and often help.”<sup>6</sup>

But, with the shift of population to the suburbs after the Second World War, and the deterioration of the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn, the decision was made to sell the building.<sup>7</sup>

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*Brooklyn LDS Chapel, corner of Gates and Franklin Ave. (1919-1963)*

In late 1963, the sale was completed, and the Brooklyn Saints began meeting elsewhere. The building on the corner of Gates and Franklin still stands, however, a symbol of the faithfulness of the early Saints whose efforts to establish a permanent home in Brooklyn have blessed all who have followed after.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>James S. Knecht to F. Artell Smith, December 12, 1938; from *Brooklyn Chapel Anniversary, 1919-1940*, 77.

<sup>2</sup>James S. Knecht to F. Artell Smith, December 12, 1938; from *Brooklyn Chapel Anniversary, 1919-1940*, 77.

<sup>3</sup>Dedicatory Prayer, Brooklyn Branch Chapel, February 16, 1919; in *Brooklyn Chapel Anniversary, 1919-1940*, 79.

<sup>4</sup>*Zion in the Brooklyn District: One Heart, Many Voices. A History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Brooklyn and Staten Island, New York, 1837-1997*, 4.

<sup>5</sup>*Brooklyn Chapel Anniversary, 1919-1940*, Foreword, 3.

<sup>6</sup>*Brooklyn Chapel Anniversary, 1919-1940*, Foreword, 3. The names of Branch and Ward leadership during that period reflects the immigrant nature of the congregation: Knecht, Koenig, Petterson, Ostendorf, Tiemersma, Braun, Butschek, Hoemke, Olschewski and Schoessow are just a sample.

<sup>7</sup>The building is currently owned by the Evening Star Baptist Church.

## Buildings in Manhattan

*(continued from page 3)*

they should not identify themselves as Mormons since members of the Disciples of Christ congregation (which owned the building at the time) were unaware that their building was being sold to the LDS Church.<sup>19</sup>

Originally constructed as a Jewish synagogue, the 81<sup>st</sup> Street Chapel had once been the long-time home of a Sephardic sect of Jews led by Rabbi Stephen Weiss, a prominent Jewish scholar and author.<sup>20</sup> The Star of David figured prominently in many of the building's details.<sup>21</sup> The interior of the building featured lofty wooden ceilings, exquisite stained glass windows, a magnificent pipe organ, and excellent acoustics. A kitchen, restrooms, and full-size cultural hall were located in the basement.

Although elegant and quite large, the 81<sup>st</sup> Street Chapel proved to be impractical for use as an LDS meeting house due to its lack of classrooms.<sup>22</sup> Small meeting spaces for classes were created at the top of each stairway, and the balcony was enclosed with glass for a cry room/classroom. Eventually, the Church purchased a brownstone adjacent to the east side of the chapel and connected the two buildings via a short passageway. The first two floors of the brownstone were renovated into basic classrooms, and a small library was organized on the first floor. The brownstone's "dungeon-like" basement was used for storage and Halloween party spook alleys.<sup>23</sup>

According to Tom and Megumi Vogelmann, resident caretakers of the building at the time, the neighborhood around West 81<sup>st</sup> Street grew increasingly unsafe in the early 1970's. Church members felt threatened and some were even robbed on their way home from Sunday evening meetings. In addition, Church membership in Manhattan had doubled since 1964,<sup>24</sup> and the renovated buildings were fast becoming worn and overcrowded. Two English-speaking wards and the Spanish American Branch now shared the limited facilities.

Progress on a new building had been slow in coming. Almost a decade earlier, in January of 1962, the First Presidency

announced the purchase of land on 57<sup>th</sup> and 58<sup>th</sup> Streets west of Fifth Avenue.<sup>25</sup>

