

**Sandwiching in History**  
**Mills-Davis House**  
**523 East 6<sup>th</sup> Street, Little Rock**  
**October 4, 2019**  
**By Ralph S. Wilcox**



**Intro:**

Good afternoon, my name is Ralph Wilcox, and I am the National Register and Survey Coordinator with the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program. Thank you for coming, and welcome to the “Sandwiching in History” tour of the Mills-Davis House. I’d like to thank Jennifer Carman for allowing us to tour the house today. This tour is worth one hour of continuing education credit through the American Institute of Architects. Please see me after the tour if you’re interested.

## **Little Rock History**

Settlement in the Little Rock area began shortly after the turn of the nineteenth century.

Although surveying land and offering it for sale did not begin until 1815, a few settlers were in the area prior to then. When the Arkansas Territory was created in 1819, the state's first capital was at Arkansas Post. However, it was not the best location since it often flooded and was far away from the majority of the territory's population. In 1820, a new centrally-located site for the capital was chosen on the south bank of the Arkansas River at the Little Rock.<sup>1</sup>

Initial settlement and development in Little Rock was focused on the river. The original plat of Little Rock consisted of 88 square blocks stretching south from the river to what is now Eleventh Street, and it included the site of the Mills-Davis House. By the 1860s, however, the city began to expand beyond the original plat, notably with the platting of the Woodruff's and Masonic additions on the city's east side, the Wright's Addition on the south side, and the Capitol Hill Addition on the west side.<sup>2</sup>

In 1871, a bird's-eye view map of Little Rock was completed, and it showed that there was still a lot of vacant land in this area of the city, even though several houses had been constructed in the area of the Mills-Davis House. Development on the block of the Mills-Davis House was focused on the west half of the block where scattered residences were located. The area of the block east of where Commerce Street intersected the block was only occupied by the Absalom Fowler

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<sup>1</sup> Roy, F. Hampton, Sr., and Charles Witsell, Jr., with Cheryl Griffith Nichols. *How We Lived: Little Rock as an American City*. Little Rock: August House, 1984, pp. 12-14.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 19, 104.

House and its outbuildings.<sup>3</sup> In fact, on the 1886 Sanborn Map for Little Rock, the area of the block east of Commerce was referred to as the “Fowler Block” rather than being given a block number. (The block to the north of the Fowler Block, rather than being given a block number, was referred to as the “Trapnall Block.”)<sup>4</sup> The land, which was a three-acre tract, had been purchased by Absalom Fowler from William Stevenson by 1837, and Fowler then purchased several adjoining lots the following year.<sup>5</sup> Some parts of this area are also referred to as the Stevenson’s Addition to the City of Little Rock.

In 1887, a second bird’s-eye view map of Little Rock had been completed and it showed the Mills-Davis House and another house to its south. However, the central part of the block was still dominated by the Fowler House and its outbuildings.

### **Abraham Anderson Mills**

The Mills-Davis House was built for Abraham Anderson Mills, who was described in his obituary as “Confederate veteran, law enforcement officer, judge, and planter.” Mills was born in Flat Rock, Arkansas, in 1834, the son of Daniel Mills and Mrs. O’Myra Lois West Mills. Mills received his early education in Flat Rock, but later moved to Little Rock where he entered St. John’s College.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> “Bird’s Eye View of the City of Little Rock, the Capitol of Arkansas,” 1871. Found at: <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.gmd/g40041.pm000130>

<sup>4</sup> Sanborn Fire Insurance Map for Little Rock, 1886.

<sup>5</sup> National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form for the Absalom Fowler House, Little Rock, Pulaski County, Arkansas. In the files of the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program, 1973.

<sup>6</sup> “Anderson Mills Called By Death.” *Arkansas Gazette*. 14 August 1927, p. 10.

