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United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Registration Form



This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places registration Form* (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

historic name Universal Life Insurance Company  
other names/site number N/A

2. Location

street & number 480 Linden Avenue  not for publication N/A  
city or town Memphis  vicinity N/A  
state Tennessee code TN county Shelby code 157 zip code 38126

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this  nomination  request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set for in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property  meets  does not meet the National Register criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant  nationally  statewide  locally. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Richard H. Lane 6/08/07  
Signature of Certifying official/Title Date  
Deputy State Historic Preservation Officer, Tennessee Historical Commission  
State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property  meets  does not meet the National Register criteria. ( See Continuation sheet for additional comments.)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of certifying official/Title Date  
\_\_\_\_\_  
State or Federal agency and bureau

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that the property is:

- entered in the National Register.  
 See continuation sheet
- determined eligible for the National Register.  
 See continuation sheet
- determined not eligible for the National Register
- removed from the National Register.
- other,

(explain:)  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

for  
Edson H. Beall 7.24.07  
Signature of the Keeper Date of Action

**5. Classification**

**Ownership of Property**  
(Check as many boxes as apply)

**Category of Property**  
(Check only one box)

**Number of Resources within Property**  
(Do not include previously listed resources in count)

- private
- public-local
- public-State
- public-Federal

- building(s)
- district
- site
- structure
- object

Contributing	Noncontributing	
1	0	buildings
0	0	sites
0	0	structures
1	0	objects
2	0	Total

**Name of related multiple property listing**  
(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.)  
N/A

**Number of Contributing resources previously listed in the National Register**  
N/A

**6. Function or Use**

**Historic Functions**  
(Enter categories from instructions)

**Current Functions**  
(Enter categories from instructions)

COMMERCE/TRADE/professional

VACANT/NOT IN USE

**7. Description**

**Architectural Classification**  
(Enter categories from instructions)

**Materials**  
(Enter categories from instructions)

Egyptian Revival

foundation CONCRETE

walls STONE/limestone

roof ASPHALT

other METAL/steel frame windows

**Narrative Description**

(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

**8. Statement of Significance**

**Applicable National Register Criteria**

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- A** Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B** Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C** Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D** Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

**Criteria Considerations** N/A  
(Mark "x" in all boxes that apply.)

Property is:

- A** owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- B** removed from its original location.
- C** a birthplace or grave.
- D** a cemetery.
- E** a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- F** a commemorative property
- G** less than 50 year of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

**Areas of Significance**

(Enter categories from instructions)

Architecture  
Commerce  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Period of Significance**

1949-ca. 1955  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Significant Dates**

N/A  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Significant Person**

(complete if Criterion B is marked)

N/A  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Cultural Affiliation**

N/A  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Architect/Builder**

McKissack, Moses, III & McKissack, Calvin  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Narrative Statement of Significance**

(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

**9. Major Bibliographical References**

**Bibliography**

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

**Previous documentation on file (NPS):**

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
- previously listed in the National Register
- Previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # \_\_\_\_\_
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # \_\_\_\_\_

**Primary location of additional data:**

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State Agency
- Federal Agency
- Local Government
- University
- Other

Name of repository:

Tennessee Historical Commission  
\_\_\_\_\_

**10. Geographical Data**

**Acreage of Property** 1.2 acres Northwest Memphis TN-AR 404 NE

**UTM References**

(place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet.)

1	<u>15</u>	<u>769206</u>	<u>3892038</u>	3	<u>          </u>	<u>          </u>	<u>          </u>
	Zone	Easting	Northing		Zone	Easting	Northing
2	<u>          </u>	<u>          </u>	<u>          </u>	4	<u>          </u>	<u>          </u>	<u>          </u>

See continuation sheet

**Verbal Boundary Description**

(Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

**Boundary Justification**

(Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

**11. Form Prepared By**

name/title John Linn Hopkins  
organization Hopkins Oates & Associates date December 2006  
street & number 974 Philadelphia Street telephone (901) 278-5186  
city or town Memphis state TN zip code 38104

**Additional Documentation**

submit the following items with the completed form:

**Continuation Sheets**

**Maps**

A **USGS map** (7.5 Or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location

A **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

**Photographs**

Representative **black and white photographs** of the property.

**Additional items**

(Check with the SHPO) or FPO for any additional items

**Property Owner**

(Complete this item at the request of SHPO or FPO.)

name Self Tucker Properties LLC, c/o Juan Self and Jimmie Tucker  
street & number 505 Tennessee Street, Suite 101 telephone (901) 261-1505  
city or town Memphis state TN zip code 38103

**Paperwork Reduction Act Statement:** This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listing. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 470 *et seq.*)

**Estimated Burden Statement:** Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P. O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reductions Projects (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20303.

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National Park Service

# National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 7 Page 1

Universal Life Insurance Company  
480 Linden Avenue, Memphis, Tennessee

## Description

The Universal Life Insurance Company building is a two-story, L-shaped plan office building designed in the Egyptian Revival style and built in 1949 by the architectural firm of McKissack & McKissack of Nashville, Tennessee. The building is located at the northeastern corner of the intersection of Linden Avenue (State Highway 278) and Danny Thomas Boulevard (U.S. Highways 51, 64, 70 and 79), on the eastern edge of the traditional African-American business area of downtown Memphis. The building was designed to face Linden Avenue, and because of its prominent location on a major federal highway right of way, the design qualities of the building's façade were continued along the west (Danny Thomas Boulevard) façade. Also because of the prominence of the site, the Universal Life Insurance Company erected a notable free-standing, post-mounted neon sign at the intersection, which has itself become something of a local landmark. The sign is a contributing object in this nomination.