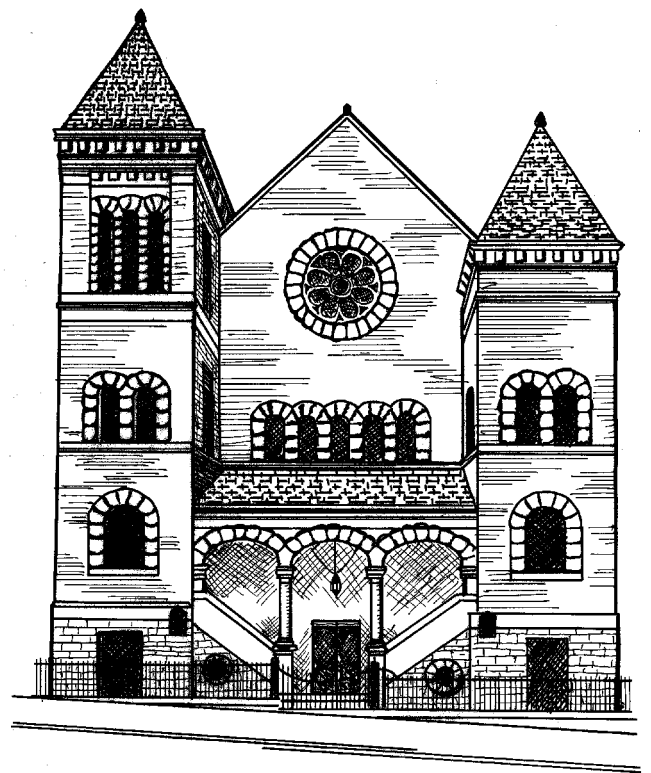
The announcement, which received nationwide publicity, said a 35 to 40-story building would be constructed for use by the church for a ward, stake and mission complex, as well as leasing the rest of the building for offices and apartments.

However, for a variety of reasons, plans for the building didn't materialize and development options on the property were later sold. Meanwhile, Church leaders continued to look for other property in Manhattan.

### A Stake Center

On April 13, 1973, President Harold B. Lee announced the construction of a 36-story mixed-use tower on Columbus Avenue between 65<sup>th</sup> and 66<sup>th</sup> Streets, directly across Lincoln Square from the Julliard School of Music. The building would include facilities for religious, educational, and cultural activities of the Church.<sup>26</sup> The new structure would house two Manhattan Wards, the Spanish-American Branch, stake offices, headquarters of the Eastern States Mission, and a Visitors Center.<sup>27</sup> Church facilities would be located in the first four stories with the remainder of the structure to be developed for rented apartments. The new building was

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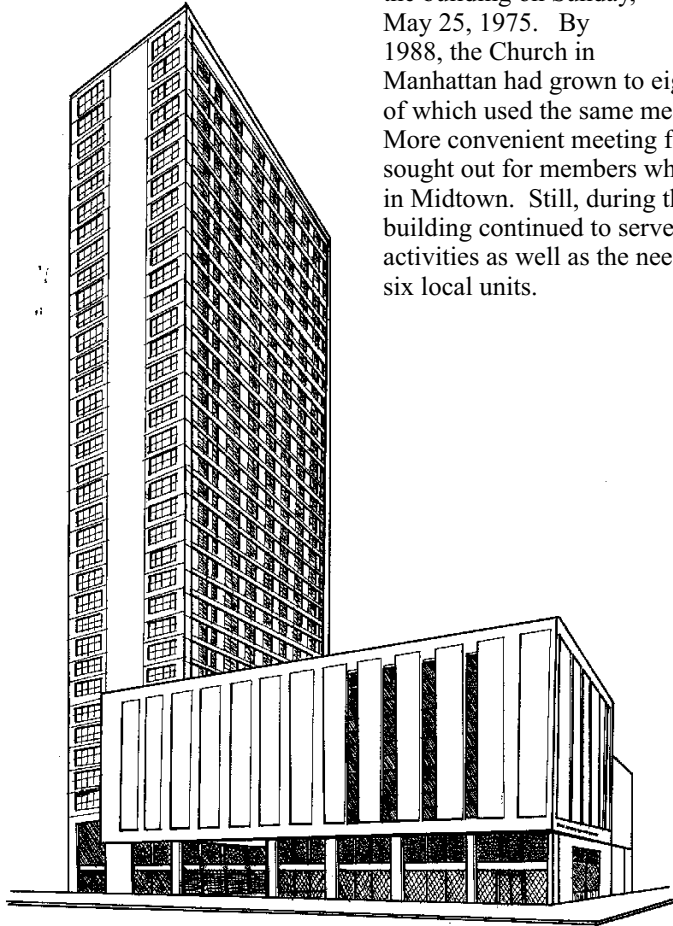
142 West 81st Street (1945-1975)

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## Buildings in New York City (continued from previous page)

intended to be a showcase for the Church on one of the most prominent locations in New York City.<sup>28</sup>

The \$15 million building was completed in stages with the apartment tower and commercial spaces ready for occupancy in early 1974.<sup>29</sup> Church facilities were completed in March 1975, and President Spencer W. Kimball dedicated the building on Sunday, May 25, 1975. By 1988, the Church in Manhattan had grown to eight units, all of which used the same meeting space.<sup>30</sup> More convenient meeting facilities were sought out for members who did not live in Midtown. Still, during the 1990s, the building continued to serve stake activities as well as the needs of five or six local units.



