

Sandwiching in History
Barney L. Elias House
335 Goshen Avenue, North Little Rock
June 6, 2014
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 Elias House! Let’s thank homeowners Mark Mathews and Beth Seward for allowing us to tour their beautiful home! I’d also like to introduce and thank some special guests--

Carolyn Elias, who was married to Barney Elias for 54 years, and their daughter, Kimberly Elias, and granddaughter, Jenna Rose.

And many thanks to Sandra Taylor Smith with the NLR History Commission, Joe Whalen, Charley Baxter, and Betsy Davies for their help.

For any architects in the audience, this tour is worth 1 hour of HSW continuing education credit through the American Institute of Architects. See me after the tour if you’re interested.

Park Hill: NLR's First Suburban Development

The Park Hill housing development, which now encompasses more than 1,600 acres, was the **brainchild of businessman Justin Matthews, Sr. (1876-1955)**. Justin Matthews, a native of Monticello, Arkansas, moved to Little Rock in 1901, the same year he married Agnes Somers. Prior to his marriage, Matthews, who had a pharmacy degree, owned and operated three drug stores in southeast Arkansas. Agnes Somers Matthews, who was also from a prominent family, urged her new husband to take a job selling cotton oil mills over a four-state area for a company based out of St. Louis. Matthews got rid of his drug stores and began selling cotton oil mills. He enticed clients to buy a mill by investing his own 10 percent commission in the venture. In 1902, Matthews, himself, opened the Rose City Cotton Oil Mill, promoting development in the community east of downtown NLR. After about four years in the business, Matthews had sold 88 cotton oil mills and decided to sell his stock, earning him upwards of \$1 million (he was only in his late 20s at the time).

About 1908 Matthews began to invest in real estate, acquiring land on both sides of the Arkansas River. He realized the potential for residential growth in North Little Rock, so he diligently worked to make the north side of the river easily accessible and more desirable. The north side of the Arkansas River was low-lying and swampy, most streets were unpaved, and there was no drainage or sewer system. Water usually stood on the streets after each heavy rain, making them impassable for automobile traffic.

Matthews spearheaded the plan to create improvement districts in North Little Rock to fund the paving of city streets in 1913 and the construction of a drainage and sewer system in 1914. He also served on the Broadway-Main Street Bridge Commission beginning in 1917, which ultimately constructed the Broadway (1923) and Main Street (1927; since replaced) bridges to replace an older bridge that could only accommodate one vehicle at a time. Matthews also pushed for the construction in 1927 of a new viaduct over the railroad tracks between 8th and 13th streets in North Little Rock. It was no accident that the Ark-Mo Highway

(now John F. Kennedy Boulevard/Hwy. 107) was one of the first paving projects undertaken by the state highway commission. Governor John Martineau appointed Matthews to the commission (1927), and the highway just happened to be the main thoroughfare through Park Hill.

Park Hill was the **first major suburban development in North Little Rock** and the **second development in the Greater Little Rock area**—Pulaski Heights was the first (platted in **1892; took off in 1903 with the streetcar**). Matthews **platted the first sections of Park Hill in 1921**. Even though Park Hill was the LR area's **second** major suburban development (after Pulaski Heights), it was the **first to rely solely on automobile transportation** (Pulaski Heights developers also relied on a streetcar system). Park Hill was advertised as the **“second Pulaski Heights,”** but with more advantages like **closer proximity to downtown** Little Rock and North Little Rock, **greater elevation** (which provided cooler temperatures and health benefits), **better views**, and **level land**.

His advertisements even mentioned the fact that the roads leading to Park Hill ran north-south, so you **wouldn't have to face the sun** going to and from work like you would if you lived in Pulaski Heights (located west of downtown LR).

Matthews formed the **Park Hill Land Company** to market, sell, and develop the area, while the Justin Matthews Company would extend his developments to other parts of central Arkansas (including Sylvan Hills—now in Sherwood, Westwood—in southwest LR, and after WWII, Lakewood—just north of Park Hill). At its peak, the Justin Matthews Company **employed over 200 people**, including an **architect/builder (Frank Carmean)**, **brick mason (Julius Bender)**, **horticulturist/landscape artist (Oscar Wilhelm)**, and **road construction engineer (Robert Massey)**. Justin Matthews built houses to **“endure the ravages of time.”**

In order to make the area more attractive to families with young children, Matthews built Park Hill Elementary School in 1924-1925 and gave it to the NLR School District. More than 200 houses had been constructed in Park Hill by 1927,

when Matthews laid out his plan for an upscale section of Park Hill called Edgemont.

