

**Sandwiching in History**  
**Villa Marre**  
**1321 Scott Street, Little Rock**  
**July 12, 2013**  
**By: Rachel Silva**



*Villa Marre, 1321 Scott St., Little Rock*



*Villa Marre's parquet floor*

## **Intro**

Hi, my name is Rachel Silva, and I work for the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program. Welcome to the “Sandwiching in History” tour of the Villa Marre! I’d like to thank RWL Investments and events coordinator AJ Hughes for allowing us to see this wonderful property today.

The Angelo and Jennie Marre House, better known as the Villa Marre, was built in 1881-1882 and was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1970 because it is a rare example of the Second Empire style of architecture in Little Rock, and because of its association with notable figures in Arkansas history.

## **Scott Street as a desirable address...**

Little Rock experienced a post-Civil War building boom, and the city expanded to the south and west of the oldest residential neighborhood (MacArthur Park). Scott Street has been described as “the center of elegant living in nineteenth

century Little Rock.” But the Marres had a difficult time fitting into Little Rock’s elite society. Although they built a showplace on one of the nicest streets in town, they were Italian, they were Catholic, and they both had a checkered past.

### **Angelo & Jennie Marre**

Angelo Marre was born on September 11, 1842, in Borzonasca, Italy. He arrived in the United States when he was 12 years old, and his family settled in Memphis (1854). Angelo and his two older brothers, James and John, worked together in various Memphis saloons. From 1865 to 1868, Angelo Marre worked for the Memphis Police Department but was forced to resign after he was accused of killing a man during an argument. He was acquitted and returned to the saloon business. But his problems with the law were not over. In 1872 Marre was convicted of stealing money from a local business owned by the Memphis police chief. The Shelby County criminal court handed down a 3-year sentence in the Tennessee State Prison and revoked his American citizenship. For unknown reasons, Tennessee Governor John Brown granted Marre a full pardon two years into his sentence. He regained his citizenship in 1879. While Angelo Marre was in prison, he inherited money from his former lover, Annie Melrose, the madam of a Memphis house of prostitution, who had died of yellow fever. As soon as Marre got out of prison (1874), he claimed his inheritance and joined his brothers in Little Rock, hoping for a fresh start.

Marre worked with his brother, John, as a bartender at the Metropolitan Hotel at the northwest corner of Main and Markham streets in Little Rock. After the Metropolitan was destroyed by fire on December 14, 1876, Angelo and John Marre bought their own establishment on the north side of Markham Street across from the Capital Hotel. The Marre brothers’ Senate Saloon & Billiard Parlor was advertised as carrying the “finest stock of wines and liquors in the city.”

At one point, Angelo went to Fort Smith and opened a restaurant with his younger brother, Tony, but their partnership didn’t last. More than likely, this is where he met his future wife. Virginia “Jennie” Bacigulapo was born in Memphis

on August 25, 1853, to Italian parents. Her family owned several restaurants and bars in Memphis and was relatively well-off. Jennie attended St. Vincent Academy in Cincinnati, Ohio, and was a talented painter and accomplished pianist. When Jennie returned to Memphis in 1870, her maternal uncle, James Brizzolara, was living at her parents' house recuperating from a wound received in a duel (with George P. Phelan). Jennie, then 17 years old, fell in love with her 22-year-old uncle, and the couple decided to marry. Since their incestuous relationship was illegal, they journeyed to Little Rock, where they would be unknown. They were married on September 23, 1870, at First Presbyterian Church. James and Jennie Brizzolara soon moved to Fort Smith, where he later became a successful lawyer and served as city attorney, mayor, postmaster general, and prosecuting attorney. The couple had two children—a son, James, Jr., and a daughter, Mary, who died at 9 months.

For unknown reasons, Jennie left her husband and son in 1876 and moved to Little Rock. In September 1877 she married Angelo Marre in a Catholic ceremony, but she never divorced her first husband. Jennie Marre was soon faced with charges of either bigamy or incest. She beat the charges by filing for divorce from her first husband and arguing that because she married outside the Catholic Church, her first marriage was not recognized by her church and was therefore void. Keep in mind that all of this stuff was reported in the newspaper.

