

A Temple Before Its Time

In March 1954, our Club featured the Chicago Masonic Temple on the cover of *The Masonic Philatelist*, as shown here, with a little write-up inside (shown below the image). The highly imposing building sparked my curiosity. The following is from Wikipedia:

The Masonic Temple Building was a skyscraper built in Chicago, Illinois in 1892. Designed by the firm of Burnham and Root and built at the northeast corner of Randolph and State Streets, the building rose 21 stories. When the clock tower was removed from the 1885 Board of Trade Building in 1895, the Masonic Temple became the tallest in the city.

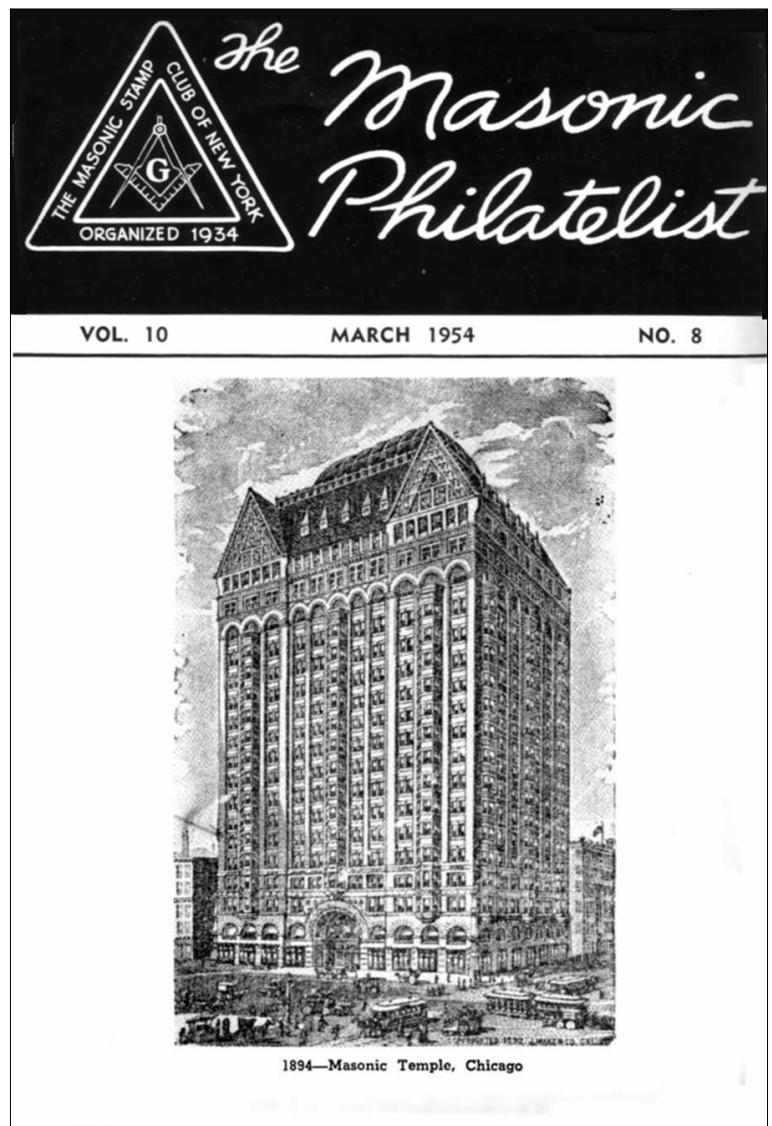
The building featured a central court ringed by nine floors of shops with offices above and meeting rooms for the Masons at the very top. These meeting rooms also served as theaters, which contributed to the building's obsolescence; its elevators proved inadequate for these crowds, and the building rapidly fell from favor with commercial tenants.

Chicago's building height regulations enacted in 1892 (the year the Temple was built), didn't allow taller buildings, until that was amended in the 1920s. In 1939 the Masonic Temple was demolished, in part due to its poor internal services, but also due to the construction of the new State Street subway, which would have necessitated expensive foundation retrofitting. A two-story "taxpayer" housing a Walgreens drug store was erected in its place, and the Joffrey Tower currently stands on the former site of this building.

Both the building's primary designer, John Wellborn Root, and the Masons' primary representative, Norman Gassette, died of natural causes during its construction.

As can be seen, the elevators were the Achilles' heel of the massive structure. Even in the 1950s elevators required an attendant, and the ride was a little unnerving, especially if the doors opened half-way between floors. One can therefore imagine what elevators were like 123 years ago.

A proper photograph was taken of the building in about 1901, and is presented on the next page. It's an astounding little trip back in time. The photo is at very high resolution so you can enlarge it significantly and see all the people going about their business on a clear Chicago day. Masonic membership was very significant in the late 1800s, and what a treat it would have been



Corner Card of the Grand Lodge Secretary of Illinois (1894) featuring the Masonic Temple in Chicago. The wood cut engraving of the Temple was done by Jacob Manz of Chicago.

The Temple not only contained Masonic Lodge activities but also had offices for many business firms, and the Temple being so well-known a letter to any of the firms with the address "The Temple, Chicago" thereon would guarantee a correct delivery.

to have attended a meeting at the Chicago Temple. A Chicago brother who was 21-years-old in 1939 would now (2015) be 97, so it is unlikely he would be in our membership (but not impossible).

It's a shame that the Temple had to be demolished. For certain it was constructed with well-meaning intentions, but a considerable leap in technology was needed to make it totally viable—it was simply before its time.

Chicago Masonic Temple, Circa 1901