2 Lincoln Square (Dedicated 25 May 1975)

### Inwood Chapel

On June 14, 1997, ground was broken for a new Mormon meeting house on the

*The new building was intended to be a showcase for the Church on one of the most prominent locations in New York City.*

corner of Riverside Drive and Payson Street in the Inwood section of upper Manhattan. Members met for services in the new chapel for the first time on March 26, 2000. This building is the first new construction initiated by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Manhattan since the current Stake Center at Lincoln Square was completed in 1975. During that same period of time, Church membership in Manhattan grew from about 1,000 members in three units to more than 3,200 members in nine units.<sup>31</sup>

### Harlem Building

At its creation in 1997, the Manhattan 9<sup>th</sup> Branch, or “Harlem Branch,” held its meetings at Sylvia’s Restaurant, a well-known landmark in Harlem; but space was severely limited and there were recurring schedule conflicts. For a short time, the branch was even forced to abandon its regular meeting schedule and hold only sacrament meetings. Then, in 1998, Church headquarters approved the purchase of a building on West 129<sup>th</sup> Street near Lenox Avenue in Harlem for use by the Manhattan 9<sup>th</sup> Branch. One current plan for the newly purchased building, a former Jehovah’s Witness chapel, includes extensive remodeling. Another idea being considered is to build a new chapel on the present site or on another lot close by.

To match the continued growth of the Church in Manhattan, plans are currently underway for acquisition of additional meeting space downtown near Union Square, and approval has also been given for the purchase or construction of a multi-million dollar building on the Upper East Side. With completion of these new buildings, the New York, New York Stake may never again be required to rent facilities or rely upon just one building to house its members. This change is the

culmination of many years' struggle, in remarkably similar ways, by successive generations of New York saints to secure a permanent home for themselves amid the towers of the city.

*At its creation in 1997, the Manhattan 9<sup>th</sup> Branch, or "Harlem Branch," held its meetings at Sylvia's Restaurant, a well-known landmark in Harlem; but space was severely limited and there were recurring schedule conflicts.*

## Notes

- 1 Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt, 1985, pg. 145. Goerck Street, now designated Baruch Place, is located near the Williamsburg Bridge.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Ibid, pg. 261. See also: Brigham Young History, 1801-1804, ed., E. Watson (1968), Pg. 146-147.
- 5 New York City Directories for 1841-1844.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Cyril D. Pearson, *New York, Cradle of Mormonism – Part I*, The Improvement Era, August 1942, pg. 522.
- 8 Times and Seasons, Vol. 3, 1842, pg. 844
- 9 Dick Owen, *Famous Churches of Our City*, Sunday News, March 3, 1957, pg. 37.
- 10 Trow's New York City Directories 1900, 1901, 1903, 1905, and 1906. See also *A Brief History of the Church in New York City* by William Cottam.
- 11 In 1917, the Church constructed a permanent Mission Home and an adjacent chapel at 273 Gates Avenue in Brooklyn William L. Woolf mentions that a Mission Home was situated at 155 Riverside Drive, overlooking the Hudson River, in 1938. See William L. Woolf, *The Church in New York City*, The Improvement Era, December 1938, pg. 730.
- 12 William L. Woolf Oral History, interviews by William G. Hartley, 1973-74, typescript, pg. 22, Oral History Program, Archives, Historical Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah.
- 13 Ibid. See also *New York City Directories*, 1920-1935 Editions.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 William L. Woolf, *The Church in New York City*, The Improvement Era, December 1938, pg. 730



*Sylvia's Restaurant, 328 Lenox Avenue (1997-1999)*

# Modern History

## *Recent Events in New York City that will be history*

### Julie Jensen's "Two Headed" plays off-Broadway

Mormon playwright Julie Jensen's play "Two Headed" opened for a three-week run off-broadway beginning May 3rd at the Women's Project Theatre. Jensen is the director of the Graduate Playwriting Program at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. The play concerns the reactions of two women in southern Utah to polygamy and to the Mountain Meadows Massacre.