The building's site is elevated slightly above both Linden Avenue and Danny Thomas Boulevard on a land terrace and set back a short ways from the surrounding street rights of way. The setback of the front façade from Linden Avenue is approximately 40 feet, and the entrance of the building is gained from the sidewalk by two short runs of concrete steps. Because Danny Thomas Boulevard takes a gently meandering course through the downtown area, it creates an uneven setback on the Universal Life Insurance site that ranges from perhaps 45 feet at its widest point at the corner with Linden, to perhaps as little as 12 feet at its narrowest point at the building's northwest corner. The building is 'L' shaped and the projecting rear ell is set back from the right of way of Driver Street by a distance of 50 feet. The site includes a large, rolling lot to the east of the building used historically as an employee's parking lot.

The Universal Life Insurance Company building was constructed of a reinforced concrete frame overlaid with limestone veneer. The roof is flat and is hidden behind a plain, flat stone veneered parapet above a cornice which is composed of an Art Moderne rondel and geometric-detailed fascia. The front (south, Linden Avenue) façade is composed of four window bays flanking a center, three-bay wide projecting entrance bay. The windows are steel frame casements composed of a fixed horizontal light above and below a pair of vertical casement sashes, and each window bay is separated one from the next by monumental fluted pilasters. Within the projecting entrance bay, the parapet changes to a raking profile and the cornice is formed as a deep cove or "gorge", decorated with a winged sun disk/world globe at center, dividing the words "Universal Life" from "Insurance Co". Below the cornice the entrance bay is further defined with monumental fluted columns distyle in antis topped with closed lotus capitals and lotiform bases. Monumental fluted pilasters also flank the outside corners of the projecting entrance bay. The space between the pilasters and the columns of the entrance bay contain single three-light steel frame windows on the first and second floors. Also on the second floor, between the columns, is a group of three steel frame casements composed of a fixed horizontal light above and below a pair of vertical casement sashes. A blind panel is set in the spandrel between the first and second floors. The entrance to the building has an aluminum frame replacement system composed of a divided-light transom above a single-light metal frame double door flanked by full-length single-light sidelights.

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Universal Life Insurance Company  
480 Linden Avenue, Memphis, Tennessee

The side (west, Danny Thomas Boulevard) façade contains eleven bays and also features a projecting entrance bay that mimics the front, though the bay is off-center in the length of the façade. Windows here are the same steel frame casements as those of the front façade, composed of a fixed horizontal light above and below a pair of vertical casement sashes.

The rear (north, Driver Street) and side (east) facades are covered with a warm grey brick veneer and have virtually no decoration. The windows of the rear and side (east) facades are steel frame casements composed of three, two-light center-pivot casements and a single-light hopper at the bottom. The only exception is the windows on the second floor of the rear ell. These windows are composed of two center pivot casements with a single light transom. A rear entrance in the recumbent angle of the ell is on axis with the front entrance; it contains a single-light, metal double-door topped by a single-light transom. The roofline of the southern portion of the east elevation is stepped, while the roofline of the rest of the east and north elevations is flat.

The original interior plan of the building has become somewhat obscured due to overlaid partitions walls installed during renovations in the mid-1960s and 1980s. However, since the original walls were built of wire lath and plaster over frame structures in some places and hollow tile construction in others, the later wood frame partitions covered with drywall or laminate paneling are easily identifiable. The building's original character has also been compromised somewhat through the installation of dropped ceilings, all of which are easily reversible throughout the building. The later partition walls are currently being removed as part of renovations to the building.

In general terms, the plan of the building is representative of an office environment developed in the late-1940s and early 1950s, before the era of design accommodating integral computer-assisted data and word processing. The L-shaped plan of the building is essentially divided into three large spaces on the first floor, each to house a pool of secretarial, clerical and administrative personnel needed to process applications, claims, accounts receivable and the other basic operations of the company. The second floor was quite different, distinguished by a plan that provided one very large pool room in the southeastern quadrant of the structure, flanked by a long string of office suites running from front to back along the west side of the building. The activity centers in the basement included storerooms and mail rooms for the company and more notably the cafeteria and dining room spaces, which served dual roles as areas for training and large group meetings. To the rear (north) of the cafeteria and dining rooms were the boiler and mechanical rooms that serviced the entire building.

The entrance foyers, stairways and corridors are easily recognizable as the "public" spaces of the building given that each is finished with a two-tone wainscot of Tennessee marble and terrazzo floors. Two notable parts of these public areas are the receptionist's desk in the front foyer, and the cashiers cubical in the second floor lobby, both fabricated out of simple lines and surfaces of Tennessee marble. The walls of these public spaces, as with all of the original walls, were finished plaster surfaces; in subsequent renovations in the 1980s, these plaster walls above the marble wainscots were veneered with a layer of drywall. The rest of the

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# National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

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Universal Life Insurance Company  
480 Linden Avenue, Memphis, Tennessee

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decorative treatments in the less public areas of the building were minimal. The floors of the corridors, pool areas and offices were finished with linoleum tile. The original corridor doors were fabricated of wood with a single-light at top and a grilled panel below to facilitate air movement and light into the corridor. Many of these interior doors remain in place today. There is some physical evidence of doorways along the corridors being finished originally with overhead operable awning transoms, also to facilitate air flow in the original building, which was not furnished with a central air conditioning or ventilation system. The transoms were likely covered after a central ventilation system was added to the building ca. 1955.

