

Sandwiching in History
Lafayette Hotel
523 S. Louisiana, LR
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By: Rachel Silva



Intro

Hi, my name is Rachel Silva, and I work for the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program. Welcome to the Sandwiching in History tour of the Lafayette Hotel! I'd like to thank several people for their help with the tour—

Missy McSwain, director of the AHPP, for her help finding a new venue on short notice;

Lou Ann Jacks and Maggie Hogan with Flake & Kelley Commercial, the building's management firm, for allowing us to tour the space and giving us access to a condo on the 9th floor;

Sharon Priest and Becky Falkowski with Downtown Little Rock Partnership, which has its office on the 3rd floor, for their help promoting the tour and for giving us an update on current activities;

And last but not least, Charles and Becky Witsell, who gave me tremendous amounts of information about the building's restoration; in particular, the restoration of the ceiling in the lobby and mezzanine areas.

The Lafayette Hotel was built in 1925 and was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1982.

History of the Lafayette Hotel

The 1920s were characterized by economic prosperity and social optimism in a time period between the end of World War I and the onset of the Great Depression. Mass production made new products and technologies affordable for the middle class, including the automobile, radio, sound synchronized motion pictures or “talkies”, and the widespread use of electricity and the telephone. And when the 19th Amendment became law in 1920, women gained the right to vote, ushering in a period of social change. Against this backdrop of events, Little Rock grew during the 1920s from a city of just over 65,000 to one with a population of nearly 82,000. And a building boom ensued.

The Lafayette Hotel was built in 1925 by the Little Rock Hotel Company with A. D. Gates of St. Louis as president and John F. Boyle of Little Rock as vice president. The hotel formally opened on September 2, 1925, and featured 300 guest rooms, each with a private bath and circulating ice water, which rented for \$2.50 and up per night. The 10-story building (plus basement) was designed by St. Louis architect George Dennis Barnett (he died in 1922, so he either drew the plans before his death, or one of his sons actually designed the hotel—he had at least two sons, both named George D. Barnett, who became architects).

The building's exterior features elements of the Renaissance Revival style with its decorative terra cotta detailing, arched windows on the top floor, and a projecting copper cornice with dentils.

The Lafayette Hotel was truly one of Arkansas's finest. In addition to the building's exterior beauty, the interior public spaces, including the lobby, formal dining room, mezzanine, and top floor ballroom, were originally designed by well-known decorator Paul Martin Heerwagen.

Heerwagen

Paul Heerwagen was born in 1866 in the Kingdom of Bavaria (now part of Germany), and in 1881, he immigrated to the United States with his family. After studying interior design in Detroit, Michigan, Heerwagen moved to Little Rock in 1891 and opened a paint store. He soon established a business as an interior decorator and muralist. In 1893 he married Ida Killian of Little Rock, and the couple had 6 children. In 1911 Heerwagen and his family moved to Fayetteville, where he operated the Paul M. Heerwagen Studios from a farm on the outskirts of town. Heerwagen was commissioned to design the interiors of hotels, office and government buildings, churches, Masonic temples, theaters, and private residences throughout the southern United States. Some of his notable projects include the Lafayette Hotel; the Arkansas State Capitol murals—depicting justice, war, education, and religion; the Peabody Hotel in Memphis; and the Strand Theater in Shreveport, LA. Paul Heerwagen died in 1955 and is buried in Fayetteville's Evergreen Cemetery.

1920s

A 1926 advertisement for the hotel read:

“In Little Rock—It's the Lafayette! Dine at the Lafayette! You'll enjoy eating your noonday lunch and evening dinner at the Lafayette. The service is prompt, the food excellent and in large variety. There are Business Men's Luncheons and Table d'Hote Dinners or you may order a la carte. There's music every evening in the Main Dining Room and you may dance as you dine at no extra charge.”

In addition to the restaurant and ballroom, George P. Elkins ran a barber shop in the basement, and the Lafayette Beauty Shop was located in the mezzanine. By 1930, there was a telegraph office in the hotel lobby as well.

In the 1920s and 30s, the Lafayette Hotel was neighbored by the 3-story Grand Central Hotel to its north (by 1930, the Ozark Hotel), the Kempner Theater was across Louisiana Street to the west (later called the Majestic Theater and then the Arkansas Theater), Pfeifer Bros. Department Store was across the alley to the east, facing Main Street, and St. Andrew's Cathedral was one block to the south.

Great Depression

Everything seemed to be going just fine for the Lafayette Hotel until the Great Depression. The hotel closed in 1933 due to financial troubles, and the building remained vacant until 1941, when a housing shortage created by World War II made reopening feasible. You see, the U.S. Army reclaimed control of Camp Robinson in early 1940 for use as a training post before the U.S. officially entered the war, and from that point on, there was a housing shortage in Little Rock and North Little Rock due to the influx of soldiers in the area.

