

Sandwiching in History
North Little Rock Post Office
(now the Argenta Branch Library)
420 Main Street, NLR
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By: Rachel Silva



Intro

Good afternoon, my name is Rachel Silva, and I work for the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program. Thank you for coming, and welcome to the “Sandwiching in History” tour of the old North Little Rock Post Office. I’d like to thank Richard Theilig and Cathy Sarna with the William F. Laman Public Library System, Sandra Taylor Smith and Cary Bradburn with the North Little Rock History Commission, and Mr. Otto Seay, who worked at the downtown post office from 1958 to 1990, for their help with the tour.

For any architects in the audience, 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.

The North Little Rock Post Office was built in 1931-1932 and was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1983.

400 Block of Main Street

The 400 block of Main Street looked very different around the turn of the 20th century. At that time, it wasn't called Main Street—it was called Newton Avenue in honor of Thomas Willoughby Newton, Sr., whose heirs platted the town of Argenta in 1866 on his farmland. In 1904 the street name was changed to Main. The tracks of the Memphis & Little Rock Railroad ran right through the parking lot on the east side of the block, crossed Main Street, and went through the west side of the block where the 1-story buildings are located between the Street Building and the Faucette Brothers Bank Building (ACT).

In 1910 the Chicago, Rock Island & Pacific, which by that time had acquired the old Memphis & Little Rock line, moved operations over to Little Rock and closed their rail yard on E. 4th Street, so there wasn't much need for this section of track. As a concession to Argenta, the Rock Island built passenger and freight depots on the north side of the river in 1913. The freight depot was located in the parking lot just to the south of the post office (torn down about 1960), and the passenger depot is still standing at E. 4th and Hazel streets. By 1914 most of the railroad tracks that crossed Main Street and continued west through the neighborhood were pulled up, making the freight depot the end of the line. The freight depot is clearly visible in photos taken during the construction of the post office.

On November 22, 1905, the city council accepted a lease and eventual acquisition of land at the southeast corner of 5th and Main streets from the Rock Island Railroad for use as a city park. A few months prior to that, in July 1905, the City paid \$58.50 to construct a bandstand on the future park site. The city park eventually had playground equipment and a picnic area as well. The park was later chosen as the site for North Little Rock's first stand-alone post office building (1931-1932).

History of the Post Office in NLR

The Argenta branch of the Little Rock Postal System was established in 1871. By 1892 the post office was located in the Lemmer Block, which was the 100 block of E. 4th Street (near the site of the old Checkmate Club). From 1895 to 1899, the post office was in the Faucette-Cook Building at 421 Main. It was located at 114 W. 4th for a couple years, and in 1905 moved to 119 Main. In 1906 the post office moved back to the Lemmer Block on E. 4th (122 E. 4th), and then found a semi-permanent home in the Matthews Building, which spanned the entire east side of the 200 block of Main Street. From 1910 (when the Matthews Building was constructed) until 1918, the post office occupied a storefront in the southern half of the Matthews Building (202 Main). But on January 13, 1918, the southern half of the Matthews Building was badly damaged by fire, destroying the contents of the post office. By 1919 the post office had relocated to a storefront in the northern half of the Matthews Building (218 Main) and remained there until 1932, when the building at 5th & Main was completed.

In the 1920s North Little Rock mayors William Burns and Ross Lawhon pushed for the construction of a new, stand-alone post office building. The Keyes-Elliott Bill of 1930, which gave preference to the construction of new post office buildings in cities with annual postal receipts in excess of \$20,000 and in which sites were already owned by the municipality, almost guaranteed a new post office for North Little Rock. The Bill also permitted private architectural firms to compete for certain federal projects, an important source of revenue for private firms during the Great Depression.

The city park site at 5th and Main was selected for the new post office, and the Little Rock architectural firm of Thompson, Sanders & Ginocchio was hired to design the building. In December 1931 subcontracts were awarded and construction began. The McGregor & Pickett Construction Company of Little Rock served as general contractors. Sand, rock, and cement were provided by the Big Rock Stone and Material Company of Little Rock; structural steel from the Arkansas Foundry Company of Little Rock; iron fixtures and fittings from the

Benberg & Sons Iron Works of Little Rock; cut limestone from Walker Bros. of Bloomington, Indiana; granite from the John Clark Company of Rockville, Minnesota; and millwork from the Standard Lumber Company of Pine Bluff. The contract for excavation work was awarded to Grady Garms of Little Rock.