The Universal Life Insurance sign is located along Linden Avenue south of the building. It is a free-standing metal post-mounted neon sign. The neon spells out "Universal Life Insurance Co." on a dark background. A round clock is located at the top of the sign. Installation of the sign was contemporary with the construction of the building.

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# National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

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Universal Life Insurance Company  
480 Linden Avenue, Memphis, Tennessee

## Significance

The Universal Life Insurance Company building is a well-preserved and locally-significant example of an office building designed in the Egyptian Revival style by an African-American architectural firm in 1949 for the exclusive use of an African-American business enterprise. Founded in 1923 on the models of the earlier North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance Company of Durham, NC (1898) and the Atlanta Life Insurance Company (1905), the Universal Life Insurance Company was one of the few outlets that permitted African-Americans to accumulate capital, not just in simple burial policies, but also in terms of annuities, bonds, and other forms of investment. Universal Life reinvested in its community through mortgages and commercial loans, at a time when opportunities for African-Americans to become home owners or business owners were limited both by segregation and the sources of lending capital willing to lend to African-Americans. Therefore, the building is significant under Criterion A in the area of commerce as groundbreaking African-American business enterprise; and, under Criterion C in the area of architecture for its significance both as a project designed by an important African-American architectural firm and for its qualities as a good example of the Egyptian Revival style in Memphis. The period of significance reflected by these contributions spans from 1949, when the building was built, to ca. 1955, when the building saw its first major alterations to accommodate forced air ventilation.

The development of the Universal Life Insurance Company came about on September 6, 1923 as a direct result of the collapse of the Mississippi Life Insurance Company earlier in the same year (Ingham and Feldman 1994:658-659). Mississippi Life had begun in Indianola, Mississippi in 1909 and made its stock in trade so-called "industrial insurance", whereby burial policies and life insurance were sold door-to-door, and their very modest premiums of five or ten cents were collected weekly by salesmen from working men and women. The company enjoyed tremendous success in the Mississippi Delta, but growing racial tensions forced the firm to relocate to Memphis in 1919 (McMillen 1989:18). The collapse of Mississippi Life came about as a result of an attempt by Herman Perry, the owner of the Atlanta Life Insurance Company and arguably the South's wealthiest African-American at that time, to make a hostile bid to take over ownership of Mississippi Life. Perry's attempt not only failed, but it also resulted, somewhat ironically, in the sale of the firm to Southern Life of Nashville, a Caucasian-owned firm. When the sales staff of Mississippi Life refused to collect premiums from their customers, the company quickly collapsed (Ingham and Feldman 1994: 659).

One of the key salespeople for Mississippi Life was Joseph Walker (1880-1958), who was one of its best salesmen. Once Perry's takeover of the company had begun, Walker stayed out of the limelight of the conflict and quietly assembled an investment team in a new insurance company that would emerge in a few months as Universal Life. The founding officers of the company that joined with Walker were J. T. Wilson, M. W. Bonner, Dr. R. S. Fields, A. W. Willis, and B. F. Booth; of these, only Walker, Willis, and Bonner were to be involved in the day-to-day operation of the company, while Booth, Fields and Wilson were simply its financial backers.



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Universal Life Insurance Company  
480 Linden Avenue, Memphis, Tennessee

Universal Life's entry into the Memphis area market in 1923 was well-timed, as the African-American community of the city was burgeoning through the in-migration of thousands of rural blacks who had left the cotton fields of the Mississippi Delta and moved for industrial and distribution jobs in town. The value of Universal's capital stock doubled within its first three years of business, such that by the outbreak of World War II, the company was represented in nine states across the South and Mid-South. Universal's growth in the pre-War period was fueled in part by the collapse of two other cornerstone African-American financial institutions in Memphis-- the Solvent Savings Bank and Trust Company (1906-1928) and the Fraternal Saving Bank and Trust Company (1910-1928)-- leaving Universal effectively as the sole investment house in the Memphis for the city's African-American citizens. After World War II, Universal made strides to expand the opportunities for African-Americans to invest by spinning off a new bank, the Tri-State Bank of Memphis (NRHP 2/11/1971), in 1946. By this time, Universal Life had expanded greatly, having opened branches in nine states (Van West 1998:1009).



The first Universal Life insurance Company building, built in 1930 at 234 Hernando Street. Source: Memphis Public Library

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Universal Life Insurance Company  
480 Linden Avenue, Memphis, Tennessee

Perhaps in celebration of its having attained the stature of being only the second black life insurance company in the U.S. to accumulate more than \$1 million in capital, or more to simply accommodate its growing pains, the firm contracted with McKissack and McKissack, the pioneering Nashville-based African-American architectural firm, to design its new headquarters building. As much as Memphis' place name was associated with the ancient capital of Egypt, the use of Egyptian Revival design in its buildings proved exceedingly rare, especially in the late 1940s when the Universal Life building was designed. Apart from Universal Life, only a few other commercial buildings are known to have been designed in the Egyptian Revival. Among these include the S. C. Toof Building (195 Madison Avenue, NRHP 08/26/1982) and the Ballard and Ballard Obelisk Flour Company building (325 Wagner Place, part South Bluffs Historic District, NRHP 06/04/1987).



