

Sandwiching in History
Philander Smith College Historic District
900 W. Daisy Bates Drive, Little Rock
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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 Philander Smith College! I’d like to thank Professor Jonathan Hutchins for his help with the tour.

For any architects in the audience, this tour is worth 1 hour of HSW (Health, Safety, Welfare) continuing education credit through the American Institute of Architects. See me or Patricia Blick after the tour if you are interested.

The Philander Smith College Historic District includes buildings associated with the first historically black, four-year institution of higher learning in Arkansas and was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1999.

Brief History of Philander Smith College

Walden Seminary, the precursor to Philander Smith College, was established on November 7, 1877, to serve as the official educational institution of the Little Rock Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church (North).

Some quick background information on the Methodist Church—

The largest and most divisive split in the Methodist Church happened in 1844 over the issue of slavery. The Methodist Episcopal Church, South supported slavery, while the Methodist Episcopal Church (North) did not. Most Methodist Episcopal (North) churches in Arkansas ceased worship until Reconstruction. Even after the Civil War, Arkansas Methodists were segregated in two separate conferences within the state—black Methodist congregations belonged to the Little Rock Annual Conference. The Uniting Conference of 1939 joined the Methodist Episcopal Church, South and Methodist Episcopal Church (North) to form the Methodist Church. The United Methodist Church was created in 1968 when the Methodist Church joined with the Evangelical United Brethren Church. The Methodist Church remained racially segregated by annual conferences until 1972.

Walden Seminary was named in honor of Bishop John Morgan Walden, a founding member and secretary of the Freedmen's Aid Society, and was located in the Wesley Chapel Methodist Episcopal Church at Eighth and Broadway in Little Rock. [The Freedmen's Aid Society was founded by the Methodist Episcopal Church (North) in 1866 to encourage the establishment of schools and colleges for African-Americans in the South.] In 1879 Walden Seminary moved with the church to a new location at Tenth and Center streets, and shortly thereafter, operations at the seminary were temporarily suspended due to a shortage of funds.

The seminary reopened in 1881, and the following year, it received a gift of \$10,500 from Adeline Smith, widow of Philander Smith of Oak Park, Illinois, which prompted the institution to change its name to Philander Smith College. Before his death, Philander Smith donated money for mission work in Asia and was interested in the work of the Methodist Episcopal Church in the South. In the 1880s, Mrs. Smith's endowment enabled the college to construct buildings on a new site at Eleventh and Icard streets. In 1883 land at the southeast corner of Eleventh and State streets was purchased for the relocation of Wesley Chapel ME Church, just one block east of the Philander Smith College campus.

On March 3, 1883, Philander Smith College became the first historically black, four-year college in Arkansas. The college offered vocational training as well as courses in journalism, advertising composition, Greek, Latin, algebra, and natural philosophy and awarded both Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Science degrees. Religious education was required as part of the curriculum. In addition to college-level classes, Philander Smith also operated grammar and secondary schools. The grammar school was eliminated in 1923, followed by the secondary school in the early 1930s.

In 1925 George R. Smith College, which was founded in 1894 at Sedalia, Missouri, by the Freedmen's Aid Society of the ME Church, burned. At that time, Robert B. Hayes, former head of the Science Department at Philander Smith, was the president of George R. Smith College. In 1933 the assets of George R. Smith College were transferred to Philander Smith College, signifying a merger of the two institutions.

In July 1948, during the administration of Philander Smith College President Dr. Marquis LaFayette Harris, the college purchased the former Little Rock Junior College site on the block bounded by 12th, State, 13th, and IZard streets from the Little Rock School District. [Due to an increase in enrollment after World War II, in 1947 the Little Rock Junior College moved to an 80-acre site on the east side of Hayes Street (now University Avenue), leaving behind the old U. M. Rose School and a gymnasium built with WPA labor at 13th and State streets. Little Rock Junior College exists today as the University of Arkansas at Little Rock.] Philander Smith College was fully accredited in March 1949 by the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, making it the first black institution in Arkansas to receive such an accreditation. Dr. Harris continued to grow the physical plant throughout the 1950s.

The construction of Interstate 630, which began in 1964 and was completed in 1985, cut a 200-foot-wide swath through the city's African-American business district and also claimed the homes of many low-income residents, most of them black. Philander Smith College was not spared. Although the college's late

nineteenth century buildings at Eleventh and Izard are no longer extant, five buildings contribute to the historic significance of the Philander Smith College Historic District.

****Show Sanborn maps of Philander Smith buildings**

****Individual building details**

Google map #1—Interesting to note that PSC acquired about 3 ½ city blocks from the Little Rock Housing Authority in January 1969. These blocks were once occupied by houses and a few businesses but had been cleared by the Housing Authority with federal Urban Renewal money (in the early 1960s).

U. M. Rose School (James Monroe Cox Administration Building)--

The U. M. Rose School was built near the site of the Fort Steele School, which was built in 1885, “rebuilt” in 1909, and faced east on State Street. The Fort Steele School was destroyed by fire in April 1915. Fort Steele—built to defend Little Rock from a Confederate counterattack after LR fell to Union troops on September 10, 1863. Named for Union General Frederick Steele. Civil War Sesquicentennial marker at 16th & Gaines. The school took its name from the nearby fort.