The excavation of the post office basement drew quite a crowd. According to the *North Little Rock Times*, more than 2,000 people showed up to watch a large steam shovel dig the basement, and the same number of spectators returned the next day. By the end of the second day, the steam shovel had dug a hole 10' deep and more than 80' long.

The post office opened on December 17, 1932. Jonathan A. Horton, who later succeeded Ross Lawhon as postmaster in the 1930s, was then superintendent of the north side postal service. Interestingly, the local post office remained a branch of the Little Rock postal system until July 1933, when North Little Rock was designated an independent station with its own postmaster. The city's first postmaster was Ross Lawhon, who also served as North Little Rock mayor and Pulaski County judge.

On July 28, 1933, the *North Little Rock Times* ran a two-page ad celebrating the city's new post office and postmaster. It read, "North Little Rock's new post office building, located at Fifth and Main streets, is one of the most pretentious in the business section of the city. Its construction gave to this city its first post office building, and with this building came the separation from Little Rock...The new post office building provides every modern facility for the handling of postal matters...North Little Rock is proud of her new post office..."

Architecture

The North Little Rock Post Office was designed in the Colonial Revival style, which was typical for post offices constructed during the 1920s and '30s. The term "Colonial Revival" refers to the entire rebirth of interest in the early English and Dutch houses of the Atlantic seaboard. The post office features several

characteristics of the style, including its symmetrical façade, multi-pane windows, accentuated front door, and entrance portico supported by Corinthian columns.

Original Interior Floor Plans

Basement—

The post office has a full basement. Originally, there were two small storage rooms on the south end of the basement, one large storage room across the west wall (now the railroad room), an even larger room along the east wall (now the auditorium) for the boiler (originally steam heat) and parcel sorting area, and three rooms across the north end of the basement (the room at the northeast corner was used for coal storage in the early days).

When someone brought a parcel into the lobby, it was taken at window no. 2 (which had a larger opening) and was placed on a conveyor belt down to the basement. Parcels were sorted in the basement and then placed on a conveyor up to the rear loading dock, where they were put onto trucks and delivered.

First floor (main floor)—

From the front door, you entered a wooden vestibule, which opened into the lobby. The lobby was long and narrow along the west side of the first floor and featured marble wainscoting, marble-faced pilasters with decorative plaster capitals, and dentil molding.

A partial wall separated the lobby from a work area. The counter was along that wall, as were the post office boxes.

The finance division was located in the south end of the lobby. The finance division handled the Postal Savings System, which was established by an Act of Congress in 1910 to provide a safe and convenient depository for working people. Money deposited in a postal savings account was then re-deposited in a local bank, where it earned 2.5 % interest. The Postal Savings System paid 2 % interest per year on deposits. The half-percent difference in interest was intended to pay

for the operation of the system. The Postal Savings System ended in the late 1960s. The finance division had its own vault for storage of deposits (that vault is no longer in the building).

Along the north end of the first floor, going from west to east, there was the main stairwell, the postmaster's office with private restroom and vault (both still there), assistant postmaster's office, and a "swing room" for post office staff (the swing room had lockers, a dressing area, and was also used as a break room). The vault in the postmaster's office contained the master stamp stock for the entire city of North Little Rock, which amounted to several thousand dollars-worth of stamps. Because of this and the postal savings system, a pistol was always kept at the counter in case the post office was robbed.

The middle area of the first floor (now the adult stacks) was used as a work room and provided access to post office boxes. The ceiling of the middle area originally went all the way up above the tall rear windows (later covered by a drop ceiling and reopened during renovation).

Second floor—

The second floor was U-shaped, with the middle of the "U" being the upper part of the first floor work room. This design was intentional. Lookout galleries or "inspector chutes" overlooked the first floor work area. Postal inspectors made random, unannounced visits to the post office and could access the building without being noticed. The chutes were on the north and south sides of the "U" and were painted black inside with little push-button lights to guide inspectors. Once inside the chute, inspectors could view almost every room in the building through a series of small, narrow openings. They were watching to make sure no one stole money, stamps, or items from packages.

The south end of the second floor housed segregated restrooms with showers and swing rooms for postal carriers. The black carrier's toilet/shower and swing room were in the southeast corner of the second floor, and the white carrier's

toilet/shower and swing room were at the southwest corner of the second floor. A stairwell separated the two areas.

A large, raised area along the west side of the second floor served as a storage attic. Three offices for postal employees were later built in this area (now the computer lab).

