

SCHENECTADY HERITAGE FOUNDATION
Fostering Historic Preservation in Schenectady County

Planning Commission, City of Schenectady
Department of Development
Schenectady City Hall, Schenectady, NY 12305

November 14, 2022

Re.: 308 State Street (formerly 302 State Street), former Masonic Temple.

Dear Commissioners:

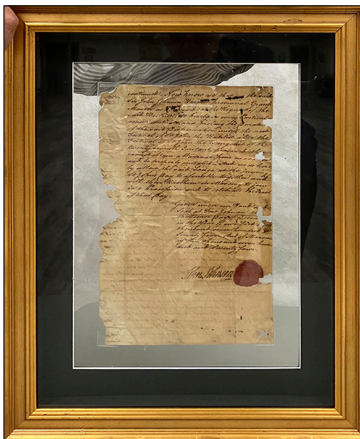
Schenectady Heritage Foundation urges you to recommend to the Planning Commission and City Council, Overlay Historic zoning for the former Masonic Temple, located at the intersection of State Street and Erie Blvd. This building meets all the criteria for local historic designation.

The Masonic Temple “possesses special character or historic or aesthetic interests or value as part of the cultural, political, economic or social history of the locality, region, state or nation and is identified with historic personages or events.”

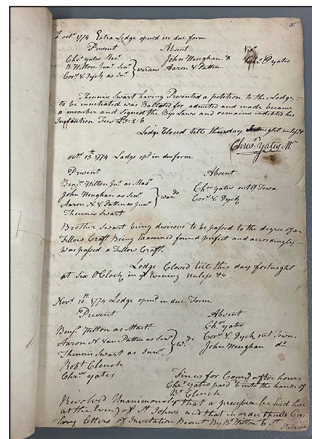
Schenectady has a strong and lengthy history with the ancient Freemasonry movement. For almost 250 years, the Masons have been inexorably interwoven with the history of Schenectady, New York State, and the Nation, bearing witness to major events, politics, and social changes from the Colonial era onward. To this day, the Masons possess detailed documentation of their history which is an invaluable resource for historians.



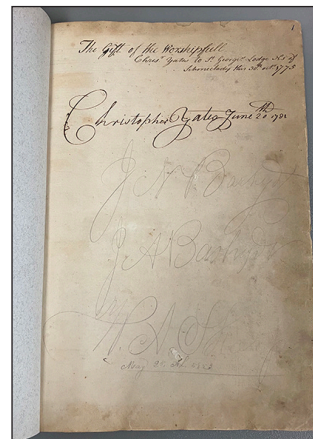
The Masonic Temple



Original charter of St. George's Lodge, with seal of Sir John Johnson, 1774



1774 minutes of meetings, bound into a book and presented to St. George's Lodge as a gift from Christopher Yates, Master

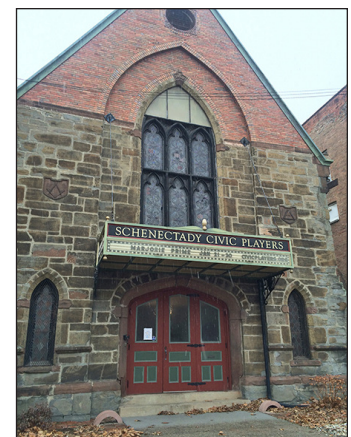


“Washington As A Mason” Engraving from St. George's Lodge historic collection

Schenectady's earliest settlers organized St. George's Masonic Lodge in 1773, one of the oldest in the country. It was officially “warranted” by Sir John Johnson in 1774, with Christopher Yates (1737-1785) serving as Master. His son, Joseph C. Yates, Schenectady's first mayor, eighth governor of NYS, and judge of the Supreme Court, served as Master. Both prominent residents and “average” men were active Masons, including 2/3 of Schenectady's Mayors, many of whom served as Master. As early as 1821, records show St. George's having black members. The influence of the Masons in the community can not be overstated.

