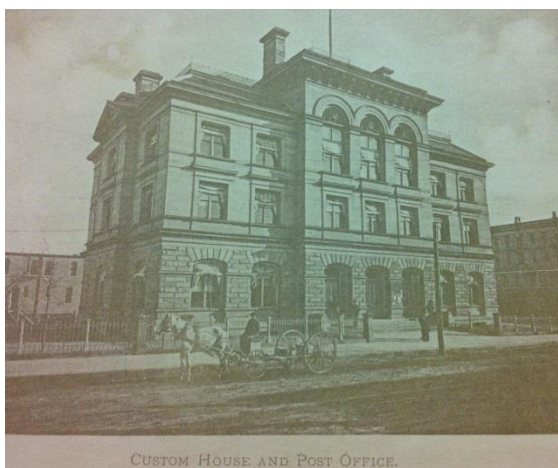


Sandwiching in History
Old U.S. Post Office and Courthouse
300 W. Second Street, Little Rock
March 13, 2015
By: Rachel Silva



Post Office & Courthouse, ca. 1900



Post Office & Courthouse, 2015

Intro

Good afternoon, my name is Rachel Silva, and I work for the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program. Welcome to the “Sandwiching in History” tour of the Old U.S. Post Office and Courthouse! I’d like to thank the U.S. Bankruptcy Court for allowing us to tour this beautiful building, and in particular, I’d like to thank Charlotte Gomlicker, Phil Principe, and Jean Rolfs for their help. The Bankruptcy Court was kind enough to allow cameras today, but please don’t take a photo of the overall courtroom layout. This is for security purposes. And if you brought your lunch, you will be allowed to eat it in the break room or learning center after my talk.

This tour is worth one hour of HSW continuing education credit through the American Institute of Architects. Please see me after the tour if you’re interested.

Little Rock’s Old Post Office and Courthouse—also known as the Old Post Office and Customs House or the Old Federal Building—was completed in 1881. Additions to the original building were constructed in 1897, 1908-1910, and 1997.

It was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1973 for its Renaissance Revival-style architecture.

History of Block 98, Original City of Little Rock

By the early 1840s, Roswell Beebe owned Block 98 of the Original City of Little Rock (this entire block from Second to Markham and Center to Spring). During the early-to-mid-nineteenth century, Beebe was one of the most important businessmen in Little Rock. At one time, he held clear title to nearly 240 acres in what is now downtown Little Rock. Although he served as Little Rock alderman in the late 1840s, Beebe's primary interest was in land speculation and the construction of a railroad line from Cairo, Illinois, to Fulton, Arkansas. In 1853 he organized and became president of the Cairo and Fulton Railroad, which later became part of the St. Louis, Iron Mountain & Southern Railroad (later Missouri Pacific, and today, Union Pacific). The town of Beebe in White County, located along the railroad, was named in his honor.

The antebellum Beebe Mansion, a two-story, Greek Revival-style house, was located on the north side of Block 98 at the southwest corner of Markham and Center, facing Markham, across from the Old State House. The Beebe House was valued at \$15,000 on August 7, 1865, the day it burned to the ground. The Beebes' two-story, brick kitchen; covered well; and a wood structure of unknown origin survived on this block until the late 19th century.

In 1872 attorney Mason W. Benjamin constructed the three-story, Italianate-style Benjamin Block on the former site of the Beebe Mansion. The Benjamin Block, also known as the Allis Block, was demolished in 1956. The site is now a parking deck just northeast of the Old Post Office and Courthouse.

So this was all on the north side of the block. There wasn't anything constructed on the south side of the block except the Beebes' outbuildings—that is, until the mid-1870s.

A Federal Building for Little Rock

The U.S. Department of the Treasury was negotiating the purchase of a site for a post office and courthouse at Little Rock as early as 1873. By 1875, the south half of Block 98 had been purchased from M. W. Benjamin for \$25,729.25. Little Rock's Post Office and Courthouse was designed in the Italian Renaissance Revival style by Massachusetts native James G. Hill, who served as Supervising Architect of the U.S. Treasury Department from 1876 to 1883. Groundwork for the Post Office began in November 1876.

