

Sandwiching in History Tour

Markham Methodist Church

9820 W. Markham Street, Little Rock

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By Mason Toms



Happy Friday everyone, my name is Mason Toms and I work at the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program which is a division of the Department of Arkansas Heritage. Thank you for coming and welcome to Markham Methodist Church, now called Faith United Methodist Church. Today's tour is worth one hour of HSW continuing education credit through the American Institute of Architects. Please see me after the tour if you are interested.

Built in 1966, the Markham Methodist Church was designed in the Organic Modern style of Mid-Century Modern architecture by Fred Perkins of the Little Rock firm Cowling & Roark.

“West Little Rock”

This area was originally quite a ways from the western most edge of the city of Little Rock. Though settled in 1812, the city initially expanded primarily to the south of what is now downtown. That area was relatively flat which made for easy building of homes and commercial buildings. After the Civil War the railroad came to the city which allowed for a significant increase in building construction in the city. However, the city maintained the direction of its initial growth. The construction of a rail line along the western edge of the city in the early 1870s further inhibited any real growth in that direction. When the Arkansas Lunatic Asylum, which is now the Arkansas State Hospital on Markham, was opened in 1883 it was far outside of the city. It was not until the final decade of the 19th century that the city crossed the railway and started moving west. Part of the reason for this sudden change in expansion was that the city had run into Fourche Creek and marshy area surrounding it in the south. Instead of attempting to drain this area and settle, it was thought that the west held more promise, as well as potential health benefits from the higher elevation. Pulaski Heights was the first area to be platted and later annexed to the City of Little Rock in 1916. By the early 1920s the area south of what is currently Markham Street and east of UAMS of the city began to take shape, though it was pretty spotty development. Development to the west continued at a slow but steady pace over the following decades. In the early 1940s the

area south of Markham and east of UAMS had begun to fill in, while the area north of Markham had seen fairly consistent growth through the 1930s.

However, the post-World War II period saw a massive increase in urban development throughout the country. It is commonly cited that there were more buildings constructed in the United States between 1945 and 1975 than there had been built in the previous 250 years of the country's existence. Little Rock was no different than the rest of the country in this growth. By 1950 the city reached Hays Street, what is now called University Avenue. During the post-World War II period the city dramatically expanded by about a mile along Markham every five years, a considerable increase in growth from the previous decades. Wingate Subdivision as well as Shannon Hills was developed around 1955 which brought the city across Mississippi Avenue. In 1959 Santa Fe Heights, the neighborhood directly to the east of us, was platted with many of the houses being completed the following year, in 1960. Many of the other neighborhoods to the north of the church were built about the same time. By the time the building we are in today was completed the city stretched across what is now I-430 and over to the Beverly Hills Subdivision, which is the neighborhood to the northwest of Nichols Furniture. The city quite literally grew around the church.

Markham Methodist Church

Markham Street Methodist began with a week-long revival in the summer of 1951. The church began as five families that believed a Methodist Church was needed to serve the ever growing number of families on the western edge of the city. The five families were Mr. & Mrs. H.J. Lewis, Mr. & Mrs. Henry Saugey, Mr. & Mrs. Otis E.

Shelton, Mr. & Mrs. Clyde Davidson, and Mr. & Mrs. R.C. Cureton. Three of the five families came from Henderson Methodist Church which was originally located at 2400 S. Maple Street, where Shiloh Seventh Day Adventist Church is currently. The minister of Henderson Methodist church, Rev. Kervin Hale, served in an advisory role in the initial planning phase of the congregation and, along with Dr. Francis Buddin, Central Arkansas Methodist District Superintendent, led the revival. Later the fledgling Markham Methodist Church met in a tent that they borrowed from a Baptist neighbor in a persimmon grove at 8416 W. Markham, where the south parking lot is now. The property had been donated to the new congregation by Mr. and Mrs. Lewis, who were founding members. Art Kidd, a layman from First Methodist Church in downtown acted as the pastor during this time. When the weather turned too chilly for tent meetings, the congregation met in the Brady Home Demonstration Club Building, about three quarters of a mile to the east. Keep in mind, at this point this area was just outside of the city and really only contained a few scattered houses and a couple of farms.

If you went to last month's Sandwiching in History Tour at First United Methodist on Center Street in downtown, you may recall that in 1950 they decided to build a new education building because they had outgrown their former wood frame structure. First United Methodist donated their former building to the fledgling church assuming they came and dismantled it and moved it themselves, which they did. Because of this donation and the hard work of church members Markham Methodist was able to begin worship in their "new" building debt free. On October 26, 1951, the "new" sanctuary was dedication by Rev. Buddin, Art Kidd, Kervin Hale, and Dr. Aubrey Walton of First Methodist Church.

