

Sandwiching in History
1st Presbyterian Church, North Little Rock
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By: Rachel Silva



Intro

Hello, my name is Rachel Silva, and I work for the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program. Welcome to the April Sandwiching in History tour of the First Presbyterian Church of North Little Rock. Before we get started, I want to thank the church for allowing us to tour their building. I'd also like to introduce and thank a few people for their help with the tour—Lynette Cox, the first artist to rent a studio space here at the church and now a church elder; Ann Russ, the church's new pastor; and of course, Sandra Taylor Smith, Cary Bradburn, and Monty Richard of the NLR History Commission. Since the church is a contributing resource in the Argenta Historic District, I'll tell you a little bit about Argenta...

History of Argenta

The City of North Little Rock was called Argenta in its early days of settlement (the town of Argenta was surveyed & platted in 1866). The area was called Argenta because of the silver that was found at the nearby Kellogg mine (argentum is the Latin word for silver). The City of Argenta developed around the railroad. The Memphis and Little Rock Railway was the first operating railroad in Arkansas, and it ran east-west from Memphis to Argenta. The Memphis and Little Rock Railway crossed the Little Rock and Fort Smith Railway in the middle of Argenta, and the St. Louis, Iron Mountain, and Southern Railroad ran along the edge of town. Because the railroads brought travelers to Argenta, the most common

businesses catered to people from out-of-town. There were hotels, boarding houses, saloons, gambling houses, brothels, and restaurants downtown. Argenta was a rough town—it had no government in the early days, so it was virtually lawless. There were no paved streets, and the sidewalks were made out of wooden planks. This side of the Arkansas River flooded often, and some of the streets stayed under water for weeks because there was no city-wide drainage system.

In 1890, the citizens of Argenta filed a petition to incorporate as a city of the first class. However, seeing this, the City of Little Rock annexed the town of Argenta despite the protests of Argenta residents. Referencing a law that excluded voters in the targeted annexation area, the City of Little Rock laid a territorial claim on Argenta in order to increase its tax base. However, Little Rock did not provide Argenta (8th Ward of LR) with many city services in return for their taxes, so a plot was hatched to regain Argenta's independence. William Faucette (prominent businessman and 1st mayor of NLR) worked with three state legislators to get the Hoxie-Walnut Ridge bill signed in 1903, allowing cities within a mile of one another to consolidate if the residents of both cities approved it at the polls. The bill was supposedly written to allow the NE Arkansas towns of Hoxie and Walnut Ridge to consolidate, which they later did. However, the bill would also allow the town of North Little Rock (which had been incorporated just to the north of LR's 8th Ward—AKA Argenta—in 1901) to annex the 8th Ward of Little Rock (formerly Argenta) in 1904. This is how Argenta regained her independence from Little Rock.

In 1906, NLR changed its name back to Argenta. It remained so until 1917, when it was changed back to NLR. Argenta was a booming railroad town in the early 20th century. By 1915, this was a largely working class neighborhood occupied by local business owners and workers and railroad employees.

Argenta Historic District (NR-listed in 1993; amended several times, but final boundary expansion done in 2007)

The Argenta Historic District currently encompasses the area that represents the city's early residential and commercial development. It is roughly bounded by Melrose Circle and 9th Street on the north, N. Broadway on the west, W. 4th Street and Broadway on the south, and the railroad tracks on the east side of Main Street form the eastern boundary.

Argenta Presbyterian Church

In December 1895 Rev. S. G. Miller of the First Presbyterian Church in LR organized a mission of 13 members in Argenta, which was then the 8th ward of LR. The Argenta Presbyterian Church was formally organized on March 5, 1899, and the trustees soon acquired a site for a church building at 4th & Maple. On November 2, 1902, the first service was conducted in the new building.

Photo of Rev. T. C. Johnston in front of the church about 1902. Johnston was pastor of the church from 1900 to 1904.

As I told you earlier, in 1917 Argenta changed its name back to NLR, so in 1920 the Argenta Presbyterian Church became known as the NLR Presbyterian Church.

In 1921 a small addition was built to the north of the sanctuary, adding another set of 4 windows on each side of the original building. Barely see the difference in brick in this 1927 photo.

In 1920 the church had hired well-known Arkansas architect Charles L. Thompson to design a Sunday School addition for the church. Thompson's plans called for a large, two-story English Revival-style addition, but it was never constructed. Shortly after the sanctuary was expanded in 1921, the Sunday School paid for a classroom addition to the sanctuary (maybe about 1924). It had half-timbering and knee braces in the gable end, but it was nowhere close to the scale of the Thompson design. See it in this photo as well.

As early as 1926, the Sunday School needed more space—the Men's Bible Class was meeting in a World War I government building, probably surplus from Camp Pike (Camp Robinson), located behind the church.

So in order to accommodate more people, sometime in the late 1920s or early 1930s, the top portion of the Sunday School addition with the half-timbering was removed to construct a full second story above the Sunday School wing.

There were 5 houses facing 4th Street between the church and Orange St. (none are left). In 1942 the church purchased the house next door at 207 W. 4th St. It originally belonged to founding church member William H. Ramsey, who was a justice of the peace and a municipal judge from 1918 to 1919. The Ramsey property was used as an additional Sunday School building and housed 8 classrooms and a pastor's study.

In 1948 the church acquired the next house at 209 W. 4th from Ms. Maydean Welch. By the early 1950s the church planned to construct a new sanctuary to handle the large congregation.

