

Sandwiching in History
Mary H. Matthews Lustron House
5021 Maryland Avenue, Little Rock
November 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 the Mary H. Matthews Lustron House. I’d like to thank the staff of the City of Little Rock for allowing us to tour the house 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.

Cunningham's Addition to the City of Little Rock

Like much of the country, Little Rock suffered a severe housing shortage after World War II. As Jim and Judy Lester write in their book *Greater Little Rock*, “With the victory over Germany and Japan secured, American GIs rushed home from Europe and Asia to pursue the American dream. In Little Rock, the late 1940s were marked by serious housing shortages as veterans flocked back to central Arkansas.”¹

To help deal with the housing shortage, several solutions were employed. In the city's older neighborhoods, many of the large old homes were divided into apartments, and the first federally-funded, low-income housing projects were also initially diverted to house war plant workers. However, once World War II was over, and construction materials became more available, new houses could once again be built to house the influx of city residents. Although new neighborhoods were developed, houses were also built in previously platted neighborhoods around the city that had not seen much development prior to the war, including the Cunningham's Addition to the City of Little Rock.²

The Cunningham's Addition to the City of Little Rock, where the Matthews Lustron House was built, first appears on the 1913 Sanborn maps for the city. Bounded by West 8th Street on the north, Washington Street on the east, West 12th Street on the south, and Butler Street on the west, the addition was just outside of the city limits at the time. (Washington Street was the western

¹ Lester, Jim, and Judy Lester. *Greater Little Rock*. Norfolk, VA: Donning Company, Publishers, 1986, p. 200.

² Roy, F. Hampton, Sr., Charles Witsell, Jr., and Cheryl Griffith Nichols. *How We Lived: Little Rock as an American City*. Little Rock: August House, 1984, p. 206.

edge of the city limits.) Even though the neighborhood was platted in the early twentieth century, it was several decades before much development occurred in the area.³

By 1939, there were very few houses built in the area. In addition, parts of some of the streets were unpaved. (Maryland Avenue, for example, was not paved between Van Buren and Harrison, just west of the Matthews House.) Even by 1950 there were still many vacant lots in the Cunningham's Addition.⁴

The concentrated development of the Cunningham's Addition during and after World War II meant that it developed during the Lustron's heyday of the late 1940s. The post-World-War-II-era of the late 1940s and 1950s represented the real beginnings of the westward-expansion of the city as new suburbs and shopping centers were built, especially in the area of Hayes Street, now University Avenue. Interestingly, the other known surviving Lustron in Little Rock, located at 1302 South Tyler, is less than ½ mile from the Matthews House.

Prefabricated Housing

Although the Lustron Corporation's prefabricated houses came about in the late 1940s, the idea of prefabrication was nothing new at the time. During the latter half of the 1800s, there were several companies that manufactured "portable" or "sectional" houses, mainly for shipment to California during the Gold Rush, for use during the Civil War, or for use as vacation cottages during the 1870s and 1880s.⁵

³ Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps for the City of Little Rock: 1913, 1939, and 1950.

⁴ Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps for the City of Little Rock: 1913, 1939, and 1950.

⁵ Reiff, Daniel D. *Houses from Books: Treatises, Pattern Books, and Catalogs in American Architecture, 1738-1950: A History and Guide*. University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000, p. 119.

The first efforts looking at the use of steel for prefabricated housing likely emerged in the 1920s when Walter Gropius and his colleagues at the Bauhaus in Germany built a steel house to coincide with the building of the new Bauhaus building in 1926. In the same year, Karl Kastner and Company in Leipzig, Germany, also built a steel house. Interestingly, both of the German efforts were also in response to a housing shortage that was plaguing Germany in the mid-1920s.⁶

Also in the 1920s some efforts were undertaken in this country, but they focused on commercial buildings and storage sheds. L. W. Ray, for example, designed and patented a portable unit that became the standard for White Castle Hamburger stands in 1928. Like the Lustron later on, Ray's design used a steel frame and porcelain-enameled steel panels that fastened to the frame to become the interior and exterior walls.⁷

However, it was not until the Century of Progress Exposition in 1933 that the real possibility of acceptance of prefabricated metal housing came to be. Of the 11 model houses that were constructed for the event, three were manufactured primarily from steel.⁸

⁶ Fetters, Thomas T. and Vincent Kohler, contributing author. *The Lustron Home: The History of a Postwar Prefabricated Housing Experiment*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2002, p. 7.

