

Stine & McClure Undertaking

924-926 Oak Street
completed 1912

by Susan Jezak Ford

Kansas City has only one example of the Neo-Egyptian style of architecture on a commercial building—the Stine & McClure Undertaking Company Building, located at 924-926 Oak Street. Designed by prominent local architect John McKecknie, the building's granite front, columns, and subtle ornamentation reflect a fanciful style that was popular in the early twentieth century.

The style that influenced the building's design was inspired by the exotic. Egyptian archeological explorations of the 1800s aroused the imaginations of America's east coast architects, resulting in inventive interpretations of the far-off tombs.

Egyptian elements—columns ornamented with papyrus stalks and lotus capitals, winged sun disks and concave cornice moldings decorated with plant motifs—were used for prisons and funerary structures in this country beginning in the mid-1800s. In the twentieth century, designers began exploring the decorative potential of reinforced concrete, translating the architecture of the pharaohs into elaborate movie palaces and theaters.

Built in 1912, the Stine & McClure building was a predecessor to the frivolous Neo-Egyptian interpretations of the 1920s and 1930s. Appropriately staid, the smooth rose granite block façade is composed of soberly adorned surfaces and recessed voids, presenting a tomb-like quality. The building is sandwiched between two larger commercial buildings, so only the front is decorated. The central entrance, surrounding windows, and second-story arcade are deeply recessed from the building's wall plane. Rope-like moldings surround first-story openings and outline the edges of the building's façade. Projecting cornices with bud-like details top the first-story entrance and windows.

The building's entrance is enhanced by two second-story columns with capitals that resemble lotus buds tied with horizontal bands. These columns support a second-story arcade, emphasized by



an iron balustrade with the budding plant motif. Four windows surround the doorway within the second-story arcade. The building's low-pitched parapet is ornamented with a pediment and a horizontal Egyptian gorge cornice, composed of vertical leaves that curve upward and outward. The building's interior does reflect the Egyptian architecture, relying on a more classic style that includes traditional dentilled molding and Corinthian columns.

The Stine name has been associated with Kansas City funerals for nearly as long as the city has existed. Edward Stine arrived in Kansas City in 1860 with his wife. He began working for the undertaking firm of Henning & McLaughlin. In 1861, when the partners decided to retire, he took over the business. The first establishment of "E. Stine, Undertaker," which involved cabinetry skills as much as tending to the deceased, was located at 503 Main Street. The Civil War and two cholera epidemics kept the young man busy. His son, W. F. Stine, joined him in the business in 1886. In 1906, the firm of E. Stine and Son was renamed Stine and McClure when apprentice William M. McClure became the third partner. Stine & McClure was the first funeral business in Kansas City to use a motorized hearse, seen as almost sacrilegious by some at the time. The growing business was located at a number of sites before engaging architect John McKecknie to build the 1912 location.

John McKecknie was a well-established architect when he designed the Stine & McClure building. Born in Clarksville, Ohio, in 1862, he graduated from Princeton in 1886 and worked first for the Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences as an architecture professor and then for the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where he oversaw the installation of full-sized sections of the Parthenon, the Temple of Vespasian, and models of the Cathedral of Notre Dame. He moved to Kansas City in 1898 and began working for the Hucke & Sexton Contracting and Building Company. He opened his own office by 1900, in time for Kansas City's turn-of-the-century boom. Between 1900 and 1910, Kansas City's population grew 54 percent, the park and boulevards system was developed, and the city saw an increase in commercial and residential construction. Between 1910 and 1920, 84 new buildings were constructed within Kansas City's central business district.

McKecknie's experiments with concrete construction brought him many commissions within the city core. His design for the six-story Gumbel Building at 801 Walnut, completed in 1905, was the first here to use reinforced concrete in a large building. Other

early designs included the massive Calvert Hunt residence at 3616 Gladstone Boulevard, completed in 1904, and the 12-story Gloyd Building at 921 Walnut, completed in 1907.

McKecknie was recognized for his ability to adapt historical styles to modern construction methods and the needs of his clients. The Stine & McClure building is built of reinforced concrete, but clad with the smooth granite that calls to mind a gravestone. Because the small storefront was constructed in the midst of a building boom, it drew little attention at the time. The design was not seen as innovative for its era, but rather as a reflection of conservative taste, a quality not uncommon in Kansas City.

The prolific McKecknie worked alone until he formed a partnership with Frank Trask in 1915. The prominent firm of McKecknie and Trask was responsible for the University Club at 918 Baltimore and the Montgomery Ward Building at St. John and Belmont Avenues. In all, McKecknie's years of practice produced 120 commercial, residential, and apartment buildings in Kansas City.

The Stine & McClure building is generally recognized as Kansas City's best expression of the twentieth century interest in Egyptian architecture. The building's design acknowledges the ancient Egyptian culture's preoccupation with death, an obvious choice for an undertaking establishment.

The building was sold to Siegrist Engraving Company in 1928 when Stine & McClure moved to a new building and their current location at 3235 Gillham Plaza. Several interior spaces in the building on Oak Street were expanded to accommodate engraving presses and increase work space, but the inside overall received few changes. The building, which continues to house the Siegrist Engraving Company, was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1990. The small but solid commercial storefront remains today as an excellent example of the Egyptian-Revival style of architecture, unique in its Kansas City setting.

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