

Sandwiching in History
Little Rock YMCA
524 S. Broadway, Little Rock
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By: Rachel Silva



Intro

Hi, 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 Little Rock YMCA. I’d like to thank Brad and Shellie Barnett for allowing us to tour this beautiful building.

The Little Rock YMCA was built in 1927-1928 and officially opened its doors on May 20, 1928. The building was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1979.

History of the YMCA in Little Rock

The Young Men’s Christian Association (or YMCA) was founded in 1844 in London, England, by 22-year-old department store employee George Williams and eleven of his friends. In the years after the Industrial Revolution, many young men moved from rural areas to cities in search of work. And upon arrival, they found overcrowded tenement housing and a slew of temptations like alcohol, gambling,

and prostitution. Williams and his friends organized the YMCA to provide companionship for these young men in a safe, Christian environment. The first YMCA in the United States was formed in 1851 in Boston, and by the 1860s, the YMCA provided affordable housing to young men who were new to the area, down on their luck, or frequently, both. Throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the YMCA's mission evolved to provide low-cost board, religious education, physical and athletic training, and other educational programs for men and boys.

The YMCA in Little Rock was organized about 1885 and initially occupied the second floor of a building at 4th and Main streets. In 1904 the Little Rock YMCA commissioned the architectural firm of Charles L. Thompson to design a building at the southwest corner of Capitol and Scott streets. Theo Sanders and Frank Gibb, who were then working for the Thompson firm, designed the Renaissance Revival-style building, which was completed in 1905.

By December 1923, the YMCA needed additional space, and the board of directors planned to expand their facility to the south along Scott Street. However, after meeting with R. L. Rayburn of the International YMCA Building Bureau, the board decided to construct a new building at the corner of 6th and Broadway. Rayburn cited three reasons for a new building—a.) it would be difficult to remodel the existing building to conform with the latest YMCA standards; b.) the size of the expansion site was too small; and c.) the site at Capitol and Scott was no longer appropriate—the YMCA should be located along the major thoroughfare between the residential and business districts of the city.

In March 1926 the YMCA initiated an ambitious 2-week fundraising campaign—their goal was \$500,000. Fundraising volunteers split into five divisions called the Arkansas Travelers, Spark Plugs, Wildcatters, Little Rockers, and the Knockouts. Volunteers promised to work at least 14 hours during the two week period soliciting funds. In the middle of the campaign, the YMCA ran a large advertisement in the *Arkansas Gazette* (3/7/1926) addressed “To the Man Who Has Questioned the ‘Y’,” saying, “Surely the people of Little Rock want the YMCA.

This ‘Y’ campaign is a referendum. Failure is unthinkable. Our city cannot afford that stigma. All proud boasting about Little Rock is ashes if the YMCA is obliged to quit.” As the campaign came to a close, pledges fell about \$27,000 short of the board’s \$400,000 “binding goal” (meaning that if they didn’t raise at least \$400,000, the construction plan would be abandoned and pledges would not be binding). But at the last minute, prominent local businessman John F. Boyle donated \$25,000, enabling the board to quickly make up the balance.

[A fundraising campaign for a new black YMCA also started at this time. It was led by Scipio A. Jones, G. H. Evans, J. W. Ish, and A. E. Bush. Their goal was \$25,000. By 1913, there was a black YMCA at 811 Broadway. The 1920s fundraising effort resulted in a new black YMCA at 10th and State streets. The Phyllis Whatley Club, a black YWCA, was located at the northwest corner of 10th and Gaines by 1939. By 1913 the white YWCA was located at 112-114 E. 7th (north side of 7th between Main and Scott; just east of the Donaghey Building). No longer extant.]

In October 1926 the architectural firm of George R. Mann and Eugene John Stern was hired to design the new YMCA building. Two months later, the YMCA board approved plans for a 4-story, Spanish Revival-style building with a foundation and walls capable of accommodating a 7-story building in case it became necessary to expand at a later date (this is why the first floor walls are 31 inches thick).