From 1877 until 1881, Angelo and Jennie Marre lived in a small house at the corner of Second and Scott streets in Little Rock. The Marres lived next to Matthew Duffy, one of Angelo's competitors in the saloon business, and his wife, Mary Agnes Duffy. Matthew Duffy died in 1878, and apparently, Angelo Marre moved in on his widow. In 1881 Mary Agnes Duffy gave birth to Angelo Marre's son, Angelo Marre, Jr. Although the elder Angelo was married to Jennie at the time, he never attempted to hide the relationship and even provided for his son's education in his will. And there is some evidence to suggest that Angelo Marre fathered other children out of wedlock in addition to this one...

Angelo and Jennie Marre built their showplace at 1321 Scott Street in 1881-1882, and we'll get to the house itself in a minute.

Angelo Marre was doing quite well financially by the mid-1880s. He owned two saloons, a liquor import business, an office building in downtown LR, 3,000 shares of stock in mining companies operating in Garland and Montgomery counties, and he was the first president of Edison Electric Company of LR. However, his bad temper and violent outbursts continued to get him in trouble with the law. Most of these incidents could be attributed to defending his wife's honor. In 1883 Angelo Marre horsewhipped a man in the lobby of the Capital Hotel for insulting Jennie. In 1888 Marre encountered Judge E. W. Kimbrell at the corner of Markham and Center streets and asked his former neighbor and friend to stop making offensive comments about Jennie. The Judge refused, so Marre "pulled his ears and slapped his face," resulting in an assault charge and monetary fine.

Interestingly, after all of this scandalous and otherwise bad behavior, Angelo Marre cleaned up his act and entered the local political arena. He served as a Republican city alderman for Ward 2 in the mid-1880s and had an unsuccessful bid for sheriff (1888).

However, Jennie Marre was never able to rid herself of the social stigma associated with her incestuous first marriage, operating a saloon, and Angelo's extramarital affairs. She lost her parents and two sisters to yellow fever in the 1878 Memphis epidemic, and her son was living in Fort Smith with his father. Jennie's only friends were Angelo's sisters, Mary and Teresa. People who grew up in the neighborhood remembered seeing Jennie Marre watch them out the window as they played nearby, and when they occasionally peeked in her window, she offered them cookies. But their parents never spoke to her.

Angelo Marre's strange and untimely death caused Jennie even more heartache. While on a fishing and hunting trip with friends in the fall of 1888, Marre stumped his big toe, resulting in a minor cut. He refused to see a physician until December. Marre had blood poisoning, and part of his foot was amputated (without

anesthesia; Marre chewed on a piece of silk thread). The effort proved to be too little too late, for Angelo Marre died February 18, 1889, as a result of his infection. Marre is buried at Calvary Cemetery in LR. His custom-designed, marble monument was ordered from Florence, Italy, and cost \$5,000. It features a large angel statue and a portrait of Marre carved in relief—the portrait on his grave marker is the only known likeness of Angelo Marre.

Angelo left Jennie a substantial amount of money when he died, and she began remodeling and updating the house (1889). She hired architect Thomas Harding to design a new kitchen, which was constructed in the ell of the original back porch (the kitchen had previously been located in the basement). She had a chicken house and stable constructed in the backyard. She had other minor repairs and maintenance completed and had the “twin parlor” ceilings frescoed as well. And Jennie Marre finally made the society column in the *Arkansas Gazette* after purchasing a 123-piece set of Dresden china from a local jewelry store in 1892.

In October 1896 Jennie Marre married Marion E. Dunn, a Little Rock broker. Jennie’s best friends (Angelo Marre’s sisters) immediately accused Dunn of being a gold digger. And for reasons unknown, the couple built a smaller house in 1901 at the corner of 22<sup>nd</sup> and Spring, opting to use the Villa Marre as rental property. On December 20, 1904, Jennie Marre met her husband at the train station. He had been away on business, but when his train arrived, the couple immediately got into an argument. Dunn stayed at the Capital Hotel that evening, and Jennie returned home. A few hours later, one of the couple’s wait staff found Jennie dead in the hallway. The first doctor on the scene thought she had been poisoned. Every night Jennie drank wine from a decanter in the hallway, and it was right after her glass of wine that she collapsed. Rumors of murder flew around town, and things were made worse when Mr. Dunn refused to allow Marre family members into the house. The coroner ruled her death a result of heart failure.

## **The Marre House (Villa Marre)**

The Villa Marre (keep in mind that it did not get this name until the 1960s rehabilitation) was built in 1881-1882 on Block 21, Lots 5 & 6, Original City of Little Rock, for Angelo and Jennie Marre at the cost of \$5,000.

