

**Sandwiching in History
Old Central Fire Station
506 Main Street, North Little Rock
March 3, 2017
By Revis Edmonds**



Good afternoon, my name is Revis Edmonds, and I work for the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program, an agency of the Department of Arkansas Heritage.

Thank you for coming, and welcome to the “Sandwiching in History” tour of the Old Central Fire Station. I’d like to thank Sandra Taylor Smith of the North Little Rock History Commission for allowing us to tour this amazing piece of North Little Rock’s history!

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.

The Old Central Fire Station is part of the Argenta Historic District, which encompasses significant historic elements of central North Little Rock. ¹This area was known as Argenta when it was first settled around 1866, and remained unincorporated until it was annexed to Little Rock in 1890. William Faucette, a leading Argenta politician and businessman who became the city's first Mayor, orchestrated the incorporation of North Little Rock just beyond the annexed area in 1901, and then made a successful petition to separate Argenta from Little Rock into the new municipality in 1904.²

The district first consisted of two discontinuous areas, one commercial and the other residential. The commercial section consists of a three-block stretch of Main Street, between Broadway Street and 6th Street. Three blocks west of this area is the residential area, which is centered on a stretch of Willow Street from 4th to Melrose Circle, that also includes properties on adjoining blocks of cross streets in between.³ The district was first listed on the National Register on March 15, 1993, and the North Little Rock City Council passed an ordinance under the Arkansas Historic Districts Act. This ordinance created the North Little Rock Historic District Commission and placed the Argenta Historic District under the

¹ Argenta Historic District: A Property Owner's Guide to Regulations and Resources Within the Argenta Historic District (North Little Rock Historic District Commission)

² "Argenta Fire Station/City Hall." (Unpublished Essay)

³ National Register of Historic Places nomination, "Argenta Historic District." March 15, 1993.

protection of the NLRHDC. In 2002 the district's boundaries were amended to change the status of five buildings to contributing status, as they had undergone appropriate restoration work. In 2007, the district was amended to include the areas between the two original.⁴ This was because in 1993, the boundaries had to be skirted so as to get 51% contributing. By 2007, because so many properties had been renovated, the district was able to take the rest in with an astounding 81% as contributing properties.

The Fire Station is a two story brick and wood building, with a three-bay front facade dominated by a large equipment bay on the ground floor, now enclosed by glass doors.⁵ It is constructed in art deco style in cast concrete and is believed to have been designed by renowned Arkansas architect Charles L. Thompson, who was responsible for many of the Victorian-era homes in Little Rock's Quapaw Quarter.⁶ The building, built by the City of Little Rock in 1895 at what was then called 506 Newton Avenue (now Main Street), served as Fire Station No. 6 for Argenta on the north side of the Arkansas River, which had been annexed in 1890 as Little Rock's eighth ward. Initially little more than a stable for horses hitched to firefighting wagons with upstairs sleeping quarters, this building was expanded and renovated after Argenta broke away from Little Rock in 1904 and merged with North Little Rock, which had been formed in 1901 from lands north of 15th Street (now Curtis Sykes Drive).

⁴ National Register of Historic Places nomination, "Old Central Fire Station,"

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Eric Francis and Adrian Watson, "This Old Firehouse." *North Little Rock Times*, February 9, 2006,

The city was strapped for cash at first because Argenta's \$20,000 in 1903 tax revenue went to Little Rock, so the money was raised by borrowing to expand the fire house to house city offices and to purchase and install an 850 pound bell for its belfry to serve as both the fire and police alarms. Cast by the Buckeye Bell Foundry in Cincinnati, the bell was later moved to Owens Funeral Home and finally to the gazebo in Faucette Park between the two Main Street bridges. When the city offices were added, North Little Rock returned the two fire horses, named "Dick and Dock," to the City of Little Rock, as new horses were selected for the city's new fire wagons.⁷ Shortly after North Little Rock's incorporation, the building initially housed city offices, the jail, and the fire station and served as the first City Hall. In 1915 the city offices were moved to the current City Hall at Main and Broadway, and in 1923 the building's original two equipment bays were replaced by one.⁸

The area where the jail had been located in the building, in the rear, was repurposed to a workshop for the fire department. The horse stalls were located under the stairway (which was in the middle of the downstairs area) up to the front door. The first motorized fire trucks were delivered in 1917, and the horse stalls were removed shortly afterward. Near that time, what was thought to be North Little Rock's first traffic signal was installed outside the firehouse, a two-sided red light that signaled traffic to stop when the fire bell rang. About 1923, as part of the need to accommodate larger vehicles, the front doors were enlarged to

⁷ "Argenta Fire Station/City Hall."

⁸ Francis and Watson, "This Old Firehouse."

the present day width.⁹ When city offices vacated the building, the courtroom became a classroom and the other offices were used by the Fire Chief and living quarters by the firemen on duty. Two poles descended from that upper floor to the engine room below, and they have been preserved and are a part of the current structure, and although the openings have been well preserved in spite of the previous deterioration, they have been closed off by thick Plexiglas. So, unfortunately, I won't be sliding down the poles today.

In 1925, a fire damaged the back rooms and the kitchen, and after the repairs were made, there were no major changes in the structure for the remainder of its use as a fire station, save for periodic paint jobs, and a facelift in 1934 with the widening of the front bay to accommodate wider and longer fire trucks. This created an unintended space issue. Eventually, outside of the two trucks in the station, any others had to be parked in the alley behind the building. A 1949 *Arkansas Gazette* article described the condition thusly:

“The narrow building barely houses three trucks, one behind the other, so that the two back trucks cannot get out unless the first is moved. Another truck is kept out in the open in a nearby lumber yard. Chief Caldwell’s car, and those of other firemen, are stored in a

⁹ “Welcome to 506 Main Street; North Little Rock’s First City Hall and Fire Station.” (Flyer by the North Little Rock Historic District Commission)

funeral home parking lot (Owens Funeral Home). They must be moved elsewhere whenever a funeral is being held. Location of the chief's car prevents a fast departure for the scene of a fire.”