Art Kidd moved away in 1952 and a Hendrix student by the name of Howard Childs assumed the role of pastor, where he stayed until he graduated in 1955. Later in 1955 a small parsonage was constructed next door to the church at 8414 West Markham to house a full time minister for the church, attesting to how much the congregation had grown. By 1956 an additional classroom building was needed due to the continuing expansion of the congregation. One was brought to the site from Cross Road Methodist Church, which was demolished to make way for Lake Maumelle. The late 1950s were a hard time for the congregation and they went through seven pastors in the space of five years, but the congregation held strong and stayed together. In 1960 Howard Childs returned to Markham Methodist where he stayed until 1965. Shortly before he left, the Little Rock District of Methodist Board of Missions and Church Extensions, Inc., bought the property next to the church at the corner of Markham and Ellis. It was then deeded on July 27th, 1965, to the congregation for the purpose of constructing a new sanctuary building with classroom and fellowship hall spaces. That year the church commissioned the Little Rock architectural firm of Cowling and Roark to design this new building. The firm was likely chosen due to the fact that David Kennedy, who was a member of the church, was the project manager for the firm. Construction began on the new building on August 1st, 1965, and on April 3rd, 1966, the first service was held in the current building, where we are today. The pastor at the time was Fred Arnold, who served the congregation until 1970. In 1968 the church's name was changed from Markham Methodist to Markham United Methodist because the Methodist Church as a whole and Evangelical United Brethren Church merged that year to create the United Methodist Church.

In the early 1970s a former courtyard space was enclosed to create more classroom space, which is now used as the fellowship hall. On December 6th, 1981 there was a special service held at Markham United Methodist Church to celebrate the “burning of the note,” a symbolic gesture signifying that the construction loan for the church was finally paid off. In 1988 Trinity United Methodist Church, located at 1101 N. Mississippi Street, donated a former Sunday School building to Markham Street United Methodist. This is the small, white building at the rear of the property. It was quickly claimed by the youth as their space. Its location is where the persimmon grove was.

In 1995 the church was broken into and the back corner of the sanctuary was set on fire. Luckily Christy Cain, a Sunday School teacher, came in early to work on her room. When she saw the fire she called the authorities and quickly grabbed a fire extinguisher and put out the fire. Her convenient timing and quick thinking likely saved the church from more severe damage. In 2001, due to financial hardships brought on by a dwindling congregation, Markham United Methodist merged with St. James United Methodist to become St. James Markham United Methodist. This partnership with St. James ended in 2004 due to disagreements over the future of the Markham Street facilities. However, the church was still in need of some monetary assistance. In order to receive help from the Methodist Church assembly, they had to become a “new” congregation. So the church was once again renamed to Faith United Methodist Church. This name change was enough to make them appear like a new church, even though they were actually a fifty year old congregation. Faith United Methodist Church continues to serve the neighborhood it was created for and has done a wonderful job of preserving a remarkable piece of Mid-Century Modern architecture.

The Architects

Cowling & Roark

Cowling & Roark was founded in 1962 when architectural engineer Price Roark left the notable Little Rock firm of Erhart Eichenbaum Rauch & Blass to join Dan Cowling in creating a new firm. Cowling too had recently left another partnership, one with Morris Smith which lasted from 1957 to 1961 because Morris Smith had decided it was time for him to retire. The new partnership was somewhat short lived and only existed from 1962 to 1966; however, in that short time they managed to create some wonderful buildings.

Roark was a Little Rock native. After serving in the European Theater during World War II he returned to the University of Arkansas where he was a part of the first class of the newly created architecture program, alongside Fay Jones, Bob Laser, and Ernie Jacks. However, he transferred his last year to Washington University in St. Louis where he earned his Bachelors of Science in Architectural Engineering in 1949. After graduation he moved back to Little Rock and went to work for the architectural firm of Erhart and Eichenbaum, which later became Erhart Eichenbaum Rauch & Blass, where he stayed until 1961.

Cowling was a native of Rogers, AR. He originally started college at Arkansas Polytechnic College in Russellville, now Arkansas Tech., but transferred to the University of Arkansas after two years to study architecture. It is likely that Cowling knew Roark while they were both at the University of Arkansas, as many of the upper classmen would commonly assist in the lessons of lower classmen. Cowling graduated

from the University of Arkansas in 1952. In 1957 he joined Little Rock architect Morris Smith to open the firm of Smith & Cowling. This firm lasted until 1961 when Smith retired.

In 1966, after Cowling and Roark parted ways, Roark founded his own firm at 713 W. 2nd Street, taking over the building from the notable firm Trapp Clippard Phelps, which is where you will still find the firm today, though now it is called Roark Perkins Perry Yelvington, or more commonly called RPPY.

