

Sandwiching in History
Second Presbyterian Church
600 Pleasant Valley Drive, Little Rock
March 2, 2018
By Ralph S. Wilcox



Intro:

Good afternoon, my name is Ralph Wilcox, and I am the National Register and Survey Coordinator at the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program. Thank you for coming, and welcome to the “Sandwiching in History” tour of Second Presbyterian Church. I’d like to thank the staff of Second Presbyterian for allowing us to tour their church today! 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.

Second Presbyterian Church (Downtown Locations):

The organization of Second Presbyterian Church occurred in April 1882, and the *Arkansas Gazette* reported on April 18, 1882, that “The new organization will consist of one ruling elder and a few members of Dr. Welch’s church, and expect to occupy, as soon as it is ready, the new edifice now being erected on State Street, corner of Fourth.”¹ By November of 1882, construction of the building had been completed, and the *Arkansas Gazette* noted on November 21, 1882, that “The church is small, but a gem in its way, combining beauty and comfort at once. It is a great convenience to dwellers in the west end, who reside a mile or two from the First Presbyterian Church, on Scott Street, and allows them to worship at their own doors, as it were.”² This building still stands today and was most recently the location of Dempsey Film Group.

The initial purpose of First Presbyterian’s efforts was to start a mission of their church, and the construction of this building was part of that effort. However, the people involved eventually thought it best to start the new congregation as a separate church, the Second Presbyterian Church, and the property was turned over to the fledgling congregation. One of the early members wrote that they “were faced with the problem of finishing the building, which meant putting in the floor, plastering the walls and supplying windows, lights, heating, pulpit, pews and a small cabinet organ.”³

Unfortunately, none of the sources found on the first building indicate who the architect was or where they were from. However, what is known is that the building cost at least \$4,000, a

¹ *Arkansas Gazette*, 18 April 1882, p. 4.

² *Arkansas Gazette*, 21 November 1882, p. 2.

³ Smith, Mrs. Hay Watson. History of Second Presbyterian Church. In the files of Second Presbyterian Church. Date unknown.

sizable sum of money for a new congregation. On November 24, 1883, the *Arkansas Gazette* reported:

The Second Presbyterian Church is making arrangements to pay off its indebtedness of \$4,000, part of the original cost of the church in the West End. The plan is to raise \$500 by January 1st, by subscriptions; and fund the balance of notes of \$20 each, payable monthly.⁴

By the 1920s, the congregation had outgrown the building at 4th and State. At the laying of the cornerstone for the second building at 3rd and Gaines on Sunday, March 1, 1925, it was noted that “Since the founding of the Second Church its growth has been steady and substantial, but never rapid. The fact is, no true blue Presbyterian Church ever grows rapidly. It’s not their nature to. Whenever a Presbyterian Church begins to draw great crowds, the elect – that is, the Scotch Irish – grow uneasy. They no longer feel at home. They think there’s a Methodist in the woodpile.”⁵

When the cornerstone for the new building at 3rd and Gaines was laid in March 1925, copies of the church records, a newspaper for the day, and coins from the time were also included. The cost of the building at 3rd and Gaines was \$250,000 and it was designed by the Little Rock firm of Sanders & Ginocchio. The cornerstone for the new building was laid on Sunday, March 1, 1925, and the first service was held in the building on December 20, 1925.

⁴ *Arkansas Gazette*, 24 November 1883, p. 5.

⁵ Remarks from the laying of the cornerstone for Second Presbyterian’s second building at 3rd and Gaines. In the files of Second Presbyterian Church. 1 March 1925.

The Move to Pleasant Valley:

Planning for the move to the current location on Pleasant Valley Drive began in 1964 when the congregation reached a crossroads at their location at 3rd and Gaines. The congregation's membership was dropping and they were at a point at which they were going to have to examine the needs of the facility at 3rd and Gaines. Being good Presbyterians, two committees were formed, a Study and Research Committee to study the city's shift in population and what effects the changes were having on the church and its attendance, and a Committee on Location, which studied the costs as well as the pros and cons in remaining at 3rd and Gaines versus moving to Pleasant Valley. In March 1965 a meeting was called to vote on staying downtown versus moving to Pleasant Valley. An overwhelming majority, 81%, voted to move to Pleasant Valley no later than 1970. At the same time, the congregation purchased ten acres in Pleasant Valley to accommodate the new building.⁶

Wittenberg, Delony and Davidson:

The current building of Second Presbyterian Church was designed by the noted Little Rock architecture firm of Wittenberg, Delony, and Davidson. Wittenberg, Delony & Davidson was established in 1919 in downtown Little Rock by George Wittenberg and Lawson Delony under the name Wittenberg & Delony Architects. In their early years there was little capital to begin with, so Wittenberg taught mechanical drawing part time and coached football for Little Rock High School while Delony took charge of the office.⁷

⁶ Boggs, Dr. Marion A. "The Past, the Present, and the Future of Second Church, Little Rock." Typewritten manuscript, 27 September 1965. In the files of Second Presbyterian Church.