The Universal Life Insurance Company building and its management team in 1949. Source: Memphis Public Library.

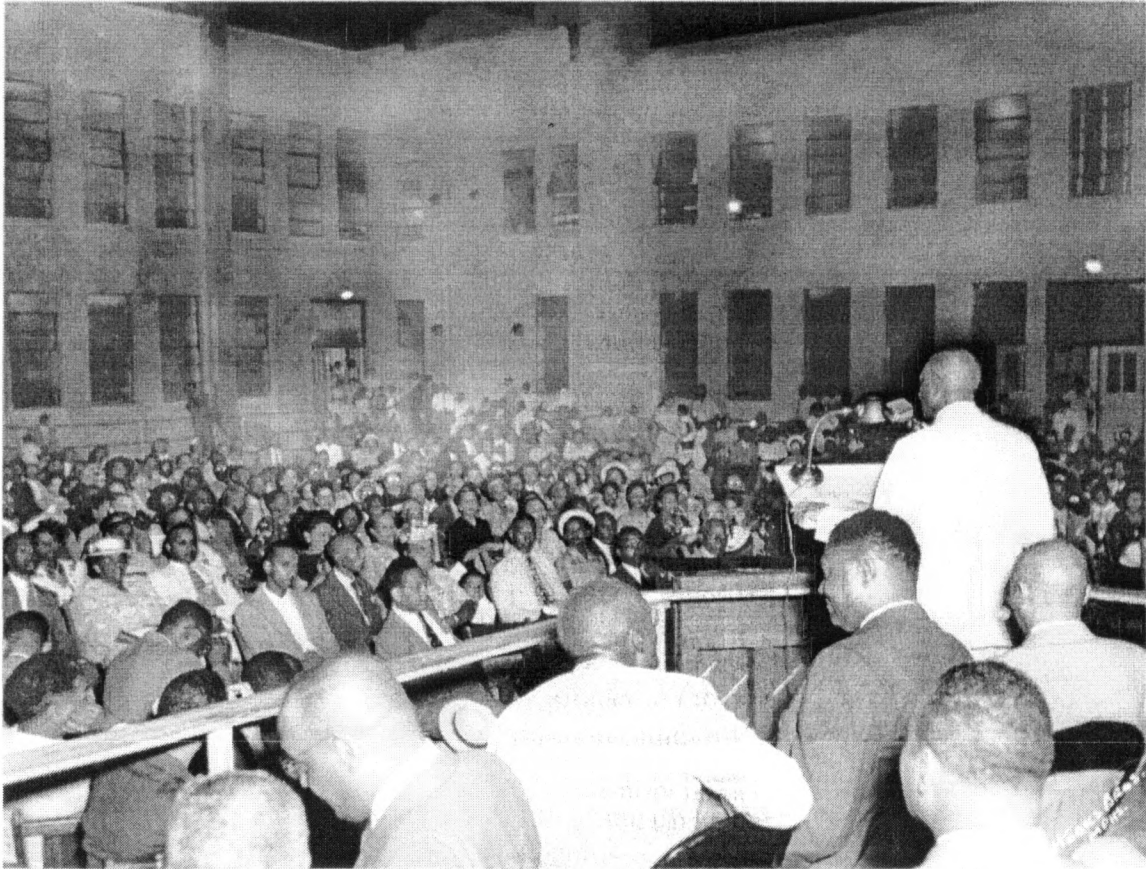
Moses McKissack III (1879-1952) began his practice as an architect in 1905 in Nashville, though he had been involved in the design and construction of residences in the Pulaski area for several years prior. His first commission was to design a residence for the dean of architecture and engineering at Vanderbilt University, and the credibility afforded him by this project led to many other commissions for houses in the West End of Nashville. The first truly major commission came in 1908 for the Carnegie Library at Fisk

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Universal Life Insurance Company  
480 Linden Avenue, Memphis, Tennessee



View of the dedication ceremonies for the new Universal Life Insurance Company, which took place on July 8, 1949. Source: Memphis Public Library

University (NRHP 1/2/1985), where Moses' younger brother, Calvin, was enrolled. Calvin McKissack (1890-1969) joined his brother in the firm of McKissack and McKissack in 1922, after several years practicing architecture in Texas and teaching drafting and industrial arts in Nashville. Projects completed after Calvin McKissack joined the firm include the Morris Memorial Building for the National Baptist Convention, USA, (NRHP 1/2/1985) Washington Junior High, Pearl High (NRHP 8/2/2002) and Ford Green Elementary schools in Nashville, Payne Chapel at Fisk University, dormitories at Roger Williams University, the Memorial Library at Tennessee State University (NRHP 6/14/1996) and numerous educational facilities under contracts let by the Works Progress Administration. Their contribution to the war effort is reflected by their design of the entire air base for the 99<sup>th</sup> Pursuit Squadron, home of the famed "Tuskegee Airmen." The firm has accomplished much more in the years since, and it remains in business today under the guidance of Leatrice McKissack, the daughter-in-law of Moses McKissack III.