Designed by Little Rock architect John Parks Almand in the Colonial Revival style, the U. M. Rose Elementary School was built in 1915 and served as an elementary until 1930. The school was named in honor of Uriah Milton Rose, a founding member of the American Bar Association and the Rose Law Firm in Little Rock. From 1931 to 1948, the Rose School was used as classroom and office space for the Little Rock Junior College. Philander Smith College used the building for classrooms, administrative offices, a bookstore, post office, and recreational rooms. Since 1975 the building has been known as the James Monroe Cox Administration Building in honor of Rev. James Monroe Cox, a professor of classical languages and the second president of Philander Smith College (served 1896 to 1924). It currently houses administrative and faculty offices and classrooms.

--Vacant block in front of the Cox Building—Full of buildings until about 1961, when they were demolished with Urban Renewal money. The Hotel Charmaine was located at the northeast corner of Daisy Bates & Izard. It was built in 1910 as a residence, and then became a hospital, and finally a popular hotel for African-Americans.

Old Gym (Sherman E. Tate Student Recreation Center)--

The Old Gym, now known as the Sherman E. Tate Student Recreation Center, was built in 1936 with Works Progress Administration labor. Historically, it was used for basketball games, classes, and special presentations. Today it serves as a temporary dining hall for students, faculty, and staff. The gym was restored with a grant from the National Park Service through its initiative to restore significant buildings on the campuses of Historically Black Colleges and Universities.

Kelly Hall--

Built in 1952, Kelly Hall was designed in the Colonial Revival style by John Parks Almand to serve as the president's home and guest quarters. It currently houses the Office of Institutional Advancement.

Barracks--

In 1948 Philander Smith College President Dr. M. L. Harris obtained a government surplus building from Camp Robinson in North Little Rock for use on the college campus. Known as the Barracks, it originally served as the headquarters for the commanding general at Camp Robinson. After its relocation to Philander Smith, the Barracks housed the Student Union and later an office for alumni and the United Negro College Fund. In 2009 the Craftsman-style Barracks was renovated to serve as a residence hall and learning center for honor students. It is currently vacant.

Wesley Chapel UMC--

The Wesley Chapel United Methodist Church at the southeast corner of Eleventh and State streets was constructed in 1927 to replace an earlier church building heavily damaged by fire. The Wesley Chapel was designed by John Parks Almand

using a combination of the Romanesque and Gothic Revival styles. It features an asymmetrical plan with a corner tower, steeply pitched roof, and arched window openings with elaborate terra cotta tracery. The congregation of Wesley Chapel United Methodist Church dates to 1854 when the church was located at Eighth and Broadway and was one of the first Methodist organizations in Little Rock used exclusively for African-American worship. The church has been tied to the college since 1877, when Walden Seminary was organized in the original Wesley Chapel. Although the church building is owned by the United Methodist Church, it is used frequently by Philander Smith College for religious activities and community programs.

M. L. Harris Library and Fine Arts Center—not old enough to be “contributing” at the time of the NR nomination, but definitely significant and should be reevaluated.

The M. L. Harris Library and Fine Arts Center was designed by Little Rock architect Dietrich Neyland and was built in 1961-1963 to house a 650-seat auditorium, library, and classrooms. The building is a very interesting example of Mid-Century Modern architecture. It is oriented toward the south and its east and west elevations consist of glass curtain walls screened by decorative concrete block.

Dietrich Neyland was born in Shreveport, LA, in 1914. After graduating from high school, he interned under the Louisiana Modernist architect Samuel Weiner before attending Tulane University to study architecture, during which time he was also an all-star basketball player. He then went on to intern under the world famous architect Richard Nuetra in California for a little over a year before he joined the U.S. Navy during WWII as an officer. After the war, Neyland returned to Shreveport and took a position with the local firm of Flaxman & Van Oss. While in Shreveport, he designed the Negro High School on Milam Street, now called Booker T. Washington New Technology High School. This school was widely celebrated and was even named one of the 10 Best High Schools in the country in the October 19, 1950 issue of *Life Magazine*. In 1949 Neyland was approached by Ed Cromwell, of Cromwell & Ginocchio, with an offer to move to Arkansas for the purpose of bringing Modernism to the state. Neyland accepted and started in

1950. Neyland became a named partner in 1961 and continued to practice at the firm until the 1990s. During his time at Cromwell, he was responsible for dozens of buildings including Brough Commons at the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville (1955), Forest Heights Junior High in Little Rock (1954), Reynolds Elementary in Morrilton (1956), LRU Cafeteria in Little Rock (1956), the Fine Arts Building and a dormitory at Philander Smith College in Little Rock, the KTHV Building in Little Rock (1955), National Bank of Eastern Arkansas in Forrest City (1959), the Automotive Museum on Petit Jean (1960), and Davis Hall at UAPB (1950).

The M. L. Harris Building is reminiscent of Carlson Terrace at the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville. Carlson Terrace was designed by internationally-known Arkansas architect Edward Durell Stone in 1957 to serve as married student housing but was demolished in 2007. It is important to recognize and appreciate Mid-Century Modern architecture for what it is—it may not be “pretty,” but it represents an avant-garde period in building design, where people were trying new construction methods and new building materials. Very cool.

Today Philander Smith College operates as a private institution affiliated with the United Methodist Church and has a current enrollment of 556 students.

Methodist Bishop Gary E. Mueller’s office is located in the Kendall Center at Philander Smith.

Philander Smith College closed its campus streets to through-traffic in the early 1980s.

New buildings—1990s, 2000s, 2010s. Currently building a new student center east of the Cox Building (Taggart architects).

Reynolds Library & Technology Center (2003-2004)—houses a multi-million dollar art collection. Check it out!

Next tour is May 2 at the Columbus Owen O'Kelley House at 413 W. 5th Street in NLR.

Pastor at Wesley Chapel UMC is Rev. Ronnie Miller-Yow. PSC students attend chapel every first Thursday in the church.