⁷ Information on Wittenberg, Delony & Davidson from: <http://www.wddarchitects.com/profile/history>

During this time they built residential homes mostly, until the new Little Rock High School project. This school (now known as Little Rock Central High School) was the most expensive high school built in the United States at the time, and bolstered Wittenberg & Delony's acclaim. This allowed them to become more competitive with the established firms.⁸

By the mid-1930s, Wittenberg & Delony employed eight people. Wittenberg focused on marketing and administration, while Delony specialized in design, and newcomer Julian Davidson was in charge of producing working drawings. The firm was active during Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal programs, and the firm worked diligently to acquire federal loans and grants for their clients from the federal agencies to build their projects. While most of their projects were residential, the firm was diversifying, taking on several college projects.⁹

It was also during the 1930s that Wittenberg, Delony, and Davidson began their relationship with Southern Arkansas University. The firm designed Cross and Nelson Halls for the university during the 1930s, and the firm "would plan every additional campus building for the next fifty years."¹⁰

When World War II began, most of the firm's employees had gone to war. With fewer employees and an increase in military work, those remaining were kept busy. Once the soldiers returned, Wittenberg & Delony decided to restructure their firm. Julian Davidson was made a

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Willis, James. *Southern Arkansas University: The Mulerider School's Centennial History, 1909-2009*. Magnolia, AR: SAU Foundation and Xlibris Corporation, 2009, p. 136.

full one-third partner and the firm became Wittenberg, Delony & Davidson, also known as WDD.¹¹

As architecture became more complex and involved in the 1950s, the firm decided to specialize in design, drafting, planning, interior design, landscaping, and construction administration. In 1959 the firm incorporated and is now known as Wittenberg, Delony & Davidson, Inc.¹²

During the 1960s the firm grew significantly in terms of numbers of projects. School projects were the majority, such as those at Southern Arkansas University, followed by residential and commercial projects, but medical projects were making significant gains. The firm won significant design awards for the Empire Life Building, the Arkansas State Health Department Building, and the Arkansas State Hospital. George Wittenberg retired during this time, and his son, Gordon, took the same role as his father and specialized in securing and procuring clients. Tom Gray was also added into the firm's integral design team, and he was the lead architect for the design of Second Presbyterian.¹³

Tom Gray:

Thomas Albert Gray was born in Indianapolis, Indiana, on December 16, 1928, to Glenn Albert Gray and Dolores Snyder Gray Brown. Gray graduated from Broad Ripple High School in Indianapolis in 1947 and in 1953 he graduated with a bachelor of architecture degree from

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

Cincinnati University in Cincinnati, Ohio, where he was also a member of SCARAB, a national honorary architectural fraternity.¹⁴

After graduating from Cincinnati University, Gray married Ruth Ann Deming, whom he met in high school and he also began a three-year stint as a jet fighter pilot in the Air Force. The Air Force brought Gray to Arkansas, and when he was discharged in 1957, he and Ruth Ann decided to stay here, since they were impressed with the mild climate and the state's friendly people. It was after he was discharged from the Air Force in 1957 that he started working for WDD.¹⁵

Gray began his career at WDD as a designer and quickly worked his way up through the firm, becoming chief of design and eventually becoming the firm's president in 1976. He was responsible for designing many of WDD's well-known buildings and several of his designs won regional, state, and national awards.¹⁶ In his entry in the 1970 American Institute of Architects directory, he listed among his principal works the Little Rock Country Club, Pleasant Valley Country Club, Arkansas State Health Building, and Second Presbyterian Church.¹⁷ His work with WDD eventually led to Gray being awarded the American Institute of Architect's lifelong honor, a Fellowship, which was awarded for his "notable contribution to the profession in the areas of design, service, and practice." Gray died at his home at 25 River Valley Road, which he

¹⁴ Obituary for Thomas Albert Gray, 4 January 2015. Found at: <http://arkansasonline.com/obituaries/2015/jan/04/thomas-gray-2015-01-04/>.

¹⁵ Obituary for Thomas Albert Gray, 4 January 2015. Found at: <http://arkansasonline.com/obituaries/2015/jan/04/thomas-gray-2015-01-04/>.

¹⁶ Obituary for Thomas Albert Gray, 4 January 2015. Found at: <http://arkansasonline.com/obituaries/2015/jan/04/thomas-gray-2015-01-04/>.

