

**Sandwiching in History**  
**Little Rock Fire Station No. 2**  
**1201 S. Commerce Street, Little Rock**  
**January 9, 2015**  
**By: Rachel Silva**



*Fire Station No. 2, ca. 1920*



*Fire Station No. 2, 2015*

## **Intro**

Good afternoon, my name is Rachel Silva, and I work for the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program. Welcome to the “Sandwiching in History” tour of Little Rock Fire Station No. 2! I’d like to thank Matt Gardner with the City of Little Rock’s Parks and Recreation Department as well as Greg Hart, John and Linda Fordyce, and Anncha Briggs with the Firehouse Hostel and Museum for their help with the tour.

This tour is worth one hour of HSW continuing education credit through the American Institute of Architects. See me after the tour if you’re interested.

Located in the MacArthur Park Historic District (National Register-listed 7/25/1977), Little Rock Fire Station No. 2 opened in February 1917. The building served as a fire station until the late 1950s. At that time, Station No. 2 was closed, and its fire equipment was transferred to a new station at the northwest corner of 9<sup>th</sup> and Sherman streets, which opened in 1960. The old fire station has had many uses since the late 1950s. Since 2006, plans have been in the works to

rehabilitate the building and turn it into a hostel and firefighters' museum. The Firehouse Hostel and Museum is expected to open later this year.

### **Early History of Firefighting in Little Rock**

Before 1892, when the City of Little Rock passed an ordinance to create a full-time, paid fire department, fire protection in the capital city was provided by volunteers. The majority of volunteers were merchants and businessmen trying to protect the contents of their buildings. As you can probably imagine, fires occurred quite frequently during the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, as people relied on an open flame for light and heat, and most buildings were made of wood. In 1830 William Woodruff, editor of the *Arkansas Gazette*, reported that there was "not a single fire bucket, much less an engine and hooks and ladders within [Little Rock's] limits." For years after this, Woodruff advocated for the purchase of fire equipment and the organization of a fire company. But the City couldn't afford a fire engine, and nothing was done.

In January 1839 the City obtained a \$5,000 loan from the State Bank of Arkansas to purchase a fire engine. The following month, a volunteer fire company was organized. A maximum of thirty men could volunteer for the company, and each person who enrolled had to serve at least a two-year term. Each volunteer firefighter was required to keep two fire buckets in his home. The captain of the company had the authority to command any firefighter or bystander at a fire. The newly acquired fire engine finally arrived at Little Rock in September 1839.

However, the volunteer firemen quickly realized that the new engine was not a panacea. It weighed almost 5,000 pounds and was pulled to the fire by the firemen. Once the engine had been hauled to the fire, firemen had to pump it by hand to produce adequate water pressure. Seven to twelve men pumped on each side of the engine at the same time. Each man could only pump for about ten minutes, so they had to work in shifts. And keep in mind that the only water sources were the Arkansas River, the Town Branch, a public cistern, or a private

well. As Little Rock expanded to the south, buildings were often too far from a water source to be saved in the event of a fire.

By the early 1840s, Little Rock's first volunteer fire company had more or less disbanded due to poor leadership and its inability to effectively fight fires. In 1846 a second volunteer fire company was organized. Known as the Little Rock Fire Company, the group adopted strict rules about membership and attendance at drills and fires. This slightly improved fire protection, but Little Rock still didn't have a hook and ladder company.

After a series of devastating fires in 1854, the Defiance Hook and Ladder Company was organized. The hook and ladder company provided firemen with a second option in the event that the engine couldn't get to the fire, or water was not available. A fire hook, or a long pole with a hook at one end, could be used to pull down the walls of a burning building. The burning pieces would then be removed from the site and allowed to burn out. This kept the fire from spreading.

Fire protection improved significantly during the 1860s and '70s. By the late 1860s, the Little Rock Fire Department consisted of four volunteer fire companies—Pulaski Fire Company (1846), Defiance Hook and Ladder Company (1854), Torrent Fire Brigade (1860), and the Pat Cleburne Steam Fire Engine Company (1866). This amounted to about 175 members and officers.

In addition to an increase in participation, technology improved. The Pat Cleburne Company, organized in 1866, had a steam-powered engine that could be pulled by hand or by horse. Also in the 1860s, annual May Day parades were held to honor firefighters, giving them a sense of pride and social responsibility. A sometimes friendly competition developed between the fire companies as well. Companies raced to the scene of a fire in a competition to "throw first water." While fights over a water source sometimes delayed the firefighting, this competition probably improved fire protection overall.