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Universal Life Insurance Company  
480 Linden Avenue, Memphis, Tennessee

Receiving the commission for the design of the Universal Life Insurance Company building was certainly a real plum for the McKissacks. Over their long career, the firm had designed any number of schools, college buildings, churches and church office buildings that either served African-Americans or were done for African-American clients. But with the Universal project, the McKissacks got the opportunity to design an office building for a successful African-American business, described as "one of the top ten Negro owned and operated businesses in the world" (Van West 1998:1009). Their selection by Universal Life was not really a total surprise, since J. E. Walker was a founding member of Mississippi Boulevard Christian Church in 1921 and was a member of the building committee that selected McKissack and McKissack to design a new church for the congregation in 1938 (974 Mississippi Boulevard, now Praise of Zion Missionary Baptist Church).



View of the lobby of the Universal Life Insurance Company building during its dedication celebration in 1949. At this time, the reception desk existing in the lobby had yet to be installed. Source: Memphis Public Library

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Universal Life Insurance Company  
480 Linden Avenue, Memphis, Tennessee

The site selected for the Universal Life building was in the center of what was quickly becoming a new center of activity and investment for the African-American community. The area around Linden and Wellington (now Danny Thomas Boulevard) was originally developed as a part of the City of South Memphis, which joined with the City of Memphis in 1849. The avenues running east from the core of downtown-- Vance, Ponotoc, Beale, Linden and others-- became one of the most affluent areas of the city for its well-to-do Anglo American residents for much of the nineteenth century. But, as the city spread eastward in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, literally exploding into newly annexed areas of the city, the families that had once occupied the large residences and attended the main stream churches of the neighborhood moved eastward, too. In their wake moved African-American families, some like the families of J. E. Walker and A. W. Willis of Universal Life, who had become members of the small but growing middle and upper-middle



View across the large secretarial pool in the southeast quadrant of the second floor of the building, taken ca. 1955. Source: Memphis Public Library

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Universal Life Insurance Company  
480 Linden Avenue, Memphis, Tennessee

income community of African-Americans in Memphis. Universal Life had been a leader in making this change, having developed their first, new, free-standing office building in 1930 at 234 Hernando Street, about two blocks away to the west from the Linden Avenue site. Further evidence of this trend is seen in 1938 with the sale of Grace Episcopal Church (555 Vance, NRHP 03/15/2005) to the congregation of Mount Nebo Monumental Baptist Church, and the sale of First Baptist Church in 1951 to Mount Olive Cathedral C.M. E. Church, located next door to the Universal Life Insurance Company building (538 Linden Avenue, NRHP 03/15/2005). This area remained an important center for African American culture and commerce well into the 1960s until the African American community, too, began an eastward migration into suburbs of the city like Shadowlawn (Shadowlawn Historic District, NRHP 08/14/1995) and Glenview (Glenview Historic District, NRHP 10/07/1999). Much of the former community center downtown was decimated by Urban Renewal in the late 1950s to 1960s, stretching from Beale Street at Second Street in downtown, out to the residential areas still surrounding Universal Life, which then began their own period of decline.



View of another secretarial pool at Universal Life ca. 1955, this one located on the first floor in the southwestern corner of the building. Source: Memphis Public Library

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Universal Life Insurance Company  
480 Linden Avenue, Memphis, Tennessee

The new Universal Life Insurance building opened in 1949, and it immediately became more than just an office building. The cafeteria and dining room of the Universal Life Building were freely made available for community events and celebrations, as well as for rallies and meetings associated with the Civil Rights Movement in Memphis beginning in the 1950s and continuing through the 1970s. Unfortunately, this aspect of the building's history is not at all well documented and it deserves attention from local researchers.

A. Maceo Walker (1909-1994), the son of J. E. Walker, was elected president of the company, and his father remained its chairman until his death in 1958 (*Commercial Appeal* 1997:A10). Walker presided over a great period of expansion for the company, which saw Universal acquire a half-dozen other insurance companies who catered their services predominantly to African-Americans. By the 1980s, the company had grown to possess assets in excess of \$50 million. In 1983, Maceo Walker's eldest daughter, Patricia Walker Shaw, took over the presidency of the company, which was hailed as a bright new era for the company to begin development as a company with national influence. However, following the untimely death of Ms. Shaw in 1985, the company drifted without leadership that could respond to a changing market of customers no longer satisfied by the model of paying for their insurance in weekly installments. The company did not survive a takeover bid and was closed in 2002.

In spite of the loss of a prominent African-American business in the Memphis community, the Universal Life building will live on, this time in the hands of two African-American entrepreneurs, Juan Self and Jimmie Tucker, whose architectural firm of Self-Tucker Architects will take up residence in the building following its rehabilitation in 2006-2007. Most of the alterations imposed on the building in the 1950s, 1960s and 1980s are being reversed, bringing it closer in appearance to its original plan and finishes. A modest exhibit on the history of the Universal Life Insurance Company and its former home building is planned for installation in the building when construction work is completed.

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Universal Life Insurance Company  
480 Linden Avenue, Memphis, Tennessee

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## Major Bibliographic References

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1975 *Architects in Tennessee until 1930*. Unpublished Master's Thesis, Columbia University, New York.

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1994 *African-American Business Leaders: A Biographical Dictionary*. Greenwood Publishing, Westport, Connecticut.