Mills was 18 when the Civil War began and he immediately enlisted in Woodruff's Battery. Mills served with Woodruff's Battery in Arkansas until the Federal occupation of Little Rock, and he continued to serve with the Battery when they went to Texas. During his time in the War, Mills rose from the rank of private to lieutenant. Mills' 1927 obituary describes the highlight of his service, noting:

When the Federal troops occupied the city in 1863 he became the hero of the final engagement by saving the battery's guns. This he did by rounding up sufficient oxen to haul the artillery pieces away and then prodding the slow-moving beasts into sufficient action to draw the guns to safety, even though death by gunfire or capture seemed imminent.<sup>7</sup>

Immediately after the Civil War ended, Mills served as manager of the Woodruff Plantation in North Little Rock for two years before going into partnership with John N. Jabine and Alden Woodruff to operate the ferry across the Arkansas River at Little Rock for two years. During his time running the ferry, he met Miss Eudie LeFevre in 1871. A romance quickly developed between the couple and they were soon married on March 20, 1872, by the rector of Christ Episcopal Church at the home of Leonard LeFevre, the bride's brother.<sup>8</sup>

Eudie was the granddaughter of Peter LeFevre, an early French-Canadian settler who is famous for having the "oldest" bones buried in Mount Holly Cemetery. According to one version of the story, apparently his bones came to the surface during a flood in Scott, and Eudie brought them

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<sup>7</sup> "Anderson Mills Called By Death." *Arkansas Gazette*. 14 August 1927, p. 10.

<sup>8</sup> "Anderson Mills Called By Death." *Arkansas Gazette*. 14 August 1927, p. 10.

to the Mills-Davis House. Supposedly, Eudie kept them in a chest in the front parlor for a number of years, until word spread around town and city officials heard about it. The city insisted that she have them properly interred. As a result, Eudie ended up buying a plot at Mount Holly, and now his grave is famous for being the oldest in the cemetery.<sup>9</sup>

In 1878, Mills decided to build a new house for his bride at the southwest corner of East 6<sup>th</sup> and Sherman streets in Little Rock. The *Arkansas Gazette* noted on May 18, 1878, that “Mr. Anderson Mills is having a handsome residence built on the southwest corner of Sixth and Sherman streets.” Mills selected the materials for the house and personally supervised its construction. The house that he had built for his bride, which you see today, was an impressive house for the neighborhood and was built in the Italianate style of architecture, a style that was popular in the late nineteenth century. Initially, the Mills only lived in the house until 1889 when they moved to Eastman Township. Although they moved from the house, they still owned it and rented it to William M. Kavanaugh until 1900. Mills and his wife then moved back into the house and around that time the house underwent a fairly extensive remodeling. The remodeling included installing modern conveniences such as electric lighting and indoor plumbing. In addition, some of the interior detailing, such as the fireplace mantels and the faux painting of the woodwork, was updated to the more modern Colonial Revival style. Mills lived there until his death in 1927. Eudie continued to live in the house until her death in 1929.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Carman, Jennifer. E-mail to the author. 30 August 2019.

<sup>10</sup> Information on the Mills-Davis House in the files of the Quapaw Quarter Association.

In the 1880s, Mills was elected to his first of two terms as Pulaski County Sheriff and he was later elected to three terms as Pulaski County Judge. After he retired from political life, Mills returned to a life of farming, running the Faulkner and LeFevre plantations, until his death.<sup>11</sup>

### **Italianate Style**

The Mills-Davis House is designed in the Italianate style of architecture, one of several styles that were popular in the late 1800s. The Italianate style of architecture (along with the Gothic Revival style) developed in the early nineteenth century in England as part of the Picturesque movement. The Picturesque movement was a reaction to the more formal classical styles that had been prevalent in architecture for approximately 200 years. The Italianate style grew out of the rambling informal Italian farmhouses and villas, many of which had square towers, and those farmhouses served as the models for the early examples of the style. Interestingly, Italian architecture, specifically formal buildings from the Renaissance period and ancient Rome, had also been the inspiration for some of the classical styles which the Picturesque movement was reacting against.<sup>12</sup>

When the Italianate style came to the United States in the first half of the nineteenth century, the style followed the informal rural models that had been the inspiration of the Picturesque movement in England. The first Italianate houses were built in the United States in the 1830s, and the style's popularity really took off after the publication of the influential pattern books of Andrew Jackson Downing, which were published in the 1840s and 1850s. By the 1860s, the

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<sup>11</sup> "Anderson Mills Called By Death." *Arkansas Gazette*. 14 August 1927, p. 10.