Edgemont comprised blocks 101 through 107 of the Park Hill development. **Skyline Drive** was the main street through the Edgemont section and curved along the crest of a hill, providing spectacular views of downtown Little Rock and North Little Rock. The houses built in Edgemont were supposed to be **larger and more expensive** than other houses in Park Hill. In fact, Edgemont was restricted to homes costing \$6,000 and up. Unfortunately, Matthews' timing for the opening of Edgemont was very poor. Only **sixteen houses were built before the Great Depression hit**, bringing construction to a halt. There was no new construction in Edgemont from 1931 until 1945.

Although residential development in Park Hill slowed during the Depression, a few significant projects were completed in the late 1930s. The Park Hill Fire Station and Water Company complex at 3417 Magnolia was built in 1938 using materials and labor provided by the Park Hill Water Company and the Works Progress Administration. The Mediterranean-style buildings were designed by the Little Rock architectural firm of Brueggeman, Swaim & Allen. The firm was well known in central Arkansas by the late 1930s and also designed the similar looking **M. S. McCord House** at 3201 Magnolia Street (1936).

In 1939-1940 Brueggeman, Swaim & Allen designed one of the area's first shopping centers at the northeast corner of present-day "D" Street and JFK. Known as the Park Hill Community Building, the complex housed the Park Theater, one of many theaters the Brueggeman firm designed for Malco Theatres, Inc. across the country during the 1930s (the Park Hill Community Building was demolished in 2003 to make way for the current shopping center). Brueggeman, Swaim & Allen also designed the Rialto Theater in downtown NLR (built in 1930 and demolished in early 1970s to make way for the Twin City Bank Building—now US Bank—in the 200 block of Main Street). Interestingly, Malco Theatres, Inc. was owned by Park Hill residents Mose S. McCord and Max J. Pruniski (a third partner lived in Memphis), and the Brueggeman firm designed both of their homes in the

1930s (I've already mentioned the McCord House, and the Pruniski House is next door at 345 Goshen, built in 1937 & NR-listed). Guy Swaim, a member of the Brueggeman firm, lived on "A" Street in Park Hill.

Residential development in Park Hill increased during the 1940s—first because of men being stationed at nearby Camp Robinson for training during WWII and then after the war when the soldiers came home. North Little Rock annexed Park Hill in 1946.

Goshen Avenue

Goshen Avenue was named for the Goshen family, who retained ownership of their land between the Park Hill and Lakewood developments and grew produce in the area northwest of Snake Hill (Avondale Road between Park Hill & Lakewood). The Goshens had a "truck garden" set-up and sold vegetables around the neighborhood. [Their property has since been developed with newer homes.]

In 1928-1929 the Justin Matthews Company built the International-style house at 406 Goshen to serve as a "model home" in a new section of Park Hill. The company's Modernistic home was designed to bring people to Park Hill, but the Depression slowed development in this section.

A comparison of the 1939 and 1950 Sanborn fire insurance maps indicates that the southeastern end of Goshen Avenue (between Delmar and A Street) was relatively undeveloped until the 1940s. [In 1939 there were 5 houses on this part of the street between Delmar and A, including the Matthews House at 406 Goshen and the Pruniski House at 345 Goshen.]

Elias Family & House

In 1949 contractor Barney Elias built this house for himself and his family. Although it has not been confirmed, I am almost certain that the house was designed by the firm of Brueggeman, Swaim & Allen.

Barney Levin Elias was born on October 18, 1921, at Okolona, Mississippi, to Jewish parents Edward and Ruth Elias. Barney always wanted to attend law school. In fact, he attended Louisiana State University in 1939 and 1940 but had to come home because his family couldn't afford to put both of their sons through college during the Depression (his older brother, Charlie, finished). The Elias family moved to Little Rock when Barney was 18 years old (about 1939) and lived in the 2400 block of Broadway (where Sims BBQ and Hair Plus are located today). Barney's uncle owned a liquor distributorship in Little Rock, and Barney drove for him. Barney was drafted during World War II but only served a short time because he had asthma.

In the 1940s, Elias started Tri-State Construction Company, along with his father, Edward, and brother, Charles. Barney was in charge and did all of the bidding, Edward was the bookkeeper, and Charles was the construction superintendent. In 1948 when Barney Elias was just 27 years old, his company was awarded the contract to build the Arkansas Governor's Mansion.