The lack of a reliable source of water continued to plague the Little Rock Fire Department until the late 1870s, when the City contracted with the privately-owned Little Rock Water Company to install a city water system, including fire hydrants. The relationship between the City and the water company soured after a couple years, and in 1880 a new contract was awarded to the Home Water Company, which provided 50 hydrants. In 1881 the company was forced to remove the valve stems from hydrants because it had not received payment from the City. However, the firemen knew how to operate the hydrants without valve stems, so the water company proposed the complete removal of all hydrants. Before the hydrants were removed, merchants agreed to pay the water company \$50 each time its water was used to fight a fire. The City eventually paid up, and the Home Water Company supplied water to the city and fire department until 1889.

By the mid-1880s, all engine companies in the Little Rock Fire Department had horses, although some of them belonged to individual firefighters. The Union Fire Company, organized in 1888, became Little Rock's fifth volunteer fire company.

Beginning in the early 1880s, the City Council considered turning the volunteer fire department into a salaried city department. Throughout the decade, the Council gradually created salaried positions. For instance, in 1885 the driver of a hose cart was paid \$65 per month, and the driver of a hook and ladder truck was paid \$70 a month.

On February 8, 1892, the City Council passed Ordinance No. 396 creating a full-time, paid fire department for Little Rock. The attire of the St. Louis Fire Department was adopted as the official uniform of the Little Rock Fire Department. The volunteer fire company names were changed to Engine Companies 1, 2, 3, and 4; and the Defiance Hook and Ladder Company became Hook and Ladder Company No. 1.

In addition to risking life and limb, firefighters had a grueling work schedule. They were on duty continuously, with the exception of scheduled meals at home. Most

firefighters lived near their assigned stations and took turns for one-hour breaks. In the early 1890s, the Little Rock Fire Department consisted of Station No. 1 at 409 Gaines, Station No. 2 at 1107 Main, Station No. 3 at 124 N. Louisiana, and Station No. 4 at 511 E. Markham. Additional stations were soon added, and older facilities were upgraded. Little Rock received its first motorized firefighting apparatus in September 1911. The Little Rock Central Fire Station at Markham and Arch streets opened in August 1913 and signified the beginning of a new era for the city's fire department.

### **Little Rock Fire Station No. 2**

In the late nineteenth century, Little Rock Fire Station No. 2 was located in a two-story, brick building at 1107 Main Street. The building featured a corner bell tower, which was used to sound the fire alarm. In order to provide better fire protection to the southeastern portion of the city, and to accommodate the city's new motorized firefighting apparatus, officials decided in 1916 to move Station No. 2 from the 1100 block of Main Street to a new location at 503 E. 12<sup>th</sup> Street, presently known as 1201 S. Commerce. The new Craftsman-style station opened on February 18, 1917, and occupied a lot on the western edge of the City Park.

### *MacArthur Park*

Now called MacArthur Park, City Park didn't actually become a park until the early 1890s. After Arkansas became a state in 1836, Governor James Conway petitioned the federal government to construct an arsenal at Little Rock to protect its residents from perceived dangers of living on the frontier in close proximity to Indian Territory. Construction at the Little Rock Arsenal began in the late 1830s. The main building, also known as the Tower Building, was completed in 1841. The arsenal eventually had more than thirty buildings. During the Civil War, Confederates occupied the arsenal from 1861 to 1863, when federal troops took Little Rock. After the war, the arsenal was used as a military barracks.

In the early 1890s, the federal government announced that it would close several small military bases throughout the country, and the Little Rock Arsenal was on the list. However, a deal was struck in 1892 whereby the City of Little Rock traded the federal government 1,000 acres on Big Rock Mountain (in NLR) in exchange for the arsenal grounds. The new military base on Big Rock was named Fort Logan H. Roots, and the arsenal grounds became known as City Park. Only one building from the Little Rock Arsenal—the Tower Building—remains today. In 1942 City Park was renamed MacArthur Park in honor of General Douglas MacArthur, who was born at the arsenal in 1880. MacArthur Park is Little Rock's oldest municipal park.

In the 1930s, the Tower Building housed a school for physically handicapped children on the first floor and a lodge hall on the second floor. In 1942 the City moved its Museum of Natural History and Antiquities into the Tower Building. It remained there until the late 1990s, when it relocated to the River Market and now exists as the Museum of Discovery. The MacArthur Museum of Arkansas Military History opened in the Tower Building in 2001.

In 1936 the Works Progress Administration constructed a Museum of Fine Arts west of the Tower Building. Several additions have been built since that time, and in 1963 the Museum of Fine Arts became the Arkansas Arts Center.

*Back to the fire station...*

When Fire Station No. 2 was built in 1917, it featured elements of the Craftsman and Spanish Revival styles of architecture. However, the Spanish Revival design elements are no longer extant. As you can see from an old postcard, the gable ends above the second story awnings on the east and west sides originally featured Mission-style, shaped parapets with finials. Also, the fire station had a tile roof.

