



As described in a 1938 issue of *The State* newspaper, 'This new type station consists of a center column, containing rest rooms, office, meters and of a circular canopy of reinforced concrete extending as much as 40 feet outward from the column, unsupported by additional props, thus allowing motorists to drive in and out with ease. Gasoline nozzles are pulled down from overhead. The thing resembles a huge, flat umbrella and it represents what seems to be an important triumph in the art of concrete work.'

Fairfield Historical Society seeks National Registry status for The Mushrooms of Winnsboro

*Did landmark Inspire
Frank Lloyd Wright
Masterpiece?*

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Contributor

Ever wondered about those giant concrete "mushrooms" that form a canopy behind the Sion Presbyterian Church in Winnsboro? Their history – and the mystery of their possible influence on the work of architect Frank Lloyd Wright – will be one of the topics presented at the Fairfield Historical Society's annual meeting at 4 p.m., Sunday, April 27, at Christ Central Community Center next door to the Fairfield County Museum.

The program will feature the historical research being conducted in preparation for nominating the structures to the National Registry of Historic Places. Museum researcher Suzanne Johnson will also delve into the mystery of whether the mushrooms might actually have been the inspiration for one of architect Frank Lloyd Wright's masterpieces.

Designed and built in the 1930s by Winnsboro architect James Workman, the ferroconcrete formations were his experimental new concept for service station buildings. Each of the three mushroom-like structures are supported by a hollow central column and topped with a wide, flat, circular roof. The largest of the structures was to serve as the main building, with same-size openings around the central column.

Workman applied for a patent on his design in 1933. In 1937, Workman wrote to architect Frank Lloyd Wright about this revolutionary way of con-



Winnsboro's mysterious mushrooms: A monument to 'creative stealing'?

structing a building with only a single column for support. The design was featured in the April, 1938 issue of *Architectural Record* magazine and, that same year, *The State* newspaper described how Workman studied flower stems and water ripples while creating his new design.

Workman's hopes and plans for his service station prototype fell victim to an economic recession that curtailed many business ventures, and apparently the only answer he received from Wright was his secretary's letter that said Wright was too busy to meet. But there is recent speculation that Wright might indeed have seen Workman's design – and perhaps liked it enough to use it himself.

Curious about this possibility, architect James Maynard, who was in Winnsboro on other business last year, contacted Taliesin, Wright's former home in Wisconsin, from where the preservation of his work is overseen, and inquired about any correspondence that might exist between Workman and Wright. He received a copy of the let-

ter Workman wrote to Wright and the secretary's response, and from that Maynard began piecing together a time line of Wright's knowledge about the Winnsboro structures.

Maynard learned that while Workman was completing and promoting his new service station design, Wright was in South Carolina overseeing the construction of the Auldbrass Plantation in Beaufort. And within a year of receiving Workman's letter, Wright designed and built the S.C. Johnson Wax headquarters in Racine, Wisc., the design centerpiece of which bears a striking resemblance to Workman's patented "mushroom" structures.

One theory is that Wright could have traveled through Winnsboro to see Workman's structures and then used that design the following year as a major component in his own architecture. Museum Director Pelham Lyles suggested it is also possible that someone at the patent office informed Wright about Workman's cutting-edge architectural use of reinforced concrete.

The famed architect designed more than 1,000 structures during his career and, unfortunately, this is not the first time he's been suspected of commandeering another designer's idea. In 1893, Wright was fired from the Adler and Sullivan firm in Chicago for 'borrowing' the firm's designs for freelance projects he then finished with his own added ideas.

While the whole story has yet to be unearthed, it's clear that the two designs are remarkably similar. Workman's single-column concrete buildings were a revolutionary idea, and Wright's architectural triumph in Wisconsin was designed after he learned about Workman's structures and after they were built.

Johnson will present this and more about the mystery of the mushrooms



Frank Lloyd Wright's famous dendri-form columns in the S.C. Johnson Wax building in Racine, Wisc., are strikingly similar to the design of a service station built earlier in Winnsboro by architect James Workman.

at the Historical Society's meeting Sunday. Attendees will also have the opportunity to view preserved excerpts from Workman's own 16mm film presentation about the construction of his structures, which stand in Winnsboro as a significant historical facet of Fairfield County's cultural heritage.

Also on the meeting's agenda will be the announcement of the recipients of the 2014 William Banks Patrick Award for historical restoration and the Distinguished Service Award for Volunteerism.

The program will then adjourn for a reception in the museum's dining room where the gift of twelve matching antique dining room chairs will be presented.

The public is invited to attend the meeting at 235 S. Congress St. in Winnsboro. For more information, call the museum at 803-635-9811.