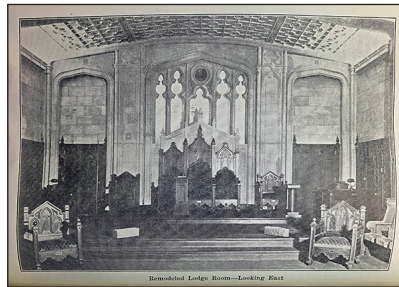
Schenectady's first Masons met at Robert Clench's Tavern, located at the site of today's Liberty Park. They entertained George Washington, Grand Master of Virginia's Masons, during his visits to Schenectady. In 1777, St. George's Lodge was instrumental in saving Washington's troops from starvation by growing and shipping grain to the front lines of Valley Forge.

For nearly 100 years, St. George's Lodge met at different locations in Schenectady's downtown area. In 1869, they built their first Masonic Temple on S. Church St., later the home of Schenectady Civic Players. This building, as well as the homes of both Christopher and Joseph Yates, are listed on the National Register as part of the Stockade Historic District.

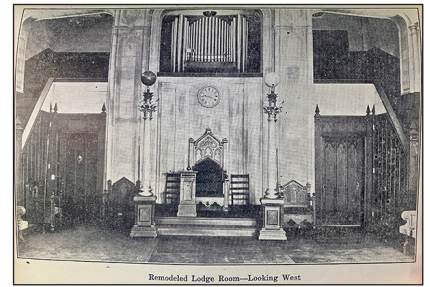


1869 Masonic Temple. Now Schenectady Civic Playhouse, 12 S. Church St.

In 1908, the Masonic Hall Association was formed to find a new home for their burgeoning membership. In 1918 they bought the “modern” building at the corner of State St. and Erie Blvd. Cornerstone ceremonies in 1919 were led by Past Grand Master John W. Vrooman (no doubt a descendant of Dutch settlers). Here the Masons, and their women’s counterpart, the Eastern Star, flourished for almost a century, wielding significant economic and political influence during Schenectady’s era of rapid industrialization and population expansion after WWI.



Interior of the Lodge Room, east

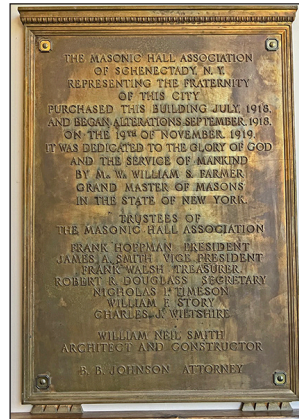


Interior of the Lodge Room, west

Masonic Temple picture postcard, c. 1930

The Masonic Temple “embodies the distinguishing characteristics of an architectural style and is the work of a designer whose work has significantly influenced an age.”

The Masonic Temple is an outstanding example of Neoclassical and Italian Renaissance Revival architecture. It was designed by William Neil Smith (1874-1934) a prominent architect practicing in NYC and upstate New York during the early 20th century. Several of Smith’s municipal, civic, and residential buildings have landmark status. He was one of several prominent architects who designed buildings in NYC’s Stone Street area, now a historic district. The narrow, winding streets, originally laid out by Dutch colonists, include 19th century Greek Revival style buildings complemented by early 20th century buildings designed in a variety of Revival styles. Among the Stone Street buildings Smith designed is Block Hall, named after the 17th century Dutch explorer Adriaen Block. Smith’s designs were influential in defining the architectural style of Manhattan’s Financial District. He also designed the Nederlander Theater (1921) which stood the test of time while other theaters faced demolition.



Bronze plaque listing architect Wm. Neil Smith. St. George’s Lodge archives



Block Hall, Stone Street Historic District, NYC. Tudor Revival building designed by Smith in 1926.

The Masonic Temple “because of a unique location or singular physical characteristic, represents an established and familiar visual feature of the neighborhood.”



The Masonic Temple, seen here from the rubble of the historic Nicholas Building, 2017. Historic zoning can help to prevent such catastrophes.

The Masonic Temple’s massive stature stands as a prominent landmark and anchor at one of Schenectady’s busiest crossroads. The Wedgeway Building, located diagonally across the intersection and currently undergoing complete restoration, is already listed on the National Register. These two buildings are “historically balanced” companion structures that have defined this major intersection for over a century.

The NYS Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) has listed the Masonic Temple as eligible for the National Register. As development continues on lower State Street, the Masonic Temple must be preserved as a valuable historic resource. Overlay Historic zoning will assist in accessing historic tax credit programs and is a critical step toward restoring and re-purposing one of Schenectady’s iconic historic landmarks.