<sup>12</sup> McAlester, Virginia, and Lee McAlester. *A Field Guide to American Houses*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994, p. 212.

style had totally overtaken the Gothic Revival style in popularity, and most surviving examples of the style date from the period of about 1855 to 1880 – earlier examples are rare. The Italianate style remained popular until the Financial Panic of 1873 and the depression that followed. Once prosperity came back, new architectural styles had emerged and the Queen Anne style became the style of choice.<sup>13</sup>

Houses that are designed in the Italianate style of architecture are normally two or three stories tall – one-story examples are rare. Normally, Italianate-style houses have low-pitched roofs, although as you can see the Mills-Davis House has a steeply-pitched roof. However, the house does exhibit the wide overhanging eaves with decorative brackets underneath, a hallmark characteristic of the style. The Mills-Davis House also exhibits the tall, narrow windows with curved tops and decorative metal window hoods that were often found on Italianate-style houses. In addition, Italianate-style houses often had a square cupola or tower, and the Mills-Davis originally had a tower at the crossing of the roofs gables.<sup>14</sup>

### **Mills-Davis House & Property**

Mills played a very hands-on role with the design and construction of the house. Supposedly, he designed the house – several member of the Mills family were architects and builders – and he supervised the construction of the house daily. In addition, Mills personally went to the lumber, brick, and stone yards to select and mark the materials that he wanted to use in the construction of the house. Mills also personally received the delivery of the building materials for the

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<sup>13</sup> McAlester, Virginia, and Lee McAlester. *A Field Guide to American Houses*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994, p. 214.

<sup>14</sup> McAlester, Virginia, and Lee McAlester. *A Field Guide to American Houses*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994, p. 211.

construction of the house and outbuildings.<sup>15</sup> The house was first shown on the 1913 Sanborn map for Little Rock, and at that time the property consisted of the main house, two small one-story outbuildings, a wind mill, and 25-foot tall brick tower with two water tanks, and a 1 ½-story barn, which was located at the southwest corner of the property.<sup>16</sup>

According to the September 15, 1885, edition of the *Arkansas Gazette*, the barn on the property was designed or built by the Pettefer Brothers. The Pettefer Brothers consisted of Ambrose and Harry Pettefer who had been born in England, but were living in Little Rock by 1880. Ambrose had been born in 1848 and Harry was born in 1852, and the 1880 Little Rock City Directory listed them as “Pettefer Brothers, Architects and Builders.” Interestingly, their advertisement in the directory noted that “stair building is a specialty.” By 1886, they were listed as Architects, Builders, and Brick Manufacturers.” Their most notable remaining design today is Trinity Episcopal Cathedral at 17<sup>th</sup> and Spring streets and Ambrose Pettefer’s house at 2216 Cumberland Street also still stands. (Harry’s house, which was located 105 East 24<sup>th</sup> Street, has been demolished.)<sup>17</sup>

After Mills and his wife passed away in the late 1920s, the house apparently passed to heirs in the family who retained ownership of the property until the early 1940s. Although the Mills had no children of their own, they did raise a dozen children that were mostly adopted nieces and nephews. Also, animals were a huge part of their life, and they had many dogs, cats, and even a

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<sup>15</sup> Information on the Mills-Davis House in the files of the Quapaw Quarter Association.

<sup>16</sup> Sanborn Fire Insurance Map for Little Rock, Arkansas, 1913.

