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## **John Wright Johnson collection**

**Title:** John Wright Johnson collection  
**Collection No:** MSS.512  
**Extent:** 0.26 cubic feet  
**Inclusive Dates:** 1895-1989

**Abstract:** John Wright Johnson (1879-1941) was an architect, master builder and carver who built many of the prestigious houses in Memphis, Tennessee, in the first half of the twentieth century. The collection contains mostly photographs but also correspondence, clippings and some drawings.

**Donor:** Dr. Ann S. Utterback, Gaithersburg, Maryland, August 2017, February 2018.

**Processed by:** Gerald Chaudron, 2017, 2018.

**Access:** Open to all researchers.

**Language:** English

**Preferred Citation:** John Wright Johnson collection, Special Collections Department, University Libraries, University of Memphis.

**Publication date:** March 2018

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**Biographical information. Written by Ann Smith Utterback, granddaughter of John Wright Johnson.**

Long before the mini-mansions of today, John Wright Johnson (1879-1941) was building true mansions with names like “Carrier Hall” and “Kingsland.” He built many of the most prestigious homes in Memphis, Tennessee, in the 1920s and 1930s. As a contractor, he guided the construction of homes designed by architects such as Bryant Fleming and Everett D. Woods.

Johnson was born in Sardis, Mississippi, the son of Swedish immigrants Anders Jönsson (Andrew Johnson) (1844-1921) and Anna Nilsson Johnson (1839-1931), on August 24, 1879. His father was a prominent architect in north Mississippi following the Civil War. He designed and built over 77 homes and buildings, and 21 of those are on the National Register of Historic Places. John was the youngest of four children, including: Anna Lydia (1868-1884), Emma Helena (1873-1964), Martha Victoria (1871-1957), and Andrew Johnson, Jr. (1878-1917).

As a young man, John worked with his father. In 1900, he apprenticed for four months with the Memphis architecture firm of Walk Jones Architects. On April 6, 1906, *The Southern Reporter* newspaper in Sardis, Mississippi, reported he had hung out his shingle as an architect at the age of 26, and he is listed with his father as architect and builder of the Byhalia Methodist Church (2511 Church Street, Byhalia, Mississippi) in 1906. On August 30, 1907, the newspaper reported that he was in Memphis again, interning with Chighizola, Hanker & Cairns Architects.

On June 4, 1908, John married Mabel Bartel Patton (1881-1953) in Memphis, Tennessee. They had two children, Samuel Reid, born on July 16, 1910 and Edith, born on March 23, 1914.

The first design job in which Johnson is listed as “architect” appears to be his collaboration with his father on the Sardis United Methodist Church in 1908. This building is credited to John Wright Johnson, Architect, and Andrew Johnson, Builder. In May 28, 1909, he was living in Crenshaw, Mississippi, and building the Crenshaw Methodist Church. On August 5, 1910, *The Southern Reporter* noted he traveled to Crenshaw to put in a bid for the Quitman County Courthouse. The Masonic Lodge building in Sardis, Mississippi, on Lee Street was completed in 1923 and lists John W. Johnson as the architect. Johnson worked alongside his father until his father’s death in 1921. He then worked in various cities in north Mississippi and in Memphis until he moved to Memphis permanently in 1924 and began his residential construction business.

Despite training as an architect, building was what he loved to do. His training as an architect was a great help to him as a builder. His building career in Memphis lasted from the mid-1920s until his death from lung cancer on November 12, 1941. Johnson’s introduction to Memphis’ wealthy citizens came through Robert M. Carrier. Carrier had a sawmill in Sardis, and he asked Johnson to help design and build Barnacre Lodge, his hunting lodge and home near Batesville, Mississippi. Carrier then decided to build a home in Memphis that was equal to those of his society friends. Johnson worked with famed architect Bryant Fleming on Carrier Hall, which is now on the National Register of Historic Places. Johnson’s connection with Carrier no doubt

brought him to the attention of other wealthy Memphians who had building plans. In his later years, he worked with his son, Reid Johnson, at S.R. Johnson Lumber Company at 3569 Southern Avenue in Memphis. Both John and Mabel were buried in Rose Hill Cemetery in Sardis.

Leon “Leo” J. Barthol (1908-1993), master craftsman and woodcarver, also worked out of the Johnson Lumber Company. Barthol apprenticed with Johnson and worked with him for many years and then with Reid Johnson until 1978. Both Johnson and Barthol had a long love of woodcarving and their intricate carving can be seen in Carrier Hall, The Peabody Hotel, The Hunt and Polo Club, Johnson’s own home at 3550 Central Avenue, and many other homes and buildings in Memphis.