Designed by the firm of Ginocchio & Cromwell, the Arkansas Governor's Mansion was built from 1948-1950 on the site of the old Arkansas School for the Blind (which was demolished in 1939 & old bricks salvaged for the mansion's exterior). After looking at the architect's plans, Elias knew that the state appropriation of \$100,000 for construction wouldn't be enough to build the mansion. So he submitted the lowest bid (\$94,235) by omitting doors, light fixtures, bathroom fixtures, tile work, heating, and the rear terrace. These items were identified as "alternatives" that would be added later when money was available. Obviously, no one would live in the mansion without lights or toilets, so additional appropriations were made to cover the "alternatives." [John Gill's *Open House: The Arkansas Governor's Mansion and Its Place in History*]

Of particular note was Elias's construction of the concrete circular stairway in the Governor's Mansion. The staircase is cantilevered from the wall without any support. When asked how he built it, Elias said, "I just did a lot of measuring." The stairs were built from the basement up, and each tread is set four inches into the

wall. In addition, Elias used steel joists, rather than wood, and poured concrete was used for the floors in the Governor's Mansion. The exterior mansion walls were brick with a cavity between the two rows of brick for insulation and moisture protection. Barney would use some of these construction methods in his own house.

In addition to the Governor's Mansion, Tri-State Construction Company built post offices, the NLR High School Athletic Building, Lakewood Elementary (1955?), buildings at LR Air Force Base (1953-55), and buildings at the AR School for the Blind, among many others (they built commercial, industrial, residential, and institutional buildings as well as public water and sewer facilities).

Barney built this home in 1949 at a cost of \$16,000, which is equivalent to about \$160,000 today but was far above what other people were spending on homes in this area at that time. The house is situated on 2.5 lots (Park Hill Addition, Block 2, East half of lot 19 and all of lots 20 & 21). Elias used poured concrete for the foundation, and the exterior walls are solid brick with a cavity in between two rows of brick for insulation/moisture protection.

Barney Elias and his first wife, Frances "Daphyne" Knight Elias, had three children: Edward Knight Elias, Eve Elias Green, and Barney O'Neal "Neal" Elias. In January 1954 Daphyne Elias was killed after her car struck a utility pole, and the downed wires electrocuted her.

In 1957 Barney Elias married Carolyn Parrish and they had two daughters: Kimberly Ann Elias and Kate Elias Schaffer.

The Elias family moved to Jacksonville, Illinois, in 1969, and Barney continued in the construction business. Barney was very active in the community. He participated in civic clubs, political campaigns, and even helped to start the local Crimestoppers program. Elias passionately advocated for the construction of Corridor 67, a highway from the Illinois/Iowa Quad Cities to St. Louis, which is still under construction today. Barney and Carolyn Elias bought a vacation home on

Lake Hamilton in Hot Springs in 1978 and retired there in 1991. While living in Hot Springs, Barney became a member of the First United Methodist Church. He died on June 5, 2011, at the age of 89.

Architecture

The Elias House was obviously influenced by the Modern Movement. Carolyn Elias described the house as “avant-garde, forward, modern, and different” and said, “People either liked it or hated it.” The home was designed using a blend of the Art Moderne and International styles of architecture.

Art Moderne—After 1930, streamlined industrial designs for ships, airplanes, and automobiles influenced building design. Art Moderne-style buildings typically featured smooth wall surfaces, curved corners, and a horizontal emphasis, giving the feeling that air streams could move smoothly over them. Although the Elias House does not have curved corners, it displays other characteristics of the Art Moderne style, like its smooth wall surface, bands of rusticated brick, and porthole window (the front door used to have three staggered porthole windows).

International—Between World War I and World War II, European architects were designing modern buildings using new materials and technology, namely a metal structural framework and concrete. They wanted to create an architectural style that would transcend national boundaries and specifically chose white stucco as a unifying exterior material. Their designs came to be known as the International style after 1932, when New York’s Museum of Modern Art hosted the influential “Modern Architecture: International Exhibition.” Although the Elias House was not built using a metal structural framework (it has solid brick walls), it features a smooth, white façade, large sections of blank, windowless walls, and a lack of exterior ornamentation.

The interesting thing is...Barney didn't care what the house looked like. According to Carolyn, he hired a good architect, tried to keep the costs down, and built it to last.

The home's design is attributed to the Little Rock firm of Brueggeman, Swaim & Allen, which I talked about earlier. Here's why I think so—
Barney Elias worked with that firm quite a bit (as a contractor on buildings they designed),
the firm designed the Pruniski House next door,
Guy Swaim lived in Park Hill (115 W. "A" Street),
the firm was designing a lot of Modernistic buildings at that time,
and Carolyn Elias remembered that the architect's first name was Ed (and not Ed Cromwell).