After World War II, the antiquated condition of the building had become manifest, as the ceiling fell in May 1957, narrowly missing a fireman who was sleeping below. As a result of the rapidly deteriorating condition of the structure, the fire inspector condemned the building as unsafe in 1958. By 1960, the structure, which was 22 feet wide and 130 feet long, was said to have not one foot of ground outside the building that could be used for washing the trucks and hoses. This duty had to be done on either the street or on the sidewalk. Trucks had to be parked end to end in the building, making it increasingly difficult to get the needed trucks out during emergencies. Another constant issue was the need to control vermin around the firehouse due to its proximity to a nearby feed mill.

Ironically, the city fathers still had to deal with the vestiges of the earlier dispute with Little Rock over Argenta's status where the fire station was concerned. In 1962, city officials discovered that the City of Little Rock still owned the land under the fire station and had since December 13, 1894. The discrepancy was uncovered as the city was in the process of selling the property to a local businessman. Upon further investigation, it was discovered that records in the City Clerk's office showed that the Little Rock City Council in 1928 authorized the

Mayor to give North Little Rock the deed to the land, but there were no records that indicated that it had ever been given. When it was discovered, the quitclaim deed was then rushed to the Pulaski County Circuit Clerk's office and recorded, upon which the sale of the property was finalized.¹⁰ Much of what we know about the firehouse also is contained in a scrapbook that was kept by the City Clerk beginning in 1938.

After being vacated by the fire department in 1962, the building served as several private businesses including Twin City Glass and Upholstery and Massery's Cleaners. The building was placed on the National Register of Historic Places on December 22, 1977, but many years went by before any improvements were made. By the late 1980s the building was abandoned and fell into disrepair for many years. Real estate developer Gene Pfeiffer purchased the building in 1990 and intended to demolish it. Its condition went from bad to worse, with timbers from the upper floors continuing to collapse and coated by a thick layer of pigeon droppings, making the building an increased health and safety hazard.¹¹ In 2000, several parties expressed serious interest in restoring the building to a dining establishment and residential loft development, but it never came to fruition.

In 2003, the North Little Rock History Commission and the Historic District Commission acquired the building with the intent of using the top floor as the

¹⁰ "NLR Owned the Land All the Time; Quitclaim Deed is Found, Recorded." *Arkansas Gazette*, August 21, 1962.

¹¹ Francis and Watson, "This Old Firehouse."

Historic District Commission's offices and historic archives, and the bottom floor as a branch of the William F. Laman Public Library. ¹²According to architect Gary Clements, the building had to be gutted to the bare walls, and steel joists replaced the rotted wooden ones. Upstairs, the former courtroom/classroom now houses the historic district's archives, and the former fireman's bunkhouse is the archives' workroom, while the former office of the fire chief is now occupied by Sandra Taylor Smith, the director of this amazing facility. When you enter, you will also notice to your left one of the original light fixtures from the station. Also, another exhibit tells the story of a near-legend in the firehouse, that of "Punchy the Firehouse Monkey."¹³ As reported in the *Arkansas Gazette* on November 20, 1895, the firemen had "a curiosity at the firehouse in the person of a monkey, which was brought back from Central America by the 'boys' who came back. He is very mischievous and annoys the neighbors with his tricks." As best as can be gleaned, the "Boys" being referred to could well be firemen who also served in the military during U.S. military interventions in Columbia and Venezuela about that time. Apparently "Punchy" was quite the star around the firehouse as indicated in another *Gazette* article in August 1896, in which it talked about Punchy's return to the firehouse after a brief sojourn in Clarksville. Punchy is such a part of the firehouse lore that the handmade doll located on the stool honors his contribution to the quality of life around the firehouse.

The downstairs portion housed the William F. Laman Library's Argenta branch from 2006 to 2014 when it moved to its current location in the old Post Office

¹² "Welcome to 506 Main Street."

¹³ Site Visit, January 30, 2017.

Building on Main Street. When the library was located here, the back portion that was the firemen's workshop was reborn as the library's Children's Center. This level now houses the amazing exhibits you will see today, many of which draw on North Little Rock's rich heritage as a railroad town. Particularly notable is the railroad themed tree in the front facing the old firehouse doors that was originally placed as a Christmastime addition, but greatly adds to the charm and atmosphere of this facility. One other notable exhibit I'd like to point out is a framed copy of the *North Little Rock News-Sentinel* dated February 6, 1904 with the headline, "Argenta at Last Secures Her Freedom," commemorating the Arkansas Supreme Court decision that allowed Argenta to break with her Capital neighbor and unite with North Little Rock, and pass through the odyssey of identity that has culminated in the rebirth of this amazing piece of our history and the modern renaissance that is now North Little Rock.

Thank you all for coming today! Please join us for our next Sandwiching in History tour of 2017 on Friday April 7 at the Dibrell House at 1400 Spring Street in Little Rock. We will begin at Noon. Also, next Saturday, March 11, you're invited to our kickoff Walks Through History tour of 2017 in Historic Downtown Jonesboro starting at the Frierson House (once home to Governor Francis Cherry) at 1112 South Main Street at 11 AM. Hope to see you at both of these and our future tours this year!

And just a reminder, if you are dining out after the tour, be sure to patronize our locally owned establishments. You'll love the taste, and you're building a better North Little Rock!