<sup>17</sup> Witsell, Charles and Gordon Wittenberg with Marylyn Jackson Parins. *Architects of Little Rock: 1833-1950*. Fayetteville, AR: The University of Arkansas Press, 2014, p. 33



parrot that Anderson Mills had trained to call little girls boys and little boys girls.<sup>18</sup> A deed dated October 28, 1943, notes that the property was sold to Horace Chamberlin and his wife, Keatts. The property was sold at auction in order to settle a lawsuit between two groups of Eudie Lefevre Mills' descendants, and the Chamberlins bought the property at the auction for \$5,150. The Chamberlins only owned the house until 1945 when the house was sold to Dr. Emmett N. Davis. However, when the house was sold to Davis, the Chamberlins retained ownership of the western 40 feet of the property. Davis, it was noted, paid \$100 "together with other good and valuable consideration."<sup>19</sup>

During the first part of the twentieth century, changes did occur to the property. By 1939, when the next Sanborn map for Little Rock was completed, the windmill and the one-story outbuilding to the southwest of the house had been removed and the other one-story outbuilding to the southeast of the house had been converted into a separate dwelling with the address of 523 ½ East 6<sup>th</sup> Street. However, the brick tower and the barn remained and the house to the west at 519 East 6<sup>th</sup> had also been built, supposedly by Mrs. Mills after her husband's death. By 1950, when the next Sanborn map was completed, a larger dwelling had been built at the southeast corner of the property and a new house had been built at 521 East 6<sup>th</sup>. The barn and the brick tower had also been removed.<sup>20</sup> Just prior to the Davises acquiring the property, the tower at the top of the house was also removed.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Carman, Jennifer. E-mail to the author. 30 August 2019.

<sup>19</sup> Information on the Mills-Davis House in the files of the Quapaw Quarter Association.

<sup>20</sup> Sanborn Fire Insurance Map for Little Rock, Arkansas, 1939 and 1950.

<sup>21</sup> Information on the Mills-Davis House in the files of the Quapaw Quarter Association.

Dr. Emmett Davis passed the home down to his son William “Bill” E. Davis, famed Arkansas commercial and fine art photographer. Davis and his wife, Jody, used the house as a residence and studio for any years. The Davises were part of an artistic community that involved many well-known twentieth-century Arkansas artists, photographers, and curators. The house remained in the Davis family until 2016 when it was purchased by Jennifer Carman. Between 2016 and 2018, Carman and her long-time friend Donna Thomas completed a painstaking historic rehabilitation of the property. Today, the property is now home to an office used by Norton Arts Conservation and J. Carman, Inc., Fine Art Appraisals, and a residential rental space on the second floor that is available as an Air BnB.

As you go through the house today, there are a few things to take note of:

- 1) The historic photo in the library shows the house in 1903 after a major ice storm hit Little Rock.
- 2) Also in the library, notice the framed sections of early painted floor cloths that were found in the home. Floor cloths were painted and treated cloths like an early form of linoleum that protected floors.
- 3) The house retains its original transom windows above the doors and its original hardware.
- 4) The ceilings on the first floor are 13 feet high and they are approximately 14 feet high on the second floor.
- 5) The fireplace surrounds in the house were installed c.1900 when the house was renovated in the newer Classical Revival style.
- 6) The interior woodwork is all solid cypress. It was originally painted to look like exotic wood species, such as walnut, and was repainted c.1900 to look like quarter-sawn oak.

- 7) The original light fixtures in the house were gas, and then converted to electricity c.1900 when electricity and plumbing were installed in the house. The current fixtures are not original, but many are period pieces that match the period of the house's remodeling.

Today, feel free to explore the Mills-Davis House. Thank you again for coming, and please join us for our next Sandwiching in History Tour at the Vestal Smokestack at 1600 Rockwater Boulevard in North Little Rock on Friday, November 1<sup>st</sup>. Also, please join us on Saturday, November 9<sup>th</sup> at 11:00 a.m. for our Walks Through History Tour of the Calico Rock Historic District in Calico Rock. Thank you again for coming and have a great weekend.