

**Sandwiching in History
Vestal Smokestack
1600 Rockwater Blvd, North Little Rock
November 1, 2019
By Callie Williams**



Intro:

Good afternoon, my name is Callie Williams, and I am the Education and Outreach Coordinator with the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program. Thank you for coming, and welcome to the “Sandwiching in History” tour at the Vestal Smokestack. 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.

I’d like to thank the staff of Rockwater for their help in organizing this tour today. I also want to thank Sarah Vestal, descendant of the Vestal family, who has written several histories of her family, which serves as the basis for this tour, as well as articles by Tom Dillard.

Joseph Wysong Vestal arrived in Pulaski County in 1880 with a mission to find land to move his established nursery and florist business to the area around Little Rock. He would become the first local florist in the area, a service that the city of Little Rock had lacked since its founding many decades earlier. By the time he died in 1917, the Vestal nursery was a huge operation, owning at least 220 acres along the northern bank of the Arkansas River with a large portion of that area given over to greenhouses, heating plants, other support structures, and rows of ornamental shrubs and flowers, as well as many varieties of berries. Under the direction of Joseph's children and grandchildren, the business would continue to expand along the riverside and by the 1950s, the nursery had 300,000 square feet under glass in their greenhouses (nearly 7 acres of land under glass). The company would also produce at least one yearly catalogue of plants available for mail-order from 1861 until 1954, a 93 year run.

Joseph W. Vestal was the son of Aaron H. and Sarah Ellen Wysong Vestal. Aaron and Sarah Vestal were Quakers who were descendants of families that had moved to the New World as part of the initial colonization of the area that would become the state of Pennsylvania led by William Penn in the late 17th century. The Vestal family would eventually move to North Carolina in the 1750s and then Indiana in the 1810s. Both of Joseph W. Vestal's parents and their extended family are thought to have been active in the Underground Railroad in both Indiana and Virginia, using their homes and businesses as hiding spots and way stations along the escape routes for those escaping slavery. Joseph followed his father into the market farming business; his father Aaron had become known for his skill in horticulture after settling in Wayne County, Indiana, in the 1840s. In 1844, Aaron Vestal had awarded a patent (no. 3708) for "Improvement in Keeping Sweet Potatoes" and in the following years he published a book on the best methods for "Raising and Keeping Sweet Potatoes." He was soon locally known as "The Sweet Potato King" and Vestal family tradition notes that Joseph W. Vestal paid for his wedding service to Josephine Lmberger in sweet potatoes in 1856. Joseph soon started his own floral business alongside his father and by the 1870s was doing large business in greenhouse grown flowers.

According to family descendants, Joseph W. Vestal moved to Little Rock during the 1880s in order to take advantage of a longer growing season. It may also be that he welcomed the abolition of slavery across the South and known he could benefit from the cheap land and

various new transportation routes offered by the new major railroads in Little Rock. His new land was also adjacent to the new Baring Cross Bridge across the Arkansas River. This bridge not only served as a railroad bridge, but by 1877 a second deck had been added above the rail-line to serve vehicular and pedestrian traffic. In 1886, the bridge was rebuilt and the vehicular section was lowered to be beside the railroad line. In 1927, the Baring Cross bridge was washed away by floodwaters and had to be rebuilt, with the new bridge opening in 1929. The bridge was again redesigned and partially rebuilt in the 1960s to facilitate the new requirements for the navigation channels on the Arkansas River.

After moving “plants, hotbed ash, and other equipment, including all that was necessary for the manufacture of flower pots and urns” as well as more than 500 varieties of roses, Joseph Vestal soon settled with his family, which would grow to include 5 children, in a house near the new nursery. Interestingly, he also started attending the Episcopal Church in Little Rock, rather than joining or starting a Quaker meeting group. By 1890, the Vestal Company was offering a wide array of mail-order plants, including 182 varieties of strawberry plants, “including orange and purple colors.” Joseph remarried after his first wife’s death in 1889 to Ms. Nora De Bear Carno of Little rock in 1891. He remained active in the business, working with his sons up until his death in 1917. His funeral was a grand affair and included him lying-in-state at the Scottish Rite Consistory on Scott Street in a building that predated the Albert Pike Memorial Temple now on the site.