Craftsman-style characteristics on the fire station included its large front porch, which faced north on 12<sup>th</sup> Street, and was supported by tapered wood columns

on stone bases; as well as exposed rafter tails, false half-timbering in the gable ends, widely overhanging eaves with triangular knee braces underneath, a mixture of exterior materials, and multi-pane casement windows.

Now, if you were paying attention when you walked in, you'll remember that all of these details are still present, with the exception of the front porch. It has been enclosed. Originally, the station's two engine bays were accessed under the front porch.

Fire Station No. 2 served its original purpose until 1959, when a new building was constructed for Station No. 4 at the northwest corner of 9<sup>th</sup> and Sherman streets. The Little Rock Fire Department decided to close Station No. 2 and move its equipment to the new station on the north side of MacArthur Park. The new station opened in February 1960. [The station at 9<sup>th</sup> and Sherman was renumbered and is now Station No. 2. That building was remodeled between 1996 and 1998, increasing its height from one to two stories and the number of truck bays from two to five.]

### **Alterations to the Building/Later Uses**

The fire station's decorative parapets and tile roof were likely removed ca. 1960, when the building was renovated to house other groups like the City Beautiful Commission, Little Rock Garden Club, and a program for senior citizens called Senior Citizens Activities Today (SCAT). Another significant part of the early 1960s renovation was the removal of the original interior staircase and the installation of an exterior stair under the north porch. [See ca. 1960 photo.] After this change, access to the second floor was provided only by the exterior stair on the north façade. In other words, if you were inside the first floor, there was no way to get upstairs unless you walked outside. The truck bays were also boarded in the early '60s.

In the early 1970s, the front porch columns were removed, and the space was enclosed with brown brick and aluminum sash windows. The side porches were also enclosed at that time (and new exterior doors added).

A variety of programs continued to operate out of the building, including Meals on Wheels and the Council on Aging, at least until the late 1980s. The Arkansas Museum of Science and History (the present-day Museum of Discovery), then-located in the Arsenal Building at MacArthur Park, used the old firehouse for collections storage as well. When the science and history museum moved out of the Arsenal Building in 1997, the City's Parks and Recreation Department took over management of the old firehouse.

The old fire station was damaged by the tornado that devastated parts of downtown Little Rock in January 1999. The second story eaves were extensively damaged, and some of the second floor casement windows had actually blown off and were found in the Arts Center parking lot. The City of Little Rock spent about \$75,000 to make repairs after the tornado. Eaves were repaired/rebuilt, windows reglazed and reinstalled, side porch enclosures were removed, and the aluminum sash windows used in the front porch enclosure were replaced with more sympathetic casement windows of the same size.

The building was then used as a place to assemble sack lunches for the city's parks program.

### **Firehouse Hostel and Museum**

In 2006 Hostelling Arkansas, Inc., signed an agreement with the City of Little Rock to rehabilitate the old firehouse and turn it into a hostel and museum. After a decade of planning, fundraising, and hard work, the Firehouse Hostel and Museum hopes to open later this year. When completed, the facility will provide about 30 beds at very affordable rates. Firefighting memorabilia will also be displayed throughout the building. The Firehouse Hostel will be the first of its kind in Arkansas, as it will be affiliated with the worldwide network of Hostelling International, which assures that member facilities meet quality and safety standards at affordable prices.

The funding for the project has come from a variety of sources. The City Parks Department has contributed labor, and the City received a Historic Preservation Restoration Grant from the AHPP in 2012 (\$13,500) to pay for masonry and window repair, painting, and the exterior stairwell doors on the north elevation. A large amount of the work was completed with the help of donations and a dedicated group of volunteers. Hooray!

### **Interior Details**

- 4,663 square feet
- Point out original openings of truck bays & enclosed front porch
- Point to boarded openings where fire poles came down
- Original white glazed brick—the firehouse hostel group removed the wood veneer paneling that covered the interior walls and discovered the glazed brick. BUT it was all black, covered in dirt and soot, and apparently damaged by a fire inside the building in the 1970s. The brick was cleaned by volunteers, and the worst pieces were replaced using glazed brick from the maintenance room wall.
- Most of the original windows
- Reconstructed the main staircase
- Original wood floors upstairs
- Upstairs bathroom was originally one huge bathroom with commodes and showers. Now it is divided into men's and women's bathrooms.
- When the hostel opens, the first floor will be used as a common area for socializing, cooking, and doing laundry. The upstairs rooms will contain separate men's and women's quarters. The rooms in the enclosed front porch will be for the hostel manager and a handicapped accessible private room for guests.

Next tour is Friday, February 6 at the Matthews-Clauson-McCullough House, 10226 Miller Road, Sherwood.

Extra:

The Little Rock Fire Department currently operates 20 stations and has more than 400 employees.