On January 17, 1880, the *Arkansas Gazette* wrote about the building's progress. According to the article, the original building footprint was 69 x 110 feet. "1,984 cubic yards of dirt were excavated for the cellar. Trenches 3 x 4 feet were dug and filled with concrete and on that foundation the basement and area walls now stand. The Contract for basement and area walls was awarded to Bivens and Robinson for \$15,925.25 and contains 8,154 cubic feet of sandstone taken from quarries at Cabin Creek, Johnson County, Arkansas [near present-day Lamar]. The water table, ashlar [masonry blocks], and steps contain 2,105 cubic feet of red Missouri granite at the cost of \$7,657.50...Contract for wrought iron and cast iron work, first floor, was awarded to Snead and Company, Louisville, Kentucky. Iron work, second story, was awarded to S. J. Cresswell of Philadelphia. Iron work, third story and roof, was awarded to Snead and Company of Louisville. Worthington and Son, North Amherst, Ohio, had the contract for supplying stone for the building's superstructure. J. F. and J. A. Hayden of St. Louis, MO, have the contract to supply slate for the roof. The superstructure contains 26,832 cubic feet of sandstone. There are 950,000 bricks in the building [1881 structure, before additions]."

In summary, the building had a basement constructed with Cabin Creek, Arkansas, sandstone; a base and water table of red Missouri granite; and exterior walls of Ohio sandstone. The roof was slate with iron cresting. The Post Office and Courthouse was completed in 1881. The total construction cost was \$224,542.87.

The 1890 Guide to Little Rock described the use of interior spaces in the building. The entire first floor was devoted to the Post Office Department. In 1890 employees of the postal service included Postmaster R. A. Edgerton, 13 clerks, and 10 mail carriers. Receipts for the money order office at the end of March 1890 were \$1,114,495.23. Receipts of the postal department were \$142,624.22. The second floor housed various federal government offices, including the Collector of Internal Revenue, Land Receiver, U.S. District Attorney, and Chief Clerk of the Railway Mail Service. The third floor was home to the U.S. District Court and contained a courtroom (Victorian or Ceremonial courtroom), judges' chambers, and jury room. The third floor also housed the office of the U.S. Marshal and Clerk of Court. [There is no mention of the fourth floor.]

1897 Addition

As the nineteenth century came to a close, Little Rock's population growth necessitated an expansion of the post office and courthouse to provide better access to federal services. The city's population nearly tripled between 1880 and 1900 (increasing from 13,138 to 38,307). The U.S. Treasury's Supervising Architect, William Martin Aiken, designed a 9,000-square-foot addition, which extended the building's central bay to the north. This addition enlarged the mail sorting area on the first floor and included the construction of a second courtroom on the third floor (pink and gray marble courtroom). The 1897 addition matched the original building extremely well and is almost indiscernible.

1908-1910 Addition

A 1907 publication called *Little Rock and Pulaski County Illustrated* provided an interesting snapshot of the postal service at that time. Postal receipts for the [fiscal] year ending June 30, 1898, were \$61,907.04, while postal receipts for the year ending June 30, 1907 totaled \$174,955.67, representing an increase of more than \$113,000. In 1907 the postal service at Little Rock was administered from the main office (this building), as well as seven stations in Little Rock and two stations in Argenta (North Little Rock). The workforce consisted of the

postmaster, assistant postmaster, 36 clerks, two substitute clerks, 40 letter carriers, eight substitute letter carriers, four rural letter carriers, and four special delivery messengers (total of 96). Mail was received daily at Little Rock by 34 trains and delivered in the city five times per day. Mail was collected in the business district eight times a day and dispatched on 32 outgoing trains. The main post office was responsible for holding surplus postal and money order funds for many post offices throughout the state. The main office also disbursed payment to all rural mail carriers and railway postal clerks in Arkansas.

As you can tell from that synopsis, the main post office was very busy and soon needed more space. In 1908 Supervising Architect James Knox Taylor designed two one-story wings, which wrapped around the east and west sides of the original building and provided an additional 16,000 square feet for the post office. The one-story wings closely matched the building's existing first floor and featured a pink granite base with rusticated sandstone walls and segmental arch openings for windows and doors.

Departure of Courts & Post Office

This building served as a federal courthouse, post office, and customs house until late 1932, when a new U.S. Post Office and Courthouse opened at 600 W. Capitol Avenue. The Old Post Office and Courthouse was then used as office space for various federal agencies, including the Armed Forces Examining and Entrance Station.

Building's Future Uncertain

By spring 1966, the future of the Old Post Office and Courthouse was uncertain at best. At that time, only the first floor of the building was in use. The U.S. General Services Administration (GSA) was anxious to be rid of it. And federal Urban Renewal ("slum clearance") money had been flowing into Little Rock for more than a decade, resulting in the demolition of many historic buildings in the name of progress. Pulaski County Judge Arch Campbell, who served as judge from 1950

to 1968, floated a proposal in 1966 to demolish the Old Post Office and Courthouse AND the 1887-1890 Pulaski County Courthouse, build a new courthouse annex on the Old Post Office lot, and connect it via underground tunnel to the 1912-1914 Pulaski County Courthouse. This may sound crazy now, but it almost happened. GSA supported the idea. Pulaski County could acquire the OPO property at no cost, as long as the county provided office space for the Armed Forces Recruiting Services in its new building.

