

Sandwiching in History
Old Main at Arkansas Baptist College
1621 Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Drive, Little Rock
June 1, 2012
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 Old Main at Arkansas Baptist College! I'd like to thank Arkansas Baptist College for allowing us to tour the facility today, and in particular, I'd like to thank Linda Gillam, college relations & special events coordinator, for her help with the tour.

Old Main was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1976 because it is the oldest building on a historically African-American college campus in Arkansas, and because it is an excellent example of Second Empire-style architecture.

Arkansas Baptist College

Arkansas Baptist College was founded in August 1884 in Hot Springs by the Colored Baptists of the State of Arkansas at their annual convention meeting. Originally called the “Minister’s Institute,” the school first held classes in November of that year at Mt. Zion Baptist Church in Little Rock. Reverend J. P. Lawson, a white Baptist minister from Joplin, MO, was hired to be the first teacher. The main purpose of the school was to provide higher education and training for African-American ministers and teachers. In 1885 the school’s name was changed to Arkansas Baptist College.

In 1887 Reverend Joseph Albert Booker became the first president of Arkansas Baptist College and served in that capacity until his death in 1926. He is credited with the school’s early success. Booker was born a slave in 1859 in Ashley County, Arkansas. He earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1886 from the Nashville Institute in Tennessee and began his service to Arkansas Baptist College the following year. Rev. Booker was an influential educator and fought against segregationist policies in LR—in particular, he strongly opposed the Separate Coach Law of 1891, which required separate but equal railroad coaches and depot waiting rooms for whites and blacks (but it passed anyway). In 1901 and 1902, Booker was awarded honorary doctoral degrees from the State University at Louisville, Kentucky, and Shaw University at Raleigh, North Carolina, respectively. [Now operate as Kentucky State University in Louisville and Shaw University in Raleigh—both are historically black colleges.]

Shortly after Booker became president of the school, Arkansas Baptist College acquired land at the southwest corner of 16th and High (now MLK) streets, and a few wood-frame buildings were constructed. However, on March 2, 1893, the wood-frame main building was destroyed by fire. By the fall of 1893, construction of the current brick main building was underway. The cornerstone was laid on November 2, 1893, but it took several years to complete the building. In the spring of 1897, the school’s newspaper, *The Baptist Vanguard*, published a sketch of the main building as it appeared at that time—it consisted of the rusticated

stone basement and one brick story with a “temporary roof.” [The 1897 Sanborn map shows this as well.] By the turn of the 20th century, the college had raised enough money to complete the building’s upper two stories.

Initially, Old Main housed the dining hall, kitchen, and Home Economics Department (with laundry facility) in the basement; offices for the president, registrar, business manager, and dean, as well as the chapel, on the first floor; and the girls’ dormitory on the second and third floors.

Old Main originally had six brick chimneys (3 on the north elevation and 3 on the south elevation), and girls were assigned the task of making fires in the stoves to provide heat for their rooms. In 1942 gas heaters were installed (and the chimneys were removed sometime after that date). Old Main was also topped by a bell tower, and different students were responsible for ringing the bell at the beginning of each day and at the beginning and ending of each class period. The original bell tower was removed about 1965 but was recently rebuilt.

By 1913, the campus also included a 3-story boys’ dormitory, a manual training building, and president’s home/alumni cottage. In the 1930s, an Education Building was constructed and housed the library, classrooms, offices, *The Vanguard* print shop, the business department, and the biology room. By 1950, the campus consisted of Old Main, the Education Building, Boys’ Dormitory, Administration Building, Gymnasium, and two classroom buildings.

Second Empire-style Architecture

The Second Empire style was one of the first new architectural styles to emerge in Arkansas after the Civil War, and its popularity lasted until the end of the 19th century. The style’s distinctive mansard roof was named after 17th century French architect Francois Mansart. The roof line was revived in France during the reign of Napoleon III (1852-1870), France’s Second Empire, from which the architectural style takes its name. The popularity of the style worked its way from France to England to the United States.

Old Main is an excellent example of the Second Empire style of architecture with its mansard roof (sloped roof bounded by molded cornices), gabled dormers situated on the steep lower slope of the roof, and paired brackets under the eaves. The building's mansard roof cupola was reconstructed. The windows have rough-cut stone lintels and sills, and interestingly, the windows on the east and west elevations are set under slightly arched stone lintels (whereas the north and south elevation lintels are straight).