1941 Reopening

Southwest Hotels, Inc., purchased the Lafayette Hotel and officially reopened the building at noon on August 23, 1941. Southwest Hotels was founded and owned by H. Grady Manning, who died on September 3, 1939, so by the time the Lafayette reopened, the company was run by his widow. Southwest Hotels owned and operated the Lafayette, as well as the Hotel Marion (built 1906) at the NW corner of Markham & Louisiana—no longer extant—current site of Peabody Hotel; the Albert Pike Hotel (built 1929) at the SE corner of 7th & Scott; and the Hotel Ben McGehee (built 1930) at the NW corner of Main & Markham (which was renamed the Grady Manning Hotel sometime in the late 1940s after the hotel company's founder)—no longer extant—on site of current Statehouse Convention Center.

When the Lafayette reopened in 1941, Southwest Hotels had done a substantial remodeling of the building. It had been modernized throughout--to the point that it "had the appearance of a new building." The number of guest rooms had been reduced from 300 to 260, and an "ultra-modern" coffee bar/lunch counter was added with an entrance off of 6th Street and through the hotel lobby (in current Garden Room area).

An *Arkansas Gazette* article from August 24, 1941, described the hotel as being "completely redecorated and modern in its new furnishings and appointments." The article went on to say, "Guest rooms, suites, and efficiency apartments are the newest, freshest, and most livable rooms in the city, high above the street, light and airy." The new coffee bar was "truly the most beautifully decorated and artistically designed coffee bar in the state."

The hotel also announced some permanent tenants, including offices for the Missouri Pacific and Rock Island railroad lines, a telephone answering service, coin shop, beauty parlor, offices for the Kiwanis Club, and the Gaslite Club in the basement (which remained there until at least the early 1960s). And the Optimist, Lions, and Civitan clubs held regular meetings at the Lafayette.

Oehrlie

Interestingly, before the hotel's 1941 reopening, the interior was completely repainted, including the lobby. The lobby ceiling was stenciled and painted by John Oehrlie, a Swiss mural painter and chief decorator for the Southwest Hotels chain, which owned the Lafayette. Oehrlie and his small crew of men redecorated the entire hotel in 8 months (spent 3 months on the lobby ceiling). And John Oehrlie worked on the original 1925 lobby decoration—at that time, he was Paul Heerwagen's foreman.

See photo of John Oehrlie (right) painting the ceiling with his son-in-law, Harold Joyce (left) in 1941. Harold Joyce later served as head painter at LR Air Force Base, painting hangers, planes, houses, etc.

1973 Closing

In 1953 there was a general remodeling of the upper floors of the building, including major mechanical, electrical, and plumbing upgrades. The hotel owners were trying to keep pace with the growing number of motels and travel courts springing up on the edges of town, and their effort prolonged the inevitable until November 23, 1973, when the Lafayette Hotel closed. An article in the *Arkansas Gazette* read, "Lafayette career covers 48 years. Closed November 23, the victim of more modern competition, one-way streets, and no parking facilities. The closing will leave Southwest Hotels, Inc., once the city's major hotel operator, with only the Grady Manning Hotel left in operation in Little Rock."

1980s Rehab

The hotel sat vacant until the early 1980s, when Jon R. Brittenum & Associates, a local investment banking firm, purchased the building and decided to rehab it. The lobby, mezzanine, and top-floor ballroom were to be restored, and all other floors were to be gutted and redesigned according to tenants' preferences. The firm of Witsell, Evans & Rasco served as restoration architects, with Baldwin & Shell Construction Company as general contractor. The rehab was projected to cost \$6.3 million, and the owners made use of the federal historic rehabilitation tax credit.

When the hotel closed in '73, the building was left unheated and uncooled, causing damage to the interior materials and finishes. However, the hotel has a concrete substructure, so it was in pretty good shape structurally. The rehab project started in the fall of 1983 and was completed (to a degree) by December 1984.

Rehab details:

- Tuck-pointed brick and painted some damaged terra cotta tile
- New windows on upper floors with period appropriate pane arrangement
- Replaced about 15% of the copper cornice
- Repaired marquees
- New mechanical systems throughout—including new elevators (set new elevators inside the old elevator shafts and installed wood paneling).
- Enlarged first floor kitchen area (so building now has about 130,000 square feet)
- Lobby floors—white and black marble—were repaired
- Red gum paneled walls and columns were stripped and refinished

Restoration of Lobby Ceiling

But the most interesting part of the building's rehab was the restoration of the lobby ceiling. This was one of the first big restoration projects in Little Rock where a lot of time and money were spent to recreate historic interior decoration. When the 1984 rehab began, the entire lobby—columns and all—had been painted white. But with years of no climate control, the many layers of white paint were flaking and exposed some of what was hidden underneath. A Little Rock firm called Designed Communications, co-owned by Suzanne Kittrell and Becky Witsell, was hired to research and document the original lobby decoration and then recreate it.