### *Second Empire-style Architecture*

The house is a rare example of the Second Empire style of architecture in the capital city (McDonald-Wait-Newton or Packet House and Old Main at AR Baptist College are two other examples). The Second Empire style was one of the first new architectural styles to emerge in Arkansas after the Civil War, and its popularity lasted until the end of the 19th century. The style's distinctive mansard roof was named after 17th century French architect Francois Mansart. The roof line was revived in France during the reign of Napoleon III (1852-1870), France's Second Empire, from which the architectural style takes its name. The popularity of the style worked its way from France to England to the United States.

However, because the Second Empire style came to the forefront in the U.S. during President Ulysses Grant's term in office, it was sometimes known as the "Grant style," making it unpopular among pro-Confederate southerners. This may be one reason why the style is not prevalent in Little Rock.

The Villa Marre exhibits several characteristics of the style, including a mansard roof (sloped portion bounded by two cornices) of patterned slate, dormer windows on the steep lower slope of the roof, a central tower (or cupola) topped by wrought-iron cresting (the cresting was originally all the way around the mansard roof as well), and decorative hood molding above the doors and windows.

### *Architect/Builder*

It has been said that the Villa Marre was based on plans from an Italian villa that Marre remembered from his childhood, but it is also likely that the Marres employed an architect to assist with the design of the home. Although no documentation exists to support this theory, Little Rock architect Thomas Harding may have worked on the design. Harding designed St. Andrew's Catholic Cathedral at 7<sup>th</sup> and Louisiana (completed 1881) and attended church there, along with the Marres. He also designed the home next door to the north at 1315 Scott (no longer extant) for Mrs. Olive Deshon, the widow of Col. A. G. Deshon (who owned the Metropolitan Hotel and later the Capital Hotel), as well as the Second Empire-style McDonald-Wait-Newton House (Packet House) on Lincoln Avenue (now Cantrell Road). It is also possible that a prominent civil engineer, Major George R. C. Rumbough, served as contractor for the house.

### *Occupants*

Remember that after Jennie Marre remarried, she and her new husband, Marion Dunn, built a new house in 1901 and used the Villa Marre as a rental property. In 1901 and 1902, Arkansas Governor Jeff Davis and his family rented the Villa Marre. Davis was elected to the office of governor three times, serving from 1901 to 1907, and later became a U.S. Senator.

In 1903-1904, Jennie Marre Dunn leased the house to A. V. Stafford, a Little Rock bookkeeper.

After Jennie's death in 1904, the Villa Marre passed to Angelo Marre's heirs—his sisters; son, Angelo, Jr.; and nephew, John—who in 1905 sold the house to former Arkansas Attorney General Edgar Burton Kinsworthy and his wife, Mary, for \$10,500. Kinsworthy, who was described as “one of the outstanding figures of the Arkansas bar,” was elected to the Arkansas State Senate in 1891 and in 1895 became president of the senate and was subsequently elected attorney general, serving in that capacity from 1895 to 1899. He later became General Attorney for

the Arkansas division of the Missouri Pacific Railroad. Mary Kinsworthy was very much a part of Little Rock high society and loved to entertain. In fact, a family friend once remarked that the Villa Marre was not elegant enough for Mrs. Kinsworthy's taste. This likely explains the Kinsworthy's extensive remodeling of the house, which took place between 1906 and 1921.

### *Kinsworthy Alterations*

1906—painted the original red brick exterior of the house white

1909-1910—hired Little Rock architect Charles L. Thompson to redesign the interior of the house.

The south side of the house originally had three rooms instead of two. The Thompson remodel reduced the number of rooms to create a larger dining room for entertaining guests. He also installed the pocket doors separating the dining room and library and stained the walnut trim a darker, birch color. Also added exposed beams to the dining room ceiling and paneled wainscoting to the dining room walls.

Removed stairs on the second floor that provided access to the cupola to create a sitting area at the top of the stairs.

Installed elaborate oak and mahogany parquet flooring on top of the original cypress floors.

1920-1921—Hired LR architect John Parks Almand to redesign the front porch.

The original 1881 porch was much shallower. It spanned half of the front façade, running from the front door to the southern edge of the house. And it was supported by Italianate-style wooden columns. The 1921 porch was situated in the same area, but it extended further out toward Scott Street. It featured a flat roof with a widely overhanging eave supported by heavy, rusticated brick columns and a decorative balustrade. This porch is no longer extant.