So Judge Campbell placed two issues on the ballot in 1966—a proposal to build a courthouse annex, and a separate proposal to pass a \$2.3 million bond issue to finance construction of the new courthouse annex. The residents of Pulaski County voted in favor of building a new courthouse annex, but the bond issue to fund it did not pass. It was a close call.

[As a side note, Judge Campbell was responsible for removing the top part of the clock tower on the 1890 Pulaski County Courthouse. He had it removed in 1961, saying he got the idea after the Little Rock City Hall dome was removed in 1956. The courthouse tower was reconstructed in the early 1990s.]

In addition to Pulaski County's interest in the Old Post Office property, the Little Rock School Board considered it for office space. The City of Little Rock was interested in razing the structure to create more surface parking. And others suggested that it become an art or history museum.

In 1975 the Old Post Office and Courthouse was designated as federal surplus property. The Federal Property and Administrative Services Act of 1949 provided for the free transfer of federal surplus property to state and local governments if the property was used as a "historic monument," or if it was used to fulfill educational or public health needs.

Arkansas State Building Services worked with the Arkansas Commemorative Commission and the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program to acquire the Old Post Office and Courthouse property. After much discussion, it was determined

that State Building Services, as the sole leasing agent for the state, would hold title to the property. The Arkansas Commemorative Commission would hold an easement on the property to ensure its preservation. The Historic Preservation Program offered technical assistance and secured substantial funding from the National Park Service for the building's restoration. State Building Services officially took possession of the Old Post Office in August 1976.

Interestingly, the state acquired the Old Post Office with the intent of leasing it to the University of Arkansas at Little Rock School of Law and the Department of Arkansas Natural and Cultural Heritage (now the Department of Arkansas Heritage). The Department of Heritage was supposed to occupy the first floor and the eastern wing of the second floor, while the Law School would have the rest of the building.

[At that time, the Dept. of Natural and Cultural Heritage consisted of the AR Commemorative Commission, Historic Preservation Program, Arkansas Territorial Restoration, First State Capitol, Arts and Humanities, Natural Heritage Committee, and Stream Preservation Committee.]

1977-1978 Restoration

The first restoration of the Old Post Office and Courthouse began in February 1977 and was supervised by architect Charles Witsell of the Cromwell Neyland Truemper Levy and Gatchell firm in cooperation with State Building Services Architect Jim Pfeifer and the AHPP. The Arkansas Legislature appropriated \$250,000 for the restoration, which was matched by \$250,000 from the National Park Service. On top of that, a total of \$100,000 was contributed by the University of Arkansas Foundation, Arkansas Bar Association, Arkansas Commemorative Commission, and the Ben J. Alzheimer Foundation. The 1970s restoration consisted of roof repair, tuck-pointing the exterior, wood window repair, making interior spaces useable (removal of partitions and drop ceilings), restoration of interior finishes, upgrading mechanical and electrical systems, etc.

As the project moved forward, it was discovered that there would not be adequate space for the Law School and the Department of Heritage. In July 1977 the scope of the project changed to accommodate the Law School only. Federal funds were reallocated to complete and furnish the two courtrooms and law library. In January 1978 the Law School began holding classes at the Old Post Office. The building was rededicated on July 15, 1978.

Departure of Law School & Uncertain Future

The UALR School of Law remained in the Old Post Office until summer 1992, when it moved to its current location near MacArthur Park. Preservation advocates became aware of the Law School's plan to relocate about one year in advance and worked to secure a future for the Old Post Office. At that time—summer 1991—GSA was in the early planning phase for a new Federal Courts Annex to be constructed on one of the parking lots north of the present courts building on W. Capitol, between Arch and Gaines. The U.S. Bankruptcy Court made up the majority of those to be transferred to the proposed annex. Bankruptcy Court judges and other federal judges in Little Rock preferred to move to the Old Post Office property instead of a new annex, but GSA was not excited about taking ownership of the Old Post Office again.

Former Senators Dale Bumpers and David Pryor, former Congressman John Paul Hammerschmidt, and former Chief District Judge Richard Arnold were responsible for GSA's reconsideration of the Old Post Office building as a home for the U.S. Bankruptcy Court. After the GSA conducted a feasibility study, plans for the second restoration of the Old Post Office and Courthouse were approved by Congress in October 1992. Construction was approved in January 1994.

1994-1997 Restoration

The Little Rock architectural firm of Witsell Evans Rasco served as the lead on a team that included Polk Stanley Saunders and Cromwell Engineers, Inc. for the 1990s restoration. John Greer of WER was the project architect. The 1994-1997

restoration cost about \$13 million. Significant interior spaces were restored to their original appearances, while other spaces were sensitively rehabilitated to meet the modern day needs of the U.S. Bankruptcy Court.