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1989 *Dark Journey: Black Mississippians in the Era of Jim Crow*. University of Illinois Press, Urbana, IL.

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"Universal Life shareholders agree to sell its policies to Texas insurer". December 6, 1997, page A-10.

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1998 *The Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and Culture*. Rutledge Hill Press, Nashville.

Wynn, Linda

"McKissack and McKissack Architects (1905- )", Tennessee State University Digital Library  
<<http://www.tnstate.edu/library/digital/mckissack.htm>>.



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# National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

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Universal Life Insurance Company  
480 Linden Avenue, Memphis, Tennessee

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## Geographic Information

### Verbal Boundary Description

The property comprises lots 3 and 4 of the Beale Street Urban Renewal Area II, measuring roughly 150 feet by 205 feet, as outlined in a heavy dashed line on the attached copy of Shelby County Property Tax Map 132N.

### Boundary Justification

The property in nomination contains the one parcel continually associated with the Universal Life Insurance building since its construction in 1949.

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# **National Register of Historic Places**

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Universal Life Insurance Company  
480 Linden Avenue, Memphis, Tennessee

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### Photograph List

Universal Life Insurance Company  
480 Linden Avenue  
Memphis, Shelby County, Tennessee

Photographer:       John Linn Hopkins  
Date:                 June 2006  
Digital files:        Tennessee Historical Commission

#### Photo 1 of 32

View of the front (south) façade of the Universal Life building, looking generally north across Linden Avenue.

#### Photo 2 of 32

View of the parapet over the front entrance on Linden Avenue.

#### Photo 3 of 32

View of the front (south) and side (east) façade of the building, looking northwest.

#### Photo 4 of 32

View of the side (east) and north (rear) facades of the building, looking southwest.

#### Photo 5 of 32

View of the rear (Driver Street) façade at Danny Thomas Boulevard.

#### Photo 6 of 32

View of the west (side) façade of the building facing Danny Thomas Boulevard.

#### Photo 7 of 32

View of the Universal Life Insurance Company's neon sign at the intersection of Danny Thomas Boulevard and Linden Avenue, which was installed soon after the company occupied its new building in 1949.

#### Photo 8 of 32

View of the entrance lobby looking east towards the public stairway to the second floor.

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# **National Register of Historic Places**

## **Continuation Sheet**

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Universal Life Insurance Company  
480 Linden Avenue, Memphis, Tennessee

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**Photos, continued.**

**Universal Life Insurance Company**

Photo 9 of 32

Close up view of the public stair. The wall above the handrail and the doorway to the left side are alterations of the original stair configuration.

Photo 10 of 32

Detailed view of one of the original wrought iron handrails in the building.

Photo 11 of 32

View of the lobby of the first floor from the stair, looking west toward the reception desk.

Photo 12 of 32

View into the office suite located to the north and west of the reception desk in the entrance lobby.

Photo 13 of 32

View of the data processing room developed ca. 1965 on the west side of the first floor.

Photo 14 of 32

View of the secondary entrance on the Danny Thomas Boulevard side of the building, and the rear stair to the second floor at right.

Photo 15 of 32

View into the clerical pool at the extreme north end of the building.

Photo 16 of 32

View of the same clerical pool area, looking to the east door that leads to the parking lot.

Photo 17 of 32

View of the cross hall in the recumbent angle of the building, looking from the rear entrance to the entrance of the data processing room.

Photo 18 of 32

View from the rear door looking south along the central axial corridor to the front door.

Photo 19 of 32

View of the rear door, and to the right, the back entrance to the east clerical pool on the first floor.

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# **National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet**

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Universal Life Insurance Company  
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**Photos, continued.**

**Universal Life Insurance Company**

Photo 20 of 32

View across the east clerical pool on the first floor, showing the partition walls that have divided it into smaller office spaces.

Photo 21 of 32

View of the second floor public lobby, east looking towards the stair from the first floor. The entrance to the east clerical pool on the second floor is located to the left of center.

Photo 22 of 32

Reverse view of #21, looking west from the stair to the cashier's vestibule, where weekly insurance payments were made in person by some clients.

Photo 23 of 32

View into the clerical pool on the east side of the second floor of the building, showing the modular partitions and other "stick-framed" partitions that have altered the original volume of this room.

Photo 24 of 32

View along the axial office corridor that loads the individual offices on the west side of the building, looking into the north ell of the second floor, at right.

Photo 25 of 32

Reverse view along the same corridor, looking south from the side entrance stair.

Photo 26 of 32

View of the office suite at the end of the north ell on the second floor.

Photo 27 of 32

View of the stair associated with the side entrance on the Danny Thomas Boulevard side of the building.

Photo 28 of 32

View of the entrance to the basement from the first floor landing of the side stair.

Photo 29 of 32

View into the Board Room located at the north end of the basement level.

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# **National Register of Historic Places**

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**Photos, continued.**

**Universal Life Insurance Company**

Photo 30 of 32

View looking across the staff dining room, looking generally southeast.

Photo 31 of 32

Reverse view across the employee dining room, looking toward the entrance to the cafeteria at center.

Photo 32 of 32

View of the cafeteria looking southeast toward the rear door to the left of center.

