

The Filson Historical Society

**Plato Family Papers
Papers, 1924-1967**

For information regarding literary and copyright interest for these papers, see the Curator of Special Collections.

Size of Collection:
.33 cubic feet

Locator Number:
Mss. A P718

Plato Family Papers Papers, 1924-1967

Biographical Note

Samuel M. Plato (1882-1957) was a prominent African American architect and builder who not only made important contributions to the African American community in Louisville but also achieved national recognition for his imaginative designs elsewhere in the country. He completed his education and began his career at a time when segregation and racism were major obstacles for African Americans who sought to pursue professional careers such as architecture. When Plato graduated from State University Normal School in Louisville in 1902 and completed his mail-order program in architecture with International Correspondence Schools, he became part of a small group of pioneering African American architects who made their mark early in the Twentieth Century.

Like other pioneers, Plato struggled against racism, helping pave the way for those who followed in his footsteps. During his early years in Marion, Indiana, he was successful in his fight to open up the building trade unions to African American workers. He was the first African American to be awarded a contract to build a post office, and he was one of only a few African American contractors to build federal government defense housing projects during World War II. Plato was successful because of his persistent efforts and because his reputation for quality and integrity could not be ignored.

Among the basic tenets of Plato's life was his belief in helping others to help themselves and devotion to his family, which was always at the center of his life. In 1939 he devised a plan to move his sister and her family off the old homestead in Waugh, Alabama, and into a new home nearby. Samuel and Elnora Plato helped to put several nieces and nephews through college and graduate school and Plato employed some of them on jobs in Louisville and Washington, D.C. Elnora Plato (1891-1975), his second wife, was his constant traveling companion and business manager. She had built her own successful dressmaking business before their marriage, and she used her own funds from this enterprise to help make Plato's dreams possible. She funded the cost of his sister's new house in Waugh and, on more than one occasion, she was able to keep their company from going bankrupt.

Plato designed and/or built a wide variety of buildings, including Greek Revival and Craftsman-style houses, elegant mansions, post offices, banks, churches, schools, office buildings, theaters and government housing projects. Eight of his buildings are listed on the National Register of Historic Places, including the Broadway Temple A.M.E. Zion Church in Louisville.

During his career he was in demand as a speaker at the Louisville Urban League, Tuskegee Institute and Hampton Institute. He was honored posthumously in 1960 by the Howard University School of Engineering and Architecture. He was admired and respected by everyone. Perhaps Elnora Plato summed it up best when she wrote "...he was a pioneer for years and he wanted his business to live. Then, too, he wanted to inspire young engineers."

**Plato Family Papers
Papers, 1924-1967**

Scope and Content Note

Papers from Samuel Plato's business as an architect and personal letters from his family members in Alabama and his accountant. Letters continue after his death with correspondence with his widow Elnora. Plato was an African-American architect who designed buildings such as Post Offices and churches in many parts of the country.

**Plato Family Papers
Papers, 1924-1967**

Folder List

Folder 1: Personal Correspondence, 1924 - 1942

Folder 2: Personal Correspondence, 1943 - 1947

Folder 3: Personal Correspondence, 1949 - 1954

Folder 4: Personal Correspondence, 1955 - 1956

Folder 5: Personal Correspondence, 1957 - 1958

Folder 6: Personal Correspondence, 1959 - 1962

Folder 7: Personal Correspondence, 1963 - 1967

Folder 8: Business Records, 1926-1953

Folder 9: Simmons University Brochure, 1925

Folder 10: Plat Map: Wagh, Alabama, 1941

Folder 11: Green Street Baptist Church Blueprints, 1928

Folder 12: Miscellaneous

**Plato Family Papers
Papers, 1924-1967**

Subject Headings

Afro-American architects - Kentucky
Afro-American business enterprises - Kentucky
Afro-American criminals - Kentucky
Afro-American churches - Kentucky
Afro-American college administrators - Kentucky
Afro-American college students - Alabama
Afro-American construction workers - Ohio
Afro-American families - United States
Afro-American press
Afro-American teachers - Alabama
Afro-Americans - History - 1877-1964
Basketball for women - Alabama
Green Street Baptist Church (Louisville, Ky.)
Plato, Elnora 1891-1975
Plato, Samuel 1882-1957
Wilson, Milton