Fred Perkins

As I mentioned at the beginning, Markham Street Methodist Church was designed by Fred Perkins of Cowling & Roark. Perkins was born on July 8th, 1938, in Carlisle, AR. He graduated from Carlisle High School in 1956 and went to college at Arkansas Polytechnic College in Russellville for two years. In 1958 he transferred to the University of Arkansas to study architecture. This was during the time that Fay Jones was one of the main professors in the program. Jones returned to Arkansas from Oklahoma in 1953 and began teaching at the University of Arkansas. Perkins, as well as other students from that time, remark that Jones never really pointed to his own works as designs the students should study. Instead he would point back to the works of Frank Lloyd Wright which had inspired him so much. This early influence from Jones likely explains the existence of so many Wrightian details and elements in the building we are in today. However, I am getting ahead of myself. During the summers Perkins would come back to Little Rock and work for Morris Smith and later Dan Cowling. It was because of the relationships that he formed during this time that he went to work for

Cowling & Roark once he graduated. During his time with Cowling & Roark Perkins found a bit of a niche in church design. His first church sanctuary design was for St. Luke Methodist Church, at 6401 W. 32nd Street in the Broadmoor area of Little Rock. In 1963 he began work on a design for First Presbyterian Church in Jacksonville. This is the sister design to Markham Methodist. I have an image of it up at the front that you can look at in a moment. No sooner did he complete that design when they were commissioned to design this building, which may explain the similarities. Not long after the completion of Markham Methodist Church the firm of Cowling & Roark split up. Perkins decided to stay with Roark when he opened his new firm at 713 W. 2nd Street in Little Rock. Perkins would eventually become Roark's first named partner at the new firm. The firm continued to grow and still exists today in the same location, although the name has changed. Perkins still goes into the office almost every day and still plays an active role in the firm. Over the years Perkins designed several other churches around Arkansas. According to Perkins, he must have "designed around 200 churches around the state." Some other designs that you might be familiar with are Henderson United Methodist Church on Baseline, near Otter Creek, the eastern section of Central Church of Christ at 823 W. 6th Street in downtown, Hunter United Methodist Church at 3301 Romine Road near John Barrow, and St. James United Methodist Church at 321 Pleasant Valley Drive.

The Architecture

Markham Methodist Church is an example of Wrightian or Organic Modernism which was a style of Mid-Century Modern architecture. As the name suggests it takes most of its influence from the works and ideology of Frank Lloyd Wright. This influence

is seen on the exterior in the material choices of stained wood and matching brown brick but also in the unique metal cap detail that is seen on the front and rear facades of the sanctuary sections. This remarkable detail was likely inspired by Wright's designs for the American System-Built homes which were developed between 1912 and 1916. These designs were an early attempt to create affordable, prefabricated houses for the general public in the years right before World War I. If we look at the B1 Model for the program we see a similar detail running around the top of the fascia board, almost like a second cornice. Inspiration for the overall form of the building may come from a proposed design by Wright for a Rosenwald School in 1928. Though it was a design for a school instead of a church, the form of the central building is remarkably similar to this building.

You might have noticed the contrast in the roofs of the sanctuary space and the education wing when you walked in. Part of the explanation for this is establishing the sanctuary as the most important part of the building complex, but it is also another example of Wright's influence. Wright detested wasted space, and he considered attics as being one of the biggest wastes of space there could be in architecture. So the church doesn't really have any attic space. The interior ceilings follow the shape of the exterior roofs.

One design element that became almost a signature feature of Perkins's churches is the "Y" detail that appears in most of the windows on the church, including the little clerestory windows in the sanctuary. This detail is seen in several of Perkins's other designs as well although Perkins inverted the "Y" element only on in the design of this church, which is one of several details that are unique to this church.

An interesting detail that you might miss when you explore the church in a moment is the high windows along the ceiling of the interior classrooms and in the former fellowship hall. These windows are remnants of when the current fellowship hall was an open-air courtyard. They were to allow in light to the rooms that would otherwise not have any exterior openings. However, now that that space has enclosed they look a bit out of place.

Two more details that I thought I would point out before you go exploring are the pendants in the sanctuary and the accordion screen on the left side of the sanctuary. First, the pendants are a feature that is somewhat unique to this church among Perkins work. They are almost a homage to Gothic architecture but in an undeniably Wrightian style. The abstracted dentil design was a common feature on Wright's buildings; however, I am not sure that I have ever seen it quite like Perkins did it here. Secondly, the accordion screen on the left side of the sanctuary. Elements such as this were actually really common in Mid-Century Modern churches. The reason for it is because the sanctuary was designed not only to be a sanctuary but also a meeting hall and occasional rec room, which also explains the parquet floors. The accordion screen opens to the kitchen in case the sanctuary was being used for a large meeting that required a meal as well.

In a final note, make sure you check out the baptismal font, pulpits, and altar. These were all designed by Perkins as part of the original design. Like Wright, Perkins would commonly design furniture pieces for the churches that he designed.

I have images of some of the other churches that Perkins designed up here at the front if you would like to come see them, as well as images of the two Frank Lloyd Wright designs that I mentioned. Does anyone have any questions?

I hope you have enjoyed today's tour. The next Sandwiching in History will be on March 2nd at the Second Presbyterian Church at 600 Pleasant Valley Drive in Little Rock, and please join us for our Walks Through History Tour on March 10th in the beautiful Mount Nord Historic District in Fayetteville, AR. Thank you for coming and have a great weekend.