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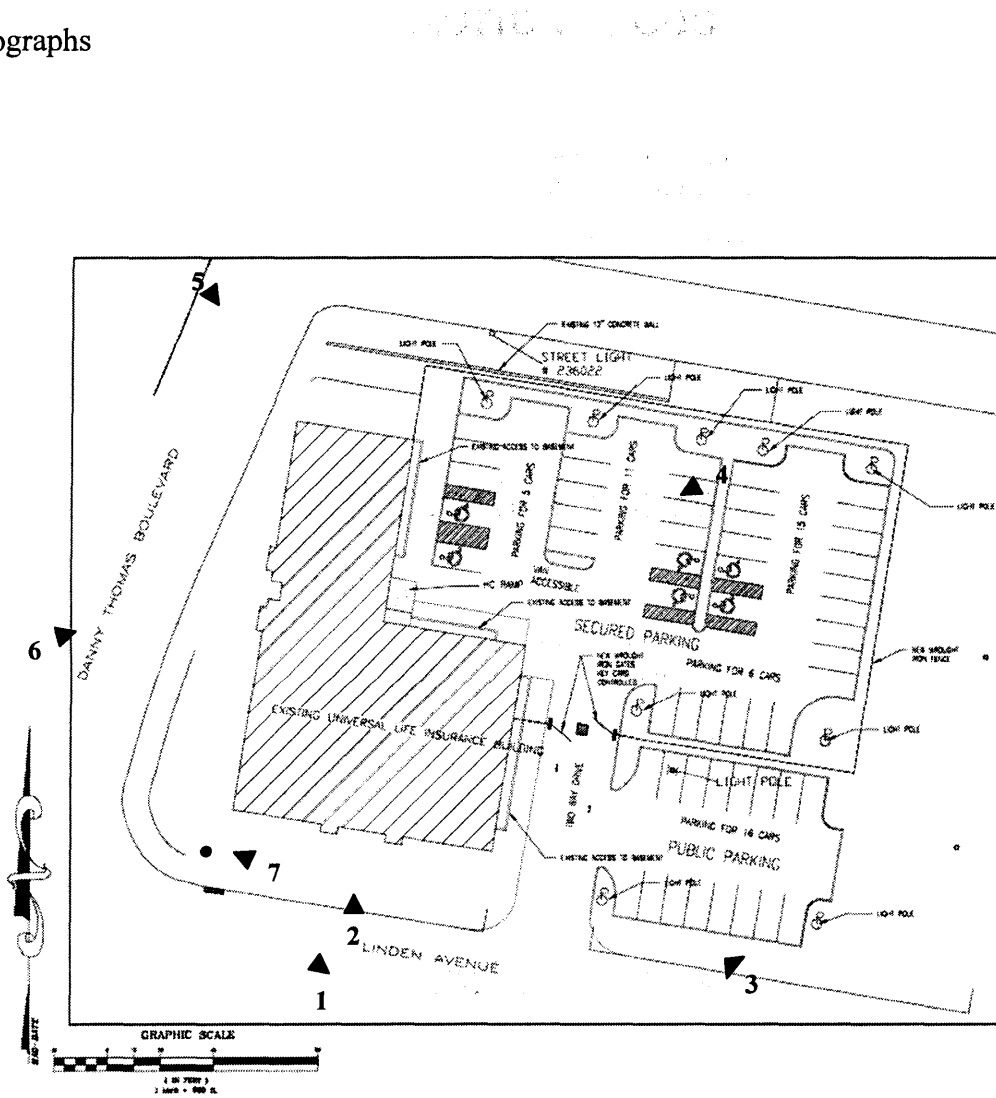
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480 Linden Avenue, Memphis, Tennessee

Photo Map Key  
Universal Life Insurance Company  
480 Linden Avenue  
Memphis, Shelby County, TN

Exterior Photographs



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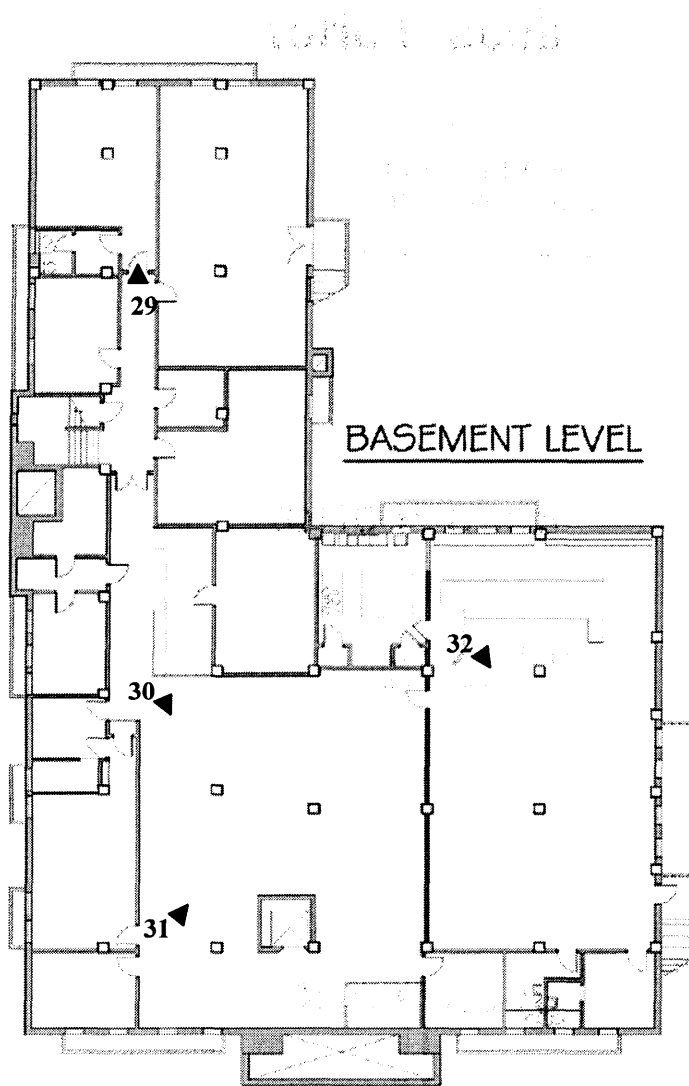
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Photo Map Key, continued