The 1881 Victorian (Ceremonial) courtroom was restored to its original appearance. Historic paint color analysis revealed more than 25 different colors in the original decoration of this courtroom. The coffered ceiling and plaster moldings were carefully restored and repainted. Before the 1977-78 restoration, a drop ceiling had been installed in this courtroom, obscuring all of the beautiful details above the windows. The building's current light fixtures are reproductions based on the original floor plans. The chandelier in the Victorian courtroom is supported by rings of steel with a bronze powder coating. It replicates the gas lights while meeting the court's light requirements. Walnut and pine were used in this courtroom. An original newel post and gate from the 1881 courtroom were used to recreate the railing. The judge's bench is a replica of the one used by Hangin' Judge Isaac C. Parker of Fort Smith.

The 1897 Neoclassical courtroom features Tennessee gray marble walls with Tennessee pink marble borders and mahogany throughout. Fluted, Ionic marble columns flank the judge's bench. During the 1990s restoration, faux marble veining was added to match the existing marble in a few places.

A third courtroom was added to the building during the 1997 renovation. It is located on the first floor in the area historically used as the mail sorting room for the post office. The 1997 courtroom features white oak and its walls incorporated some of the original lobby columns. Those columns are plaster with faux marble veining and cast-iron bases and capitals. The first floor courtroom is used for visiting judges.

In order to provide additional square footage for the Bankruptcy Court, two wings were constructed in 1997 on the north side of the building. The 1997 wings added a total of 25,000 square feet. They are separated by about six feet from the older structure to provide a clear view of the Ohio sandstone and Missouri granite

exterior. The 1997 addition was constructed with light-colored brick to match the sandstone and used a raked joint every fifth course to create a shadow line resembling mortar joints on the original building; however, it is obviously a new structure. The wings each consist of two floors and a basement. The basement provides secure parking accessible from the alley to the north. The first and second floors house offices for case administration, information technology, human resources, and security, among other things.

Bankruptcy Court staff began moving into the building in October 1997, and the dedication ceremony for the newly renovated Bankruptcy Court was held on November 7, 1997.

Architecture

The 1881 portion of the Old Post Office and Courthouse was designed by James G. Hill, Supervising Architect of the U.S. Treasury Department from 1876 to 1883. Although Hill was appointed Supervising Architect in August 1876, just three months before construction began at the OPO, he had been employed in the Office of the Supervising Architect since 1867. Little Rock's Post Office and Courthouse was his first major work.

The Renaissance Revival style of architecture was popular in the United States in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The style was largely modeled on the 16th century buildings of the Italian Renaissance. Features of the style on this building include: a symmetrical façade, rusticated first floor, segmental arch openings for first floor windows and doors, three rounded arches above the third story windows in the central bay decorated with carved Classical motifs, and large brackets under the eaves.

Notable Features

- Current square footage = 85,660 square feet

- Symbols in Victorian courtroom—U.S., eagle, American flag above side doors. Behind the bench—fasces or scrolls (symbol of judicial authority), scales of justice (fairness and balance between the needs of individuals and society), and flames or torches (symbol of truth).
- Elevator—cast-iron traction elevator dates to about 1896. Ironwork was manufactured by Jones & Laughlin Iron and Steel Company of Pittsburgh. It was operated by hand-lever and used up until 1992 but is no longer operational due to modern safety requirements. It was one of the first elevators in Little Rock. From the 4th floor, you can see the mechanical apparatus on top of the old elevator.
- Original bronze and brass window and door hardware and ventilation grilles
- Original marble mantles in 3rd floor judges' chambers. Coal-burning fireplaces.
- Columns in first floor lobby—plaster with faux marble veining
- Postal windows in west side of lobby
- Safe in Finance Office, east side of first floor—Mosler Safe Company, 1910
- Sculpture to west of building—commissioned by GSA as part of the 1994-1997 renovation. The sculpture was created by Washington, D.C. artist Jim Sanborn and comments upon the evolution of bankruptcy laws, which now allow individuals and corporations to survive financial collapse. The sculpture consists of two 6-foot blocks of granite, one red and one black, to represent equally debts and assets. The blocks are connected by a text-inscribed bronze screen with ancient laws addressing bankruptcy.
- About 30 people work in the building today.

[Visiting judges' chambers on first floor. Judge Richard Taylor's chambers on second floor. Judge Phyllis Jones' chambers on fourth floor.]

Next tour is Friday, April 3 at the Lynch Apartments, 523 Orange Street, NLR.