⁷ Fetters, Thomas T. and Vincent Kohler, contributing author. *The Lustron Home: The History of a Postwar Prefabricated Housing Experiment*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2002, p. 7.

⁸ Fetters, Thomas T. and Vincent Kohler, contributing author. *The Lustron Home: The History of a Postwar Prefabricated Housing Experiment*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2002, p. 8.

Lustron Corporation

However, Lustron's efforts represented one of the first serious attempts to use steel for prefabricated residential construction, and the post-World War II era was the perfect time to try the concept. Lustron was the brainchild of Carl Strandlund who had been born in Sweden in 1888 and was the son and grandson of engineers.⁹

Strandlund joined Chicago Vitreous Enamel Products Company in April 1942 as a works manager at their Cicero, Illinois, plant.¹⁰ The company later developed a high-grade steel enamel that was used for architectural panels, which were developed under the Porcelain Products Company name, and they trademarked the name "Lustron" on October 19, 1937.¹¹ The word "Lustron," was a variation of Lusterlite and a contraction of the procedure of putting "luster on" steel through the enameling process.¹²

The efforts to get the Lustron Corporation off the ground began in 1946 when Strandlund met in Washington, DC, with Wilson Wyatt of the Veterans Emergency Housing Program. Strandlund was seeking release of some of the government's hoarded steel so that his company could resume production of enameled steel service stations and hamburger stands.¹³

⁹ Fetters, Thomas T. and Vincent Kohler, contributing author. *The Lustron Home: The History of a Postwar Prefabricated Housing Experiment*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2002, p. 10.

¹⁰ Fetters, Thomas T. and Vincent Kohler, contributing author. *The Lustron Home: The History of a Postwar Prefabricated Housing Experiment*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2002, pp. 10-11.

¹¹ Fetters, Thomas T. and Vincent Kohler, contributing author. *The Lustron Home: The History of a Postwar Prefabricated Housing Experiment*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2002, p. 11.

¹² Knerr, Douglas. *Suburban Steel: The Magnificent Failure of the Lustron Corporation, 1945-1951*. Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2004, p. 77.

¹³ Fetters, Thomas T. and Vincent Kohler, contributing author. *The Lustron Home: The History of a Postwar Prefabricated Housing Experiment*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2002, p. 3.

Although Wyatt and the government were not willing to release steel for the construction of hamburger stands and service stations, they were willing to release an unlimited supply of steel for housing. Although Strandlund's hopes were probably somewhat dashed, he did see a tremendous opportunity in the use of steel for housing. In fact, he had designs for the Lustron with him.¹⁴

The prototype Lustron house was manufactured using the tooling that Chicago Vitreous had retained from before World War II, and it was named the "Esquire." Once the idea for the plan of the Lustron house was developed, Strandlund commissioned two architects Morris H. Beckman and Roy Burton Blass to design the prototype house.¹⁵

The design that Beckman and Blass came up with reflected the strong consumer desire for a flexible interior with open spaces and multipurpose rooms. They chose the ranch style for the Lustron for several reasons. First, it was a simple design that could be adapted to a wide variety of locations and lot characteristics. Second, it gave the house a broad potential market, and since it was a design that many were familiar with, it was hoped that this would outweigh any potential negativity associated with the novelty of the steel construction.¹⁶

Although the panels for the house were done by Chicago Vitreous initially, the frame for the prototype was done by Macomber Steel in Canton, Ohio. Once the frame was completed, it was

¹⁴ Feters, Thomas T. and Vincent Kohler, contributing author. *The Lustron Home: The History of a Postwar Prefabricated Housing Experiment*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2002, pp. 4-5.

¹⁵ Knerr, Douglas. *Suburban Steel: The Magnificent Failure of the Lustron Corporation, 1945-1951*. Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2004, p. 78.

¹⁶ Knerr, Douglas. *Suburban Steel: The Magnificent Failure of the Lustron Corporation, 1945-1951*. Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2004, p. 78.

shipped to the site in South Hinsdale, Illinois, where the prototype would be constructed. In addition, the engineers were looking for a suitable material to be used to seal the gaps between the steel panels. After testing several materials, they settled on polyvinyl chloride, which is used today for bottle cap gaskets for baby food, pickles, and jelly, among other food products.¹⁷

The prototype house was erected on the grounds of the Hinsdale Nursery. The company had a large formal garden near the nursery's entrance and the house was built in the middle of it. Like the eventual production models, the Esquire prototype used porcelain-enameled steel for the walls, roof, gutters, and downspouts. However, some of the interior partitions were constructed out of wood and plywood, although they would eventually use the porcelain-enameled steel like the rest of the house.¹⁸