Basement level photographs



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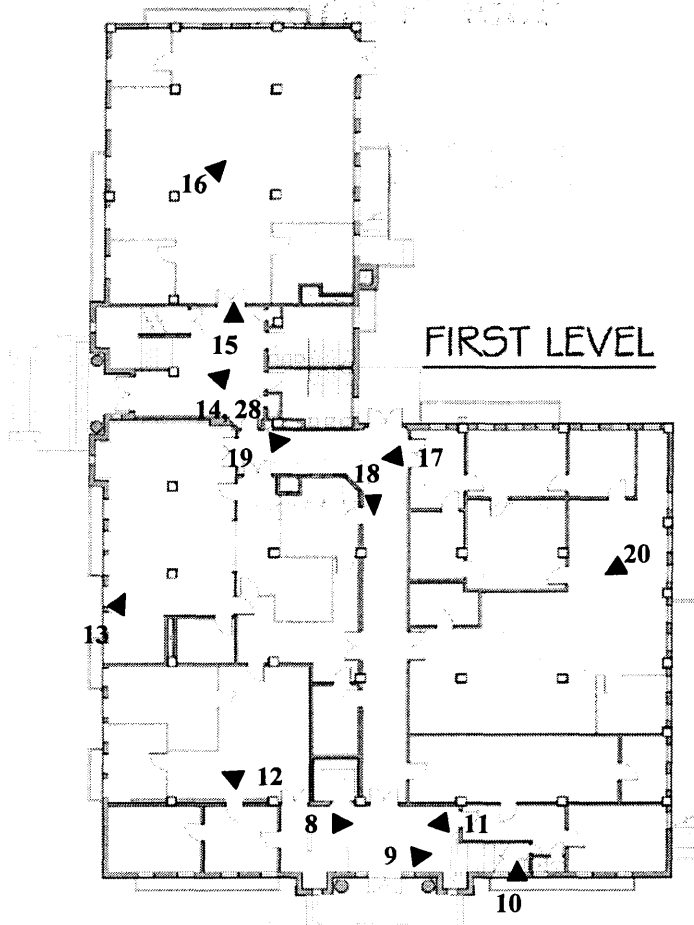
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Photo Map Key, continued

First floor photographs





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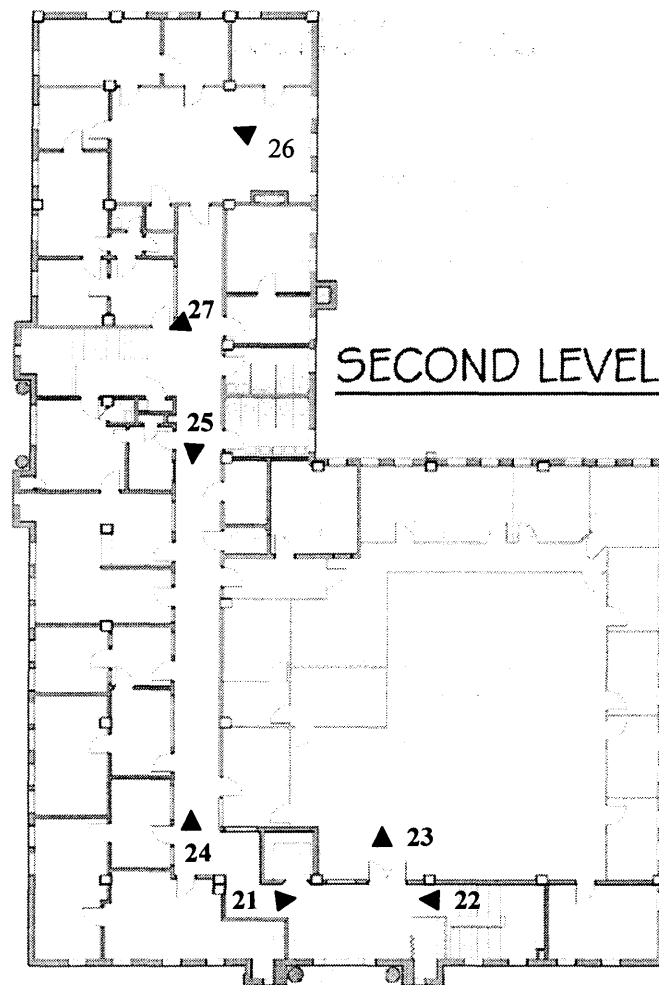
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Photo Map Key, continued

Second floor photographs



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