Recent Past & Rehab of Old Main

On February 1, 2006, Dr. Fitzgerald Hill became the 13th president of Arkansas Baptist College. Under Dr. Hill's leadership, the college has experienced its most dramatic period of growth and development. In 2006, Arkansas Baptist College had an enrollment of about 200 students, but today, there are more than 1,100 students enrolled. ABC offers a BA in Criminal Justice, BA in Human Services, BA in Religious Studies, BA in Business Administration, BA in Public Administration, as well as an Associate of Arts in Religious Studies, Associate of Business Administration, and an Associate of Arts in Christian Education. And as you can see, several historic buildings have been rehabbed and new buildings have been constructed on campus to accommodate the growing student population and attract more students.

Old Main was altered over the years, including the removal of the cupola and chimneys and the replacement of the original wood porch steps with concrete steps. The original slate shingles were replaced with asphalt shingles, and the decorative brackets under the eaves were removed. Other exterior and interior elements had deteriorated as well. The building was in desperate need of rehabilitation.

Using private donations, grants from the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program, and grant monies provided by the National Park Service's fund to rehab historic buildings on the campuses of historically black colleges and universities, work

began on Old Main (AHPP paid for asbestos and mold abatement in 2007; AHPP paid for roof in 2005).

SCM Architects of Little Rock did the rehabilitation, which included masonry repairs, installation of a new slate roof and wood windows, repair and repainting of all exterior wood surfaces, and the reconstruction of the bell tower and porches with divided staircases (metal stairs instead of wood). The project also involved the adaptive re-use of the building's interior in a manner that was historically sensitive...installation of an elevator and reconfiguration of the interior spaces to best serve the school's needs.

Most interior finishes/fixtures are period appropriate replacements, but some elements are original, like the beadboard ceilings and wainscoting and interior iron columns in the chapel (auditorium).

Work was completed in the winter of 2010.

So now, in the Basement, you have:

- New tilework
- Original beadboard ceilings & wainscoting
- Replacement fixtures
- Testing and tutoring rooms
- Storage
- Office space

(window well around basement)

1st Floor:

- Chapel (auditorium)
- Conference room/board room

2nd Floor:

- Classrooms
- Attached via skybridge to new General Studies I Building (faculty offices, classrooms, lecture hall)

- New stairwell constructed in the west end of Old Main (replaced original stairs with hall space and put in elevator in east end of building)

3rd Floor:

- President's office
- Administrative staff

Thank you!

Next tour is on Friday, July 6 at the Dr. Albert McGill House at 2209 S. Battery in Little Rock.

Extras:

High Street (the name of this street until 1993, when it became MLK) was one block west of the original city limits on Pulaski Street. Most of this area consisted of undeveloped fields and forest until the late 19th century. Benjamin Johnson, who died in 1851, owned 160 acres adjoining the western boundary of the original city—his land extended almost to Park Street on the west and from 12th Street down to Wright Avenue. After Johnson's death, his heirs sold to different parties, and eventually, they had the land surveyed and platted. In April 1877 the Centennial Addition to the City of LR was platted and lots offered for sale. The addition was named in honor of our country's centennial celebration (1776-1876).

Before this neighborhood was associated with Central High School, it was known as the West End. The West End was one of several "street car suburbs," which were developed hand-in-hand with the construction of streetcar lines and other amenities such as water and sewer service, paved streets and sidewalks, electricity, and fire protection. LR's streetcar system began in the late 1870s as a horse or mule-drawn operation, but by 1894 it included 20 miles of electric railway with cars running on a rapid schedule. By the mid-1890s, High Street was a major north-south route for the streetcar, which ran on High from 9th Street south to Wright Avenue, and later beyond.

Rehab of Old Main was part of ABC's Vision 2020, which aims to improve the school and community. One of the plan's first priorities was to improve safety and remove blight, so ABC chose numerous buildings and lots to rehab, demolish, or repurpose. Rehabbed historic properties—Old Main, student services building, GED building, Cooperative Baptist Fellowship offices, community leadership offices, Auto Baptism Car Wash on Wright Ave., old St. Peter's Rock Baptist Church on 18th Street will be new performing arts center. New construction is also part of that plan...General Studies I & II, new dormitories, Campus Bistro, Buffalo Barn Student Union, Yancey's Cafeteria/Community Produce Market, etc.

Principals at SCM Architects are John Connell, Fred Moseley, Brad Place, and Mike Steelman.