Once the feasibility of constructing the house was shown, it became necessary to find a factory for production of the final design. Wilson Wyatt contacted the War Assets Administration (WAA) and told the WAA to transfer the Dodge-Chrysler plant in Chicago, which had been converted to an aircraft engine plant, to Lustron. However, the plant had already been promised to Preston Tucker for production of his Tucker Torpedo automobile.¹⁹

In the meantime, a new housing expediter, Frank R. Creedon, who had taken Wyatt's place worked with the WAA and was finally able to offer Strandlund the choice of two plants for the

¹⁷ Fetters, Thomas T. and Vincent Kohler, contributing author. *The Lustron Home: The History of a Postwar Prefabricated Housing Experiment*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2002, p. 18.

¹⁸ Fetters, Thomas T. and Vincent Kohler, contributing author. *The Lustron Home: The History of a Postwar Prefabricated Housing Experiment*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2002, pp. 18, 20.

¹⁹ Fetters, Thomas T. and Vincent Kohler, contributing author. *The Lustron Home: The History of a Postwar Prefabricated Housing Experiment*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2002, p. 31-32.

manufacture of Lustron houses. Two Curtiss-Wright plants in Ohio, one in Columbus and one in Cincinnati were available. Strandlund chose the Columbus plant and signed a lease for \$428,000 a year.²⁰

At this point Lustron was still part of Chicago Vit and Porcelain Products, which meant that they were partially liable for any loan funds that Lustron received. Since Porcelain Products had become inactive and Chicago Vit declined loan funds, it paved the way for Strandlund to set up a totally new “Lustron Corporation” on October 31, 1947.²¹

To help spread the news about Lustron homes, model homes were erected in various cities around the country. The first model home went on display in New York City in April 1948. The other model homes were erected in Milwaukee, Wisconsin; Washington, DC; Chicago, Illinois; Detroit, Michigan; St. Louis, Missouri; and Indianapolis, Indiana, among other locations.²²

By late 1948, Strandlund claimed that Lustron had 20,000 “firm” orders and he announced that the production goal for 1949 was 45,000 houses. The first home design offered by Lustron was designated the “Westchester,” which was similar in design to the “Esquire” prototype designed by Blass and Beckman. The name “Westchester” referred to the upscale New York county and was intended to associate the house with established and desirable suburban communities.²³

²⁰ Feters, Thomas T. and Vincent Kohler, contributing author. *The Lustron Home: The History of a Postwar Prefabricated Housing Experiment*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2002, p. 34.

²¹ Feters, Thomas T. and Vincent Kohler, contributing author. *The Lustron Home: The History of a Postwar Prefabricated Housing Experiment*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2002, p. 37.

²² Feters, Thomas T. and Vincent Kohler, contributing author. *The Lustron Home: The History of a Postwar Prefabricated Housing Experiment*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2002, p. 47 and 49.

²³ Knerr, Douglas. *Suburban Steel: The Magnificent Failure of the Lustron Corporation, 1945-1951*. Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2004, p. 125.

The Westchester had many interesting features, including a combination clothes and dishwasher in the kitchen, which was part of the Westchester Deluxe package that also included a bedroom vanity and a pass-through divider between the kitchen and dining room. The bathroom featured all of the necessary amenities including a bathtub, toilet, and sink in addition to an illuminated medicine cabinet with mirror, a towel bar, robe hook, combination soap dish and grab bar over the tub, toilet paper holder, drinking glass holder, and a curtain rod in the shower. The two-bedroom Westchester Deluxe model ultimately became Lustron's best seller.²⁴

However, criticism did come about, although little of it was from homeowners. During Senate hearings on Lustron, Senator J. William Fulbright of Arkansas stated: "I have only seen one of them, but it sort of reminds you of a bathtub." Reconstruction Finance Corporation director Harvey J. Gunderson, on the other hand, said that Lustrons looked "a little like hotdog stands."²⁵

Finally, though, after years of preparation, the first house for public sale left the Lustron factory in early January 1949 bound for Webster Groves, a western suburb of St. Louis. Unfortunately, it had been over three years since the end of World War II in 1945 and most of America's soldiers had returned to the U.S. and set up homes in the meantime.²⁶ The fact that production of

²⁴ Fetters, Thomas T. and Vincent Kohler, contributing author. *The Lustron Home: The History of a Postwar Prefabricated Housing Experiment*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2002, pp. 70-71.