### Mormon Arts Festival

The New York, New York Stake sponsored an all-day festival of the arts on Saturday, March 4th. The festival featured the work of members of the stake, many of whom are professional artists in a variety of fields. The festival included a visual arts exhibition, a classical works concert and midnight readings of original literature.

### Dedication of Inwood Building

The island of Manhattan saw its 2nd LDS Chapel, a newly constructed building on Riverside Drive across the street from Fort Tryon Park in upper Manhattan. The building was completed in February and dedicated June 11th.

### Millennial Dreams at Museum of Folk Art

The Museum of American Folk Art's major exhibit, Millennial Dreams: Vision and Prophecy in American Folk Art, which ended May 14th, included Mormon works among the 75 objects

displayed. Coincidentally, the museum is located on the ground floor of the LDS Church's Lincoln Square building.

### Mahonri Young Exhibit in Connecticut

An exhibit on Mormon artist and Brigham Young grandson Mahonri Young is underway at the Weir Farm National Historic Site, in Wilton Connecticut. Young lived at the farm from 1931 until his death in 1957, and where he sculpted the figures for the "This is the Place" monument and the marble statue of Brigham Young in the U.S. Capital's rotunda. Young used a foundry in Brooklyn to cast his figures and also taught at the Arts Student League in New York City.

### Slover's "Joyful Noise" off-Broadway

LDS playwright Tim Slover's play "Joyful Noise" opened off-Broadway at the Lamb's Player's Theater for six weeks. The play tells about Handel's composition of the "Messiah."

### Church Hosts UN Ambassadors at Radio City Music Hall

LDS Church member and sports executive David Checketts helped the Church host 68 United Nations Ambassadors and Consuls with their families at Radio City Music Hall's famous Christmas Spectacular on Friday, December 10th. Checketts is CEO and President of Madison Square Garden, which owns Radio City Music Hall

in addition to the midtown New York sports arena for which the company is named. Prior to the Christmas Spectacular performance, Checketts and his wife Deb hosted a reception for the diplomats.

### Fast for Harrison New York Temple

North America Northeast Area authorities asked members in the New York region to fast May 7th for a resolution to the zoning challenges faced by the Harrison New York Temple. Construction on the temple has been delayed because of objections by neighbors in the upscale neighborhood where the LDS Church has proposed to build.

### LDS Artist Twitchell Featured in Bronx Show

A "substantial selection" of LDS artist Lane Twitchell's work was exhibited in a Bronx Museum of Art show commemorating the 20th anniversary of their Artists in the Marketplace program. Twitchell, who is in his 30's, is a graduate of the program.

### Westchester LDS Family in the News

News reports from as far away as Manchester, England note that the five children in the Brown family, Desirée, Diandra, Melody, Gregory and Ryan are all attending Juilliard, studying the piano. After the children were accepted to the famous music school, their parents moved the family to White Plains from Houston.

## Buildings in New York City (continued from previous page)

- 16 Ibid. A number of buildings with space reserved for religious meetings on the ground floor and hotel rooms included on the upper floors were constructed in Manhattan during the late 1920s.
- 17 Playbill, Volume 90, Number 3, March 1990
- 18 William L. Woolf Oral History, pg. 22.
- 19 Ibid, pg. 23
- 20 Tom and Megumi Vogelmann, interview by Ned and Cheryl Lynn Thomas, May 16, 1999.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 The 81st Street building still exists and continues to be used by a predominantly African-American Baptist congregation.
- 23 Today, the building is used as a non-LDS church by an African-American congregation.
- 24 Franklin Whitehouse, "Mormon Center Planned

- Here," *The New York Times*, January 6, 1971
- 25 Skyscraper Church Planned, *Church News*, Jan. 20, 1962, pg. 7,14. See also Franklin D. Richards, *Conference Report*, April 1962, pg. 49.
- 26 Church Plans Skyscraper, *Church News*, April 14, 1973.
- 27 The Visitor's Center concept resulted from the success of the Mormon Pavilion at the 1964 New York World's Fair.
- 28 Tom and Megumi Vogelmann, interview by Ned and Cheryl Lynn Thomas, May 16, 1999.
- 29 New York Skyscraper Progress Continues, *Church News*, August 3, 1974. Original commercial tenants on the ground floor included Long John Silver's Seafood Restaurant and Empress Travel.
- 30 N.Y. Meetinghouse Houses Entire Stake, Bulges at the Seams, *Church News*, June 11, 1988
- 31 Estimates of church membership obtained from the New York NY Stake clerk's office.