For more information see:

<https://andrewjohnsonarchitect.wordpress.com/>

<https://johnsonarchive.wordpress.com/>

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## **Scope and contents**

The collection contains correspondence, publications, and drawings but mainly comprises photographs. The photographs include some of Johnson and his family, and snapshots and portfolio images of the houses he worked on. There is a large group of photographs of Carrier Hall including images of it under construction and the landscaping. There are also some construction snapshots of the William Burr Chapman house and some photographs of the interior of Johnson’s own house featuring furniture he and Barthol carved. Another group of color photographs is more recent and documents the furniture Johnson built. Among the clippings are articles on Leo Barthol’s life and work and there is a DVD that tells the story of the return of the paneling that was removed from Carrier Hall and subsequently reinstalled by Barthol. Three drawings are of interest, including one by Johnson of a chair he built and carved, and another of his family home, and one by Bryant Fleming of a fountain.

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## **Subject terms**

Architects and builders--Tennessee--Memphis.

Barthol, Leon J., 1908-1993.

Fleming, Bryant, 1877-1946.

Houses--Tennessee--Memphis.

Johnson, John Wright, 1879-1941.

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## **Inventory**

Folder

- 1 Correspondence, 1926-1941.  
Photographs:
- 2 J.W. Johnson family, 1895-circa 1956.
- 3 Robert M. Carrier house, "Carrier Hall", 642 S. Willett Street, Memphis, Tenn.  
Johnson portfolio.
- 4 Robert M. Carrier house, Memphis, Tenn.: Construction, circa 1923.
- 5 Robert M. Carrier house, Memphis, Tenn.: Exterior.
- 6 Robert M. Carrier house, Memphis, Tenn.: Landscaping.
- 7 Robert M. Carrier houses, "Barnacre Lodge", Miss.: Sardis, Miss. Johnson  
portfolio.
- 8 C. Leroy King house, "Kingsland", Park and Cherry, Memphis, Tenn. Johnson  
portfolio.
- 9 J.W. Johnson house, 3550 Central, Memphis, Tenn. Johnson portfolio. House was  
built between April and September 1928.
- 10 J.W. Johnson house, 3550 Central, Memphis, Tenn.: Exterior and interior.
- 11 Houses: Nellie Pidgeon, Walnut Grove and Pidgeon, Memphis, Tenn.; Mrs.  
Curtis King, Central and Highland, Memphis, Tenn.; Vance Norfleet,  
Walnut Grove and Perkins, Memphis, Tenn.; H.K. Reese, 3438 Central,  
Memphis, Tenn. (remodel); John Sneed Williams, Jr., 542 East Parkway  
South, Memphis, Tenn.; John Sneed Williams, Sr., Poplar and Edgewood,  
Memphis, Tenn. Johnson portfolio.
- 12 Houses: William B. Chapman, Morningside Park, Memphis, Tenn.
- 13 J.W. Johnson furniture. Color images of furniture designed, built and carved by  
Johnson with the carving assistance of Leo Barthol.
- 14 Landscape exhibit, Memphis Garden Club, 1934 May.
- Publications:
- 15 Articles, 1968, 1989. Includes Howard, Edwin, "From Memphis", *The  
Delta Review*, Vol. 5, No. 7, 1968 July, pp.82, 84; Hollis, Jane, & Cheryl  
Sales, "A Bit of England in Tennessee: The Jacobethan Revival Estate of  
A Memphis Anglophile", *Southern Accents*, 1989 October, pp.164-174,  
re: Carrier house.
- 16 Clippings: "J.W. Johnson, Who Built Fine Homes, Is Dead", *Memphis Press-  
Scimitar*, 1941 November 12; "John W. Johnson Dies at his Residence  
Here", *Commercial Appeal*, 1941 November 13; Obituary: Mrs. Mabel  
Johnson, *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, 1953 December 26.
- OS Hogan, Dave, "'Dream Mansions' Graced East Memphis' Past, *Memphis  
Press-Scimitar East*, 1976 April 8.  
Clippings re: Leo Barthol:  
BeVier, Thomas, "Lone Artist Improves With Age", *Commercial Appeal*,  
1972 January 27.  
Fulbright, Alice, "Every Piece of Wood Contains Image", *Commercial  
Appeal*, 1977 April 11, p.8.

- Donahue, Michael, "Art Scene: Woodworker's Objects Range from Floor to Altar", *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, 1980 June 5.
- 17 Fleming, Bryant, *Illustrations from the Work of Bryant Fleming, A.I.A., F.A.S.L.A., Architect, Landscape Architect*, Ithaca, N.Y., 1932. Includes advertisement for Johnson, and illustrations of R.M. Carrier house.
- OS Drawings: Birdbath with cherub drawn by Bryant Fleming.  
Dining chair by John W. Johnson.  
Detail of carving by John W. Johnson.
- 18 Drawing: J.W. Johnson house, 3550 Central Avenue, by John W. Johnson, circa 1929, on a blank account from Williams and Johnson, General Contractors, Normal Station, Memphis.
- 19 Miscellany. J.W. Johnson business card.
- AV DVD: Hart, Nancy, "Carrier House Paneling Story", WRC-TV, Memphis, Tenn., news story re: Leo Barthol's work on restoration of paneling in Carrier Hall, 1989 Spring.  
CD: Digital copies of Johnson family photographs.