²⁵ Knerr, Douglas. *Suburban Steel: The Magnificent Failure of the Lustron Corporation, 1945-1951*. Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2004, p. 145.

²⁶ Fetters, Thomas T. and Vincent Kohler, contributing author. *The Lustron Home: The History of a Postwar Prefabricated Housing Experiment*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2002, p. 53.

Lustrons occurred after the majority of the housing crisis had been solved as well as the high cost were two of the biggest problems that Lustron had to overcome.²⁷

One of the largest obstacles in the process of constructing and erecting the Lustron house was shipping the house to the building site. However, the company's engineers came up with a solution of loading all of the components onto a single flat-bed trailer where the walls and roof trusses formed the outer perimeter of the trailer while the other components were loaded in the center. Boxes on the floor of the trailer held the nuts and bolts and the tools necessary to assemble the house. The trailers, which were brightly painted blue and yellow with the Lustron logos, also acted as rolling advertisements for the house, and they could also serve the purpose of returning to the factory with raw materials.²⁸

The price that a purchaser paid for the Lustron depended on the company's price structure, a complex formula that was based on geographic zones. However, this allowed for the covering of transportation costs to get the house to the site. Obviously those zones closest to the factory in Columbus were the cheapest.²⁹ Arkansas was covered by Lustron's Zones 17-27, which meant that prices varied from \$4,590 for a Newport Model up to \$7,212 for a three-bedroom Westchester Deluxe, a significant amount of money during the 1940s.³⁰

²⁷ Fetters, Thomas T. and Vincent Kohler, contributing author. *The Lustron Home: The History of a Postwar Prefabricated Housing Experiment*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2002, p. 82.

²⁸ Knerr, Douglas. *Suburban Steel: The Magnificent Failure of the Lustron Corporation, 1945-1951*. Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2004, pp. 115-116.

²⁹ Fetters, Thomas T. and Vincent Kohler, contributing author. *The Lustron Home: The History of a Postwar Prefabricated Housing Experiment*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2002, pp. 74-75. Although Texas was the furthest west of the official Lustron zones, at least three Lustron homes were constructed on Fairway Drive in Los Alamos, New Mexico. However, it is possible that these were erected by the U.S. Government as part of the Manhattan Project.

³⁰ Knerr, Douglas. *Suburban Steel: The Magnificent Failure of the Lustron Corporation, 1945-1951*. Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2004, p. 94, and Fetters, Thomas T. and Vincent Kohler, contributing author.

Volume production of Lustron houses finally began on February 25, 1949, and in the first 12 months of production, a total of 1,250 houses had been manufactured.³¹ Although production had steadily increased through the first part of 1949, storm clouds were building on the horizon. On July 3, 1949, *Time* magazine published an article about Lustron titled “Bathtub Blues” that was critical of the company and its president along with the RFC. The many loans that the government had given Lustron were also questioned.³² The call for investigations into the company by the House Banking and Currency Committee to look at allegations of mismanagement and waste of RFC funds in October 1949 also negatively impacted the company.³³

By the end of 1949, things were really heating up for Lustron. On December 28th, the RFC terminated its loans to the company, and the following day Lustron was given an ultimatum to submit a reorganization plan by January 6, 1950. Just a week later, the RFC declared that Lustron was in default on the vast majority of its loans, and it began to look at foreclosure, receivership, or some other way to seize the Lustron Corporation’s assets.³⁴ The suit of

The Lustron Home: The History of a Postwar Prefabricated Housing Experiment. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2002, pp. 151-152.

³¹ Fetters, Thomas T. and Vincent Kohler, contributing author. *The Lustron Home: The History of a Postwar Prefabricated Housing Experiment.* Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2002, pp. 79, 85 and 87.

³² Fetters, Thomas T. and Vincent Kohler, contributing author. *The Lustron Home: The History of a Postwar Prefabricated Housing Experiment.* Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2002, p. 85.

³³ Fetters, Thomas T. and Vincent Kohler, contributing author. *The Lustron Home: The History of a Postwar Prefabricated Housing Experiment.* Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2002, p. 89.