Two large offices and a public restroom were located along the north side of the second floor. The offices were occupied by several different tenants over the years, including the Arkansas District of the Civilian Conservation Corps (1930s), U.S. Coast Guard (1940s), Department of Labor (1940s), Internal Revenue Service (1956-1976), U.S. Treasury Department (1960s), and Jack H. Williams Accountants (1993-2002).

Closure of Post Office

Much to the dismay of downtown merchants, in 1962 Postmaster Gene Burks announced that the city's main post office would probably be moved to a new building on Pershing Avenue in the Military Heights Urban Renewal Area. In July 1965 the main post office was in fact moved to Pershing, and the downtown building became a branch post office. Saturday window service was eliminated in 1988, and in 2007 weekday service hours were cut back to close at 1 p.m. The U.S. Postal Service closed North Little Rock's historic downtown post office on June 15, 2012.

With a loan from the City of North Little Rock, the William F. Laman Public Library System bought the post office building for \$775,000 on September 30, 2012.

[The North Little Rock Public Building Authority issued \$3.5 million in bonds on the library's behalf to cover the \$775,000 purchase price and \$2.8 million in expected renovations. The Public Building Authority will then own the building that the library will lease for 10 years to pay off the loan. After the loan is paid,

the Public Building Authority will deed the building to the Laman Library Commission.]

Post Office Renovation

In May 2006 the Laman Library opened an Argenta Branch in the first floor of the old fire station and city hall building at 506 Main. By 2012, the Argenta Branch was a bit cramped in its 2,500-square foot space and needed more room, thus the decision to buy the old post office. Renovation of the old post office began on March 5, 2013. The \$2.8 million project converted the building into a new home for the Argenta Branch Library with 15,300 square feet of public space, including a children's department, computer lab, gallery & exhibit hall, auditorium, meeting room, and more than 12,000 books for children, teens, and adults. Allison Architects designed the new library space, and CBM Construction Company was the contractor. The Argenta Branch Library opened on April 5, 2014.

Renovation Details

Original light fixture in portico was taken down and restored

In lobby--Original fixtures, marble wainscoting, columns with decorative capitals, dentil molding, vestibule, and one of the customer tables (the other one is back in the vending area)

Original interior wood doors in some places

Postmaster's vault and postmaster's private restroom are still intact (restroom has original marble stall and hardware)

During the renovation of the building, the drop ceiling was removed, and the second floor was cantilevered out to create more floor space in the children's area upstairs. A walkway was added on the east side of the second floor so you could make a loop around that floor.

Also during the renovation, an elevator was installed on the south side of the building. They did a really good job with it and even used the historic windows from the spot where they cut into the building in the elevator tower.

And an additional fire stair was added in the northeast corner of the building.

Several photos taken during the construction of the post office are framed and displayed in the back hallway on the first floor. Be sure to check those out.

We also have some original plans laid out in the area that was once the postmaster's office.

Invite everyone to Lamanpalooza—August 2 (tomorrow) from 10 to 2 behind the Argenta Branch Library. They'll have inflatables, a zip line, DJ, and food. Event is free and open to the public.

Our next "Sandwiching" tour will visit the Rozelle-Murphy House, 1301 Scott, Little Rock, on September 5.

The post office basement was identified as a suitable bomb shelter in the 1960s.

On August 24, 1951, assistant postmaster and 30-year postal service employee Harvey C. Horton shot himself in the basement of the NLR Post Office. No explanation was given for the suicide, but Horton had submitted his resignation the previous week. He appeared to be in bad health and refused to take a vacation, even though the postmaster had urged him to do so.

Ghost stories—a few library employees have heard musical instruments played in the break room and railroad room (basement), things like percussion and a harmonica. They think it is Harvey Horton's ghost.

Also, a library employee saw the ghost of a blonde girl in the upstairs women's restroom.

Library history—

The NLR Public Library first opened in June 1946 in a 2-story house at 211 Maple Street, on the site of the old Rye Furniture Building. In 1959 voters approved a bond issue to fund the construction of a new library at Pershing and Orange Street. The new library was built in 1961-1962, and in December 1962 it was named for Mayor William F. “Casey” Laman (1958-72 and 1979-80). A new wing was added to the Laman Library in 1968, and a 2002-2003 renovation nearly doubled the size of the library. The Argenta Branch opened in 2006 at 506 Main and moved to its current home in the old post office in 2014.