¹⁷ Gane, John F. ed. *American Architects Directory*. New York: R. R. Bowker Company, 1970.

had designed for himself and his wife in 1963, on December 21, 2014, only ten weeks after Ruth Ann's death.¹⁸

Design and Construction of the Current Building:

The first draft of the architectural plans for the current building of Second Presbyterian Church were completed by September of 1967 and the plans were reissued on December 4, 1967.

Interestingly, the building as built was at least the second design for the campus. Construction of the building occurred throughout 1968 and the building was dedicated in March 1969. The location of the sanctuary in the center of the building represents the centrality of worship in our denomination, and the shape of the sanctuary recalls the shape of a tent, reflecting the historical roots of the tent and the tent revival in the growth of congregations. In addition, you will notice another reference to historical church architecture in the stylized canopy or sounding board behind the raised pulpit. You will also notice that the large chandelier in the center of the sanctuary resembles a large crown.

One of the most distinctive features of the building, and from what I understand also one of the most controversial, was the use of the stained-glass windows from 3rd and Gaines, especially since they are in the middle of the building and would not be lit by natural light. However, they were originally backlit by fluorescent lights, but that system was replaced in the last few years with an LED lighting system.

¹⁸ Obituary for Thomas Albert Gray, 4 January 2015. Found at: <http://arkansasonline.com/obituaries/2015/jan/04/thomas-gray-2015-01-04/>.

Stained Glass Windows / Building's Architecture:

As part of the Building Committee for the church at 3rd and Gaines, a sub-committee was formed and given the responsibility for securing the stained-glass windows for the building. The windows were designed and fabricated by Pittsburgh Stained Glass Co. of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, a company that is still in business today.

According to the records of the company, the windows for Second Presbyterian Church were order #9913. The itemized quotation for the windows was issued on April 20, 1925, to Sanders & Ginocchio, the building's architects. The invoice for the windows, dated September 2, 1925, indicated that the cost for the windows, after some changes had been made to the order, was \$6,738, and the windows were shipped from Pittsburgh via the Pennsylvania Railroad. Another invoice, dated November 12, 1925, was issued for the figure panels in the windows currently in the narthex, adding \$230 to the cost.¹⁹

The five windows in the Chapel (along with the two windows in the Northwest Entry) were originally located in the Jennimae Williams Chapel in the building at 3rd and Gaines. Installed in 1957, the windows were made using the Bergethon method of stained-glass making, which allowed the use of glass panes rather than small pieces of stained glass. The method was named after its Norwegian inventor, Pere Bergethon.

The designs of the windows were supervised by George L. Payne of Paterson, New Jersey, and the windows were installed for the cost of \$6,000 in April 1957 in observance of Second

¹⁹ Invoices for Stained-Glass Windows from Pittsburgh Art Glass Co. 2 September 1925 and 12 November 1925. In the files of Pittsburgh Stained Glass Studios and Second Presbyterian Church.

Presbyterian's 75th Anniversary. The windows depict the Nativity, the Baptism, Christ the teacher, Christ carrying the cross, the Resurrection, the Lord's Supper, and the Calling of the Disciples. An eighth window, which was round in design and illustrated the Holy Bible, is currently disassembled and in storage.

Neil Hamill Park:

At the same time that the congregation was working with Wittenberg, Delony & Davidson on the design of the building, they were also working with notable local landscape architect Neil Hamill Park on a landscape design for the campus.

The course of landscape architecture in Arkansas changed with the twentieth-century career of Neil Hamill Park, who is believed to be the state's first professionally-trained landscape architect. Although Park was born in Lansing, Michigan, on May 12, 1904, to Agnes Hamill Park and Elijah Crane Park, he moved with his family to Parkin, Arkansas, in 1912 when his mother was transferred there to manage the Lansing Company.²⁰ Park graduated from Parkin High School and then received his bachelor's degree in 1924 from Little Rock College.²¹ Park also earned a master's degree in landscape architecture from Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, in 1928, and then spent time studying in Rome, Italy, after winning the Prix de Rome for landscape architecture in 1931.²²

²⁰ Wallack, Catherine. "Neil Hamill Park." *The Encyclopedia of Arkansas History and Culture*. Found at: <http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/entry-detail.aspx?search=1&entryID=3189>.

²¹ "Landscape Architect Dies at 81." *Arkansas Gazette*. 6 February 1986, p. 12A.

²² Birnbaum, Charles A. and Robin Karson, eds. *Pioneers of American Landscape Design*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2000, p. 120, and Wallack, Catherine. "Neil Hamill Park." *The Encyclopedia of Arkansas History and Culture*. Found at: <http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/entry-detail.aspx?search=1&entryID=3189>.