### *Later Occupants*

Mary Kinsworthy died unexpectedly in 1925, and Edgar's health declined shortly thereafter. He sold the house in 1929 to Luther and Eula Whitmore. At that time,

Luther Whitmore was president of the Prudential Building and Loan Association. As a result of the Great Depression, the Villa Marre went into receivership, and was purchased in 1935 by Albert and Nellie Townsend. Albert, a career postal employee, and Nellie, a schoolteacher, owned the Villa Marre until 1940. Gladys Neal Brandon and her widowed mother, Lucy Neal, became the 6<sup>th</sup> owners of the Villa Marre in 1940. The women divided the house into two apartments—they lived on the first floor and rented the second floor to another family. A door was installed at the top of the main staircase to provide privacy.

In 1942 Greek immigrant I. B. Mavraganis (changed his name to John Morris) bought the Villa Marre. He also owned the Hoffman Hotel across from Union Station. John's nephew, Bill Mavraganis, and his wife, Mary, rented a portion of the Villa Marre. In 1951 John Morris sold the Villa Marre to his nephew, Bill. Bill and Mary changed their last name from Mavraganis to Morris at that time. The Morris family lived on the first floor of the house and converted the second floor into four small apartments. They also removed the main staircase to prevent upstairs tenants from accessing their living quarters downstairs. Instead, access to the upstairs apartments was provided by an exterior staircase at the rear of the house. Mary Morris also covered the "high maintenance" parquet floors with linoleum.

In 1958 Bill and Mary Morris rented the house to Mary Dorchester, who converted the first floor into the Dorothy Donelson Studio of Dance and lived upstairs. From 1960 to 1963, the Villa Marre served as the boarding house for the local chapter of Alcoholics Anonymous. It sat vacant for one year, and in January 1964 the house was condemned by the city. After hearing the city's plan to demolish the house, Little Rock furniture dealer James W. Strawn, Jr., purchased the house from Mary Morris for \$11,550.

### *1960s Rehab*

Strawn began a massive rehabilitation effort, taking care to restore significant elements of the house from both the Marre and Kinsworthy eras. He called the house “the Villa Marre” in honor of its first owners.

Inappropriate second story addition removed, along with rear staircase

1921 porch removed—current porch is the creation of Mr. Strawn

Room divisions restored to the Kinsworthy era

Parquet floors refinished (the linoleum covering actually saved the floors)

Layers of wallpaper and paint removed to uncover original stenciling, which was recreated (by artist Rosemary Fisher and later by Becky Witsell/Suzanne Kittrell)

Interior transom windows reinstalled

Balustrade from main staircase was found under a pile of scrap lumber in the basement, and using clues from nail holes in the wall and floor, the staircase was recreated

Small bathroom under main staircase was installed by Mr. Strawn

Some elements in the Villa Marre are from the Logan Roots House, which stood at 923 Scott Street until it was demolished in the 1960s. The Roots Parlor, which is the northwest parlor, contains the Roots front door nameplate, a chandelier, pier mirror, and mantel from the Roots House. The kitchen cabinets are from the Roots House, and the zinc and oak bathtub upstairs is from the Roots House. The chandelier in the dining room is from the Packet House.

### *QQA*

Strawn used the house to display Victorian-era furniture and for family functions from 1966 until 1979, when he donated the property to the Quapaw Quarter Association. The QQA had its office in the carriage house next door and used the house as a museum. The QQA put the property up for sale in the late 1990s. It was a private residence for about 12 years, and since January 2012, it has been

used as a rentable venue for weddings, parties, and other events with some office space upstairs.

**Designing Women**—The front façade of the Villa Marre was used to portray the exterior of the fictional Sugarbaker & Associates Interior Design Firm on the hit CBS television show *Designing Women*. The show, which ran from 1986 to 1993, was produced by Arkansans Harry Thomason and his wife, Linda Bloodworth-Thomason.

Next tour is August 2 at the Emmett Jenkins House at 24<sup>th</sup> and Chester in LR.

*Back porch/breezeway*—enclosed in the 1890s. The back double doors were installed during the 1960s rehab and were salvaged from the Arkansas State Hospital (date to ca. 1882). Back porch landing and stairs were also done in the 60s rehab. The original (or maybe late 1880s) first floor bathroom was located in the breezeway between the kitchen and the second parlor.