In 1890, Joseph had entered in partnership with his son Charles Vestal, who was 24 years old. He also changed the name of the business to Jos. W. Vestal & Son; Florists and Nurserymen. Two years after being made a partner in the business, Charles married Charlie Walters and the couple would have four children, three of whom were later active in the family business: Joseph Walter, Charles Howell, and Ruth. Charles focus at the company his father created was on the business operations, including retail sales and marketing. In 1892, he pushed the company to publish the first color catalogue, which is thought to be the first color catalogue published west of the Mississippi River. Joseph’s eldest son George became a horticulture professor, working at Purdue University, he also helped with the family business and specialized in the study and

cultivation of Magnolia and Evergreen trees. Several of his trees still survive around Little Rock and North Little Rock. Unfortunately, George died in 1891 after suffering from consumption.

By 1918, the company was sending out at least 50,000 catalogues of 80 pages to customers worldwide and Charles had helped to increase the greenhouse acreage to 4 times the area under glass in the 1880s. During Charles's leadership of the company, they became known nationwide for their roses, many of which they had propagated, including the thornless "David O. Dodd" rose developed in 1926 which was advertised as "a magnificent rich crimson, flushed scarlet with well-shaped buds, carried erect and opening into a large, beautifully shaped flower." The early success of the Vestal roses, which would soon cover a huge area on their land holdings, including a large portion of what is today Vestal Park just to the north, led the city of Little Rock to become known as the "City of Roses" during the early 20th century and the "David O. Dodd" rose was selected as the official flower of the 1936 state centennial celebration.

Although Charles was raised in his parent's home in the Baring Cross area of what is today North Little Rock, his continued business success allowed him to buy a fine large home on Lincoln Street, which is today Cantrell Avenue, near where the Packet House still stands. This area was once full of large Victorian era homes and Charles was particularly fond of his home's view of his nursery across the river as well as its location near to the Baring Cross Bridge so that he could easily walk to work and back home for lunch each day. Charles was also responsible for the levee system that helped to save the Vestal land holdings along the river from several high water events from the 1890s through the 1920s. These levees, however, were no match for the flood of 1927. The high water inundated the Vestal nursery and greenhouses on the week before Easter, their busiest week of the year. Every available worker as well as Vestal family members worked to stack sandbags to keep the river at bay. These efforts work, at least in part; while the main river flooding was kept out of the nursery, the overflow and backwater eventually flooded the greenhouse area, where thankfully many of the plants were saved due to the elevated planting benches. Also, many of the roses were saved due to their location farther north on higher ground. Several of the service buildings, including the original taller incinerator smokestack were damaged by the flood and had to be replaced. The smokestack we see today is the 90 feet tall replacement for the original smokestack that was taller.

After the death of Charles Vestal in 1928, the company changed its focus from mainly retail and catalogue sales to supplying regional wholesale markets for other florists, nurseries, and retailers. Charles's sons Charles Howell Vestal and Joseph Walter Vestal as well as his daughter Ruth Vestal all helped to continue the company's legacy. Howell oversaw the company as president, Walter was the horticulturalist, and Ruth oversaw the retail locations and each of the siblings were equal partners. In the early 1920s, Howell obtained acorns from an acquaintance for the Southern Live Oak tree, which is an evergreen oak tree, and he planted several in Central Arkansas. This includes the large Live Oak tree at 15th and Pike Avenue in North Little Rock, which was given the deed to itself and its heirs as a way to preserve the tree from the extension of Pike Avenue several years ago. This tree, a rare example so far north of its usually range along the Gulf of Mexico, officially owns itself and the small triangle of land on which it sits was designated as a city park, though to be the smallest in the state.