Due to the fact that Park returned from Rome during the Great Depression, he initially worked for the Tennessee Valley Authority on large-scale public works projects²³ However, by the late 1930s, Park was working in Memphis, Tennessee, as a partner in the firm of Highberger & Park before he established his own practice in Memphis in 1939.²⁴ In the early 1940s, Park was called on to do the site work for a swampy location in southeast Arkansas that would ultimately become the Rohwer Relocation Center Site.²⁵ According to a 2007 interview with Park's wife and two daughters, he "completely laid out the site" and considered it a most "unpleasant task." Park also considered it his largest professional regret.²⁶

Park practiced on his own in Memphis for only a few years before he moved to Little Rock permanently in 1943, the same year that he married Lois Linebarier, a nurse from Camden, Arkansas.²⁷ Shortly after moving to Little Rock, Park bought a three-acre property at 4 Cantrell Road and soon began designing the landscape for his own property.²⁸

After World War II, while Park was working on the landscape for his own home, his practice grew to take in a variety of projects, including residential, religious, and institutional commissions. With respect to his religious work, he worked on designs for some of the state's most prominent congregations, including a design in 1968 and 1969 for Second Presbyterian

²³ Wallack, Catherine. "Neil Hamill Park." *The Encyclopedia of Arkansas History and Culture*. Found at: <http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/entry-detail.aspx?search=1&entryID=3189>.

²⁴ Information on John Foster Highberger from www.findagrave.com.

²⁵ Kirk, Dianna. "Rohwer Relocation Center Site, Rohwer, Desha County, Arkansas." National Register of Historic Places Registration Form. From the files of the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program, 1974, pp. 8-1 and 8-2.

²⁶ Speed, Anne. Notes from an interview with Lois Park, and Eva Riley and Anne Park, daughters of Neil Hamill Park. 22 September 2007. In the files of the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program.

²⁷ Wallack, Catherine. "Neil Hamill Park." *The Encyclopedia of Arkansas History and Culture*. Found at: <http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/entry-detail.aspx?search=1&entryID=3189>.

²⁸ Landscape design for the Neil Hamill Park House. No date. Found in the Neil Hamill Park Papers (MC1512), Special Collections, University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville, Arkansas. Mapcase P184, Folder 183.

Church. When the congregation decided to move from their downtown location to a new site in West Little Rock in the late 1960s, Park was commissioned to complete a landscape plan for the site. Interestingly, an unexecuted proposal for the project indicated that “Some plants will be moved from the old Church building according to plans.” Most of Park’s plan for Second Presbyterian involved laying out trees and plantings around the building and its parking lots and driveways, along with designing entrance features to the site. However, two parts of the design were more formal in their layout – the memorial garden at the southeast corner of the building and the narthex court on the east side of the building. It is believed that most, if not all, of Park’s design was never carried out although the narthex court as it exists today does approximate Park’s design.²⁹

Neil Hamill Park retired from active practice in 1975 and died in Little Rock on February 4, 1986. Park’s legacy in landscape architecture was vast and reached beyond the state of Arkansas. His involvement with the American Society of Landscape Architects entailed holding offices at the state and national level, including serving on the Society’s Board of Trustees and the Committee of Education.³⁰

Second Presbyterian Church Today:

Since Second Presbyterian Church moved to Pleasant Valley in the late 1960s it has been a vibrant congregation that has continued to grow. The growth of the congregation led to the construction of an addition on the west side of the building in 1988 that included a great

²⁹ Landscape design for Second Presbyterian Church. 1969. Found in the Neil Hamill Park Papers (MC1512), Special Collections, University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville, Arkansas. Project Drawings: Mapcase N161, Folder 137, Other materials: Box 3, Folder, 6.

³⁰ “Neil Hamill Park is the Man Behind Many of Arkansas’s Beautiful Lawns.” *Arkansas Gazette*. 9 February 1960, page B4, and “Landscape Architect Dies at 81.” *Arkansas Gazette*. 6 February 1986, p. 12A.

hall/gymnasium space along with additional classrooms, and as part of the capital campaign in 2006 the main building was renovated and the Youth Building was built to the southeast of the church. Over the next few years, another addition will be constructed to allow for the expansion of our preschool, the main pipe organ in the sanctuary, parts of which are original to the building, will likely be replaced and solar panels will likely also be added to the facility. The membership of Second Presbyterian Church currently stands at just under 1,900 members making it the largest Presbyterian Church in the state.

Today, feel free to explore our sanctuary and the chapel which is to the right as you exit the sanctuary. Also, feel free to explore the Prayer Garden outside the chapel to the south. I have a partial set of the original plans for the church, as well as pictures of some of the landscape plans for the campus, which you are also more than welcome to browse through.

Thank you again for coming, and please join us for our next Sandwiching in History Tour at the Dr. Charles H. Kennedy House at 6 Edenwood Lane in North Little Rock on Friday, April 6th. Also, please join us this Saturday March 10th at 11:00 a.m. for our Walks Through History Tour at the Mount Nord Historic District in Fayetteville. Thank you again for coming and have a great weekend.