The artists were able to uncover most of the 1940s decoration, but only small portions of the original 1920s decoration were clearly visible. So the decision was made to restore the '40s decoration, which was done by John Oehrlie (and Southwest Hotels). However, the 1920s decoration was a floral stenciling very similar to the '40s design.

According to Becky Witsell, this design is Craftsman in style and is very masculine because the hotel catered mostly to traveling businessmen. Stenciling was a very

common way of decorating home interiors in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Pattern catalogs were published and sold pre-cut stencils, “hand cut by competent artists,” that could be purchased by painters and decorators for architectural application (from Becky Wisell and Suzanne Kittrell’s book *Authentic Stencil Patterns, 1890-1930*).

Pass out binoculars

The process:

- The ceiling beams and brackets are ALL plaster. In the ‘40s, the beams were decorated with a panel-like stencil treatment and then faux-grained on the sides to give the appearance of wood beams. The coffers between the beams were painted one color. In order to get the stencil patterns and colors exactly right, the entire process had to be done from scratch, just like it was done in the beginning.
- Kenneth Beard Painting Co. stripped the ceiling and applied a thin layer of sheet rock mud to provide a new surface for the stencils
- Stencils were reproduced and color mock-ups (sample boards) were done before starting the ceiling
- A team of 6 women repainted the ceiling:
 - Becky Witsell
 - Suzanne Kittrell
 - Ovita Goolsby
 - Kathy Worthen
 - Susan Purvis
 - Susan Leir
- They worked on scaffolding and painted 2 bays at a time. Then they would tear down the scaffolding and put it up in the next place. It took one year (1984) to complete the ceiling.
- Taped up the stencils (one at a time) and did the brown outlines
- Painted brown connecting lines with a straight-edge tool
- Stenciled in some large color designs

- Painted most colors by hand inside the brown stencil shapes and added highlights by wiping the paint with cheesecloth (gauze-like material traditionally used to separate curds from whey when making cheese)
- **Ovita Goolsby was a portrait artist, and she painted tiny portraits of the 6 women on the ceiling. Who can find them?**
- Created faux wood graining on the sides of each column with a flogger, which is a heavy, long-bristled brush used to texture paint—painted layer of brown paint and went back over it with the flogger to give it a rough texture. Then dab with cheesecloth.
- For the gold brackets—they were painted with varnish and dusted with bronzing powder while still damp (bronzing powder contains actual metal flakes). Then a glaze was applied over the bronzing powder to give it an “antique” look.

The whole process was filmed—absolutely amazing.

Becky also did some painting in the top-floor ballroom, but that detailing has since been covered.

Iron balustrade is original and was painted by Beard-Breeding, who also did the paint prep and wood varnishing.

Jay Coor restored all of the antique light fixtures in the lobby (one was stolen during the restoration and a reproduction had to be made??).

Brittenum rehabbed the exterior, the top three floors, the lobby, and the mechanical systems. In late 1984, American Diversified Capital Corp. of Costa Mesa, CA, purchased the Lafayette Hotel building with plans to finish out the remaining 8 floors.

Current Use

The Lafayette Building, or Lafayette Square, is now managed by Flake & Kelley Commercial and owned by Tower Investments, LLC (of Woodland, CA). Beginning in 2005, Tower Investments converted floors 6 through 10 to one and two-bedroom condominiums. There are currently 6 condos on each floor 6-10 (so a total of 30 condos). Two-bedroom/2 bath condos have about 1,700 square feet, and one-bedroom/1 bath condos have about 1,000 square feet. They offer the option to buy or lease (currently about 2/3 leased and 1/3 owned).

Floor 5 is currently under renovation.

Floors 2-4 and the mezzanine are for commercial tenants.

The lobby/dining room are available for weddings and special events. They usually have at least 2 events here each month.

And there is a gym in the basement for tenants.

Sharon Priest, executive director of Downtown LR Partnership, will give us an update on the organization's current activities...

Now we will go up a few at a time to tour the 9th floor condo.

Thank you! Next tour is September 7 at the J. Rogers Young House (Robinwood B & B) at 2021 S. Arch St. in LR.

Extras:

Green faux marbling in the Garden Room was not Becky's work.

John F. Boyle, of Boyle Realty Company, owned the Boyle Building and Hall Building.

The Marquis de Lafayette was a French ally of the U.S. in the Revolutionary War. Lafayette County in southwest Arkansas is named in his honor.