During the 1930s, the Great Depression led to a massive shrinkage in the retail sales of the Vestal Company. The company changed their offerings, streamlining the varieties of plants they offered for sale. Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, the business continued to shift away from retail sales and toward supplying fresh flowers and plants for the wholesale markets. New cut flower buildings with refrigeration were constructed on the site as well as more greenhouses. The annual retail catalogue ended with the last issue in the fall of 1954, after 93 years in publication. Charles Howell Vestal died in 1954 and his brother Joseph Walter took over the leadership of the company until his death in 1971.

Walter and Howell Vestal were both credited with much of the success of the firm during the 20th century. Both had studied horticulture at the University of Arkansas. Walter eventually focused on the horticultural aspects of the company, breeding many new flower varieties, including at one time growing 600 varieties of daylilies. The company also offered a variety of vegetable plants, and fruit and nut trees, including eight different types of tomatoes and six different types of pecan trees. Customers could order seeds, pot plants, bulbs, roots, as well as fertilized chicken eggs. As always, the roses were a huge part of the business, and the firm hybridized many that they then named after family members or Arkansas landmarks and leaders including the "Ruth Vestal" climbing rose, the "Mildred Vestal" rose, the "Petit Jean", the

“Dardanelle”, the “Albert Pike”, the pink “Little Rock” rose, the “Mrs. U. M. Rose” rose, as well as the “Senator Joe T. Robinson” rose. The company’s offerings were wide, including not only flowering plants but ferns, palms, and the “American Wonder” lemon. In 1952, it was reported that the company was growing more than one million chrysanthemum plants for cut flowers, all in greenhouses, and in the same year had produced roughly 750,000 cut roses.

In the 1950s, the fourth generation of Vestal family members joined the company, with Joseph Walter Vestal, Jr. and Kent Greer Vestal. The company was again expanded into other floral and horticultural areas, including out of season pot plants, and new investments in flower crops from California and Colorado and new wholesale locations across the region. During the 1960s, the assets of the company were split with one company focusing on retail florists, wholesale flowers and supplies while the other company focused on pot plants. Eventually the retail and wholesale flower business was sold to Florafax of Tulsa in 1977, which now continues under different names. The Vestal descendants would continue to work in horticulture and flowers, opening various businesses in silk flowers and decorative accessories, hydroponic operations, organic greenhouses, and blueberry farms. After the sale of much of the Vestal holdings, the remaining family business operated by the Vestals eventually went bankrupt in the 1980s. The large expanse of greenhouses was soon torn down and all that remained by 2000 was the large brick smokestack. Today, the area is again seeing a resurgence as new homes are built along the river. The surrounding land was purchased by Jim Jackson and Lisa Farell, who have used it to start the Rockwater Village community and who helped to save the smokestack by having it integrated into the street planning as a feature of the site.

The Vestal name lives on in the surrounding neighborhood, with Vestal Street and Vestal Park just to the north on land given by the family to the city of North Little Rock. Also the Vestal Addition, now part of North Little Rock, was land that was sold by Joseph Vestal and eventually became part of the small municipality of Baring Cross in 1899, before the entire small town was annexed by the city of North Little Rock in 1905. The name of the town came from the nearby bridge which was itself named for the company who financed the construction of the bridge, the Baring and Company bankers of the United Kingdom. The “cross” part of the name was a reference to the company president’s family coat of arms which included a cross.

The Rockwater Marina is also open today if you would like to visit – they are located just down the road. You can also walk along the river trail and you will be walking very close to the original office location for the entire Vestal operation on this site.

Thank you again for coming, and please join us for our next Sandwiching in History Tour at the Arsenal Building at MacArthur Park along 9th Street in downtown Little Rock on Friday, December 6th, at Noon. Also, please join us on Saturday, November 9th at 11:00 a.m. for our Walks Through History Tour of Calico Rock in Izard County. Thank you again for coming and have a great weekend.

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