St. Louis native Edward Frederick Brueggeman moved to Little Rock in 1928 and worked for the firm of Thompson, Sanders & Ginocchio until he opened his own practice in 1932. He was joined in 1933 by Little Rock native Guy Winfield Swaim, Jr. (who was a longtime resident of Park Hill). In 1936 William "Bill" Samuel Allen joined the firm, making it Brueggeman, Swaim & Allen. The firm designed many landmark buildings in central Arkansas, including the VA Building on Roosevelt Road (along with Erhart, Eichenbaum & Rauch), the Federal Building on Capitol (along with E, E & R and Cromwell), St. Vincent Infirmary at Markham & University (with E, E & R), Our Lady of Holy Souls Catholic Church, and Catholic High School. [By the late 1980s, the firm was Wellborn Henderson Associates.]

Other occupants

After the Elias family moved to Illinois, the house was occupied by a series of individuals.

1970—William S. Roberts and wife, Audrey. He was in the U.S. Air Force.

1971—Gordon Patterson and wife, Ann. Patterson was an architect at the LR firm of Wittenberg, Delony & Davidson. He is currently listed online as Associate Professor Emeritus of Architectural Studies at Clemson University (S. Carolina).

1972—Patterson (after he got the job at Clemson, the Pattersons rented the house. It was a bachelor pad during some of those years and was kind of a party house).

1973—Vacant

1974—Vacant

1975—Thomas K. Arnold and wife, Nancy. He worked for Arnold & Co., cabinetmakers at 1305 North Hills Blvd., NLR

1977—Arnold

1978—Roy Nicholas and wife, Nancy. He was a salesman.

1979—Vacant

1980—Anne M. Callis

1981—Steph F. Narisi, office worker

1982—No Return

1983—Michael Clark, MoPac Railroad

1984-2014—Mark Mathews

Mark & Beth

Mark Mathews is a 3rd generation Park Hill resident and grew up on Cypress Street. He always admired the Elias House. When Beth saw that this house was for sale, she immediately wanted to buy it. They purchased the home in 1983 and have been here ever since.

Mark does commercial photography, and Beth does marketing for the ear, nose & throat department at UAMS. They have one son, Houston, who is 26.

Notable features of house

Some of the floors, the staircase, the window sills, and the back patio floor are marble that came from a historic bank building (possibly in Malvern) that Elias was renovating at the time.

Decorative grille separates the entryway from the sunken living room.

Aluminum balustrade on staircase.

Original sandblasted fir paneling in Mark's office and in the guest room upstairs (guest room also has original sandblasted fir valences on windows).

Original metal-frame windows (only one has been replaced—above kitchen sink).

Original stainless steel countertops and metal cabinets in kitchen.

Original tile in bathrooms and most of the original hardware.

The house was originally designed with an innovative passive cooling system. The roof had a big dip in the middle to hold water on purpose (roof pond). A valve in the upstairs bathroom could be turned to flood the roof, and a pipe (which you

can see in Houston's room) allowed excess water to drain. Needless to say, the roof has been replaced many times!

Original parquet floor in Mark's office and dining room

Upstairs floor is original oak, but it has been white-washed and treated to make it lighter (like bamboo).

Screened porch on east side of house

Concrete pad out back originally had built-in tables and a grill

Detached Garage—built sometime after 1950 (not on 1950 Sanborn map), and second owners put a shed roof on it.

Extra room at end of upstairs hall & Rooftop terrace—at some point, a room was added to the second floor at the end of the hall. It was originally just the roof, and then tile was put down on the floor and a parapet wall built around the roof to make the area into a rooftop terrace. They eventually enclosed the tiled area as another room, and now you can access the rooftop terrace from a door in that room.

The house currently has 4 bedrooms and 2.5 bathrooms.

About 3,500 square feet

NOT ALLOWED to see laundry/basement or upstairs master bedroom!!!

***The NLR History Commission has copies of Cary Bradburn's *On the Opposite Shore: The Making of NLR* for sale today. \$15 for an autographed copy! Perfect for Father's Day.

Next tour is July 11 at the Dickinson House, 515 W. 15th Street, LR (Rosemont B & B).

Extras:

Barney's brother, Charlie Elias, was the historian for Temple B'nai Israel and collected old guns.

Venetian plaster wall in the entryway was done by Mark Mathews. Looks like marble but is not.