ALMAND: They hired architect John Parks Almand to design the new building. JPA was born in Lithonia, Georgia, in 1885 and received his architecture degree from Columbia University in 1911. After spending a year working in Havana, Cuba, Almand learned that Charles Thompson was looking to hire an architect, and he applied and got the position. Almand arrived in Little Rock on July 13, 1912. For the first two and a half years that Almand worked with Charles Thompson, he was a designer and earned \$2,000 a year. For the next year, he was promoted to a junior partner with Thompson. However, Almand wanted to go out on his own, so he opened his own office in January 1916.

Although Almand opened his practice during the 1910s, it was not until the 1920s that it really took off. He received many large commissions during the 1920s, including First Presbyterian Church in LR, and he was the designing architect of Little Rock High School (Central High School). Although a lot of his work was centered in Little Rock, his practice grew to be statewide during the 1920s. During the Great Depression, Almand moved to Washington, DC, where he worked as an architect for the Treasury Department, designing post offices, customs houses, mints and other federal buildings across the country.

Almand returned to Little Rock in April 1936 to take charge of the Resettlement Administration's Inspection Division office, which covered Arkansas, Louisiana, and Mississippi. The Resettlement Administration was involved in the construction of dams, farm buildings, utilities, roads, trails and lodges, and projects in Arkansas included Lake Dick (NR-listed 1975) in Jefferson County and Mount Magazine.

Almand returned to private practice in 1937 but not for long. During World War II, he worked as the construction engineer for Naval Air Stations being built in Traverse City, Michigan, and Corpus Christi, Texas. After World War II, Almand's practice returned to normal. As before the war, Almand's commissions during the 1940s and 1950s encompassed a wide variety of building types including churches, residences, and educational buildings. JPA died in 1969 after suffering a heart attack.

Almand designed this sanctuary in a simplified version of the Gothic Revival style with a steeply pitched roof and pointed arch windows. His design also featured an

arcade porch with pointed arch openings to tie the new sanctuary with the old. As you can see, the interior of the sanctuary is beautiful with its mahogany paneling and stained glass. Unfortunately, the stained glass windows are bowing badly and are in need of immediate repair. Applied for HPRG...

The church demolished the Welch house at 209 W. 4th St. to build the new sanctuary. The ground breaking for the new sanctuary was on March 7, 1954.

These photos were taken during the construction and show how they built the new sanctuary around the Ramsey house at 207 W. 4th St. Sunday School classes continued in the Ramsey house until the 1902 sanctuary could be remodeled to hold a pastor's study, church office, and a fellowship hall. Then they demolished the Ramsey house to create the courtyard. Unfortunately, they sheared off the steeple on the 1902 church when they extended the arcade across the front façade. And the lower level stained glass windows were bricked-in on the front façade of the 1902 building, but the large pointed arch stained glass window was just boarded over and is still there. You can crawl up in the attic and see it. From the attic in the old sanctuary, you can also see the original vaulted plaster ceiling, which has been obscured by a modern drop ceiling. The original blue glass casement windows remain in the 1902 sanctuary as well. The first service was held in the new sanctuary on August 22, 1954. Almand finished the front facing gable ends with board and batten redwood siding, which was covered with vinyl siding in the 1990s—working on getting this removed.

So at this point, the church was U-shaped around a central courtyard. Once again, the church hired John Parks Almand in 1957 to design an educational annex that would completely enclose the courtyard. This annex runs along the entire northern elevation today.

MANSE: In 1927 the church constructed a manse to the north of the church building facing Maple St. This Craftsman-style house was individually listed on the NR in 1993. The manse served as the official pastor's residence until the 1960s when the Presbytery of Arkansas started giving its ministers housing allowances. Then the manse was used as a youth building for the church and later housed several businesses and nonprofit organizations. The church owned it until the 1990s, and it is currently for sale.

As you can tell from the number of additions to the building, the First Presbyterian Church was a very active church with a large membership for many years. However, as the neighborhood began to decline in the 1980s and 1990s and the

crime rate was high downtown, people moved out to Park Hill, Lakewood, Sylvan Hills, Sherwood, etc., and the church suffered greatly. For the last decade, the church averaged less than 50 people in attendance each week, and many members were elderly, so they didn't use the large education wing because there wasn't a Sunday School. In 1991 the congregation even contemplated moving out of downtown, but thankfully, they decided to stick it out and stay here.

Determined to reclaim the neighborhood, the Boosters for a Better Downtown NLR started meeting in the church in the early 1990s, and the Argenta CDC initially met here as well. And as you know, these groups, combined with the National Register Historic District designation and Historic District Commission, have completely turned things around in Argenta.

First Presbyterian Church has its own story of renewal. The church has literally been saved from financial ruin by embracing the local arts community and renting studio space to these artists. Artist Lynette Cox started renting a studio space here in Sept. 2006, and soon urged church leaders to offer more studio spaces for rent. By the summer of 2007, she had convinced them—now the church rents studio space to 9 artists and 1 attorney. There's even a state of the art recording studio in the old education annex! The money from the studio rentals brings in \$24,000 annually and keeps the church afloat.

Now the church hosts 3rd Friday Art Night exhibitors as well as the Argenta Farmer's Market during the winter season. And now the church has a new pastor, Ann Russ, who has been here since last fall.

The way this church has sought to become a part of the community and embrace the creative talents of these artists is wonderful, and I think those partnerships will benefit the church for many years to come.

Original pews from 1902 sanctuary are in the balcony.

In the 1954 bell tower, you can see the old railroad bell that was donated to the church around the turn of the 20th century by the Union Pacific RR (at that time the St. Louis, Iron Mountain & Southern RR).

Floor plan on 1957 education annex—connector area was kindergarten and nursery. Down hallway from west to east was choir room and then all the rest were classrooms.

Kitchen added off fellowship hall in 1962-63.

Park Hill Presbyterian Church split off in 1947—likely adopted the “First” at that time.