³⁴ Fetters, Thomas T. and Vincent Kohler, contributing author. *The Lustron Home: The History of a Postwar Prefabricated Housing Experiment.* Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2002, p. 92.

foreclosure against Lustron's mortgage was filed on February 22, 1950, and was assigned to U.S. District Judge Mell G. Underwood.³⁵

On May 5, 1950, Judge Underwood ordered that the Columbus plant be sold along with its machinery, land, and Lustron's patent rights. Around the same time, the machinery was stopped along with the conveyors and the enameling furnaces were also shut down.³⁶ Before the factory closed, a total of 2,680 Lustron houses were built in the United States, the Territory of Alaska, and in Venezuela. The last house was shipped from the factory on June 6, 1950, and 36 cash orders were returned to prospective buyers since the factory would not be able to deliver the homes.³⁷

By the end of 1949, according to Lustron records, twelve Lustron houses had been shipped to Arkansas. It is known that at least three of the houses, including the Matthews House, were shipped to Little Rock, with at least one each going to North Little Rock, West Helena, and Pine Bluff. It is unknown where most of the other seven homes were shipped, although it is known that one went to El Dorado.³⁸

³⁵ Fetters, Thomas T. and Vincent Kohler, contributing author. *The Lustron Home: The History of a Postwar Prefabricated Housing Experiment*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2002, pp. 96-97.

³⁶ Fetters, Thomas T. and Vincent Kohler, contributing author. *The Lustron Home: The History of a Postwar Prefabricated Housing Experiment*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2002, p. 97.

³⁷ Fetters, Thomas T. and Vincent Kohler, contributing author. *The Lustron Home: The History of a Postwar Prefabricated Housing Experiment*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2002, p. 97.

³⁸ Fetters, Thomas T. and Vincent Kohler, contributing author. *The Lustron Home: The History of a Postwar Prefabricated Housing Experiment*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2002, pp. 92 and 141.

Mary H. Matthews

The Matthews House was built c.1949 for Mary H. Matthews, an X-ray technician at the University of Arkansas School of Medicine (now UAMS). (Although Matthews' first name was Mary, she went by Helen almost exclusively.) The address was first listed in the 1951 Little Rock city directory.³⁹

The choice of a Lustron house made perfect sense for Matthews. After World War II, which her husband had served in, he suffered from severe post-traumatic stress disorder. Due to the severity of his condition, he lived at the Veterans Administration hospital after the war, leaving Helen to care for a house on her own. Since the Lustron's porcelain-enameled steel construction meant virtually no maintenance, it would have been the perfect type of house for her to own. This was especially true since she had her own career that would have left her little free time to deal with maintaining a house.⁴⁰

The Lustron that Matthews had built was a Westchester two-bedroom model in Dove Gray. Lustron offered their homes in four colors, which were Dove Gray, Maize Yellow, Surf Blue, and Desert Tan. Interior colors included a neutral light gray, a blue, a yellow, and a pink. The colors for the houses were designed by noted colorist Howard Ketchum. The other Lustron in Little Rock is also Dove Gray while the model in North Little Rock is Surf Blue and the models in West Helena and Pine Bluff are Desert Tan. (A Maize Yellow example also existed in Little Rock until it was demolished c.2005.)⁴¹

³⁹ *Polk's Little Rock, North Little Rock City Directories*, 1949-2013.

⁴⁰ Saar, Amanda. Head, Historical Research Center, UAMS. Conversation with the author. 10 September 2013.

⁴¹ Fetters, Thomas T. and Vincent Kohler, contributing author. *The Lustron Home: The History of a Postwar Prefabricated Housing Experiment*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2002, p. 49 and 69.

Although Matthews remained in the Little Rock area until at least the late 1970s when she retired from UAMS, she only lived in the house until c.1960 when Grover Wallace and his wife Imogene were listed as the residents. It is also likely that the addition to the house was constructed shortly after the Wallaces purchased the house. The Wallaces retained ownership of the house until 1999 when it was sold to Ronnie and Mary Sanders. The Sanders remained in the house until it was sold to the City of Little Rock on June 10, 2013.⁴²

Today, feel free to explore the house. I have put up Lustron-related photographs throughout the house – with magnets, of course – for you to look at. Thank you again for coming, and please join us for our next Sandwiching in History Tour at Curran Hall at 615 East Capitol Avenue in Little Rock on Friday, December 7th. Also, please join us on Saturday November 10th at 11:00 a.m. for our Walks Through History Tour of the Magnolia Commercial Historic District in Magnolia. Thank you again for coming and have a great weekend.

⁴² *Polk's Little Rock, North Little Rock City Directories*, 1949-2013, and information on the house from the Pulaski County Assessor's website at www.pulaskicountyassessor.net.