W. Frank Ault was hired as general contractor, and site prep and construction commenced in May 1927. Arkansas Governor John Ellis Martineau delivered a speech at the cornerstone laying ceremony in October 1927 in front of several hundred people, saying “The new YMCA building is the greatest factory erected in Arkansas during the past 25 years. Its work of building the character of boys and young men is the greatest industry in the state. This YMCA will keep more boys out of jail than all the laws on the statute books.”

The new YMCA formally opened on May 20, 1928, and thousands of visitors toured the building. At the opening ceremony, William A. McDonnell, chairman of the fundraising campaign, announced that the National Council of the YMCA

regarded the Little Rock facility as “the finest Y building for its size in the world.” McDonnell went on to say, “We have learned that character cannot be forced upon the young man. It must be molded by indirection, and by subtle effects. A young man in these surroundings will unconsciously achieve higher ideals. There will be awakened in him a spirit of reverence, of religion. I like to think that this building is more than brick and mortar, and rather a crystallized ideal, the result of a dream.” [AG 5/21/1928] And by the way, when the YMCA moved out of its building at Capitol and Scott, the old facility was purchased by the *Arkansas Democrat* and today houses the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* offices.

Description of the YMCA Building in 1928

The Broadway entrance on the east side of the building was the men’s entrance to the lobby. The men’s social room was located in the northeast corner of the first floor. Also on the north side of the first floor were offices, a women’s parlor, restrooms, and men’s game room. [The women’s parlor was for “the friends, sweethearts, and mothers of the ‘out-of-town boys’.” No female visitors were allowed on the upper floors. And they were not allowed to be members.] A kitchenette and refreshment counter was located off the lobby.

The boys’ entrance was on 6th Street and led into a boys’ social room and lobby, which occupied the space at the southeast corner of the first floor (where the Nationwide Insurance office is now). The boys’ side also had some offices, restrooms, and a game room. The arched opening on the building’s south side was the entrance to an open-air tunnel leading from 6th Street into the courtyard. A large, wrought-iron gate controlled access from the street. [This was open as late as 1979 but has since been enclosed.]

The central courtyard featured a fountain and flower garden and divided the first floor into a north side for men and a south side for boys.

The western half of the first floor housed the swimming pool (SW corner), locker rooms, and a health and massage department, complete with “the most modern

equipment for giving Turkish baths, the ultra-violet ray, and massages.”
[Ultraviolet ray treatments were popular in the early 20th century to cure all types of ailments. It was electrotherapy, or applying electrical current to the body.]

The west side of the second and third floors housed two gymnasiums. Two handball courts were located directly above the northwest corner of the gymnasiums, and the flat-roofed portion over the larger gym was used as a rooftop garden, and according to oral histories, sunbathing on the roof was a popular activity until the ladies from the Federal Building began peeking too much. Another rooftop garden was located above the first floor lobby and overlooked the courtyard.

An educational department was located on the north side of the second floor, and the remainder of the available space on that floor was devoted to dormitory rooms. The majority of space on the third and fourth floors was taken up by dormitory rooms. The rooms on the second through fourth floors could provide lodging for 134 men. The building’s southern tower also provided room for 12 free beds in 1928.

Back to History of the Y

During the Great Depression, the YMCA operated on a very lean budget. Although the board of directors established new dormitory rates in 1932, many lodgers were allowed to stay despite their inability to pay rent. But the rates were as follows: 2nd floor single, \$4 per week; 2nd floor double, \$6 per week; 3rd floor single, \$3.75; 3rd floor double \$5.50; 4th floor single, \$3.50; 4th floor double, \$5; and beds in the tower, 50 cents per night.

In its 48th Annual Report (1933), the board of directors noted that the economic crisis and its social effects made the Y’s work even more relevant. As social conditions changed, the Y became a community center for the whole family—even young women participated in indoor baseball, swimming, and other activities (although they could not be regular members). And many transient men

and boys were served by the YMCA, which was able to “set their feet aright and to give them courage, baths, lodging, and a handshake.”

During World War II, the YMCA provided temporary lodging for military recruits and traveling servicemen. Frank Whitbeck, who became a member of the Downtown YMCA in 1942, remembered the gymnasium filled with servicemen being given temporary lodging. The recruits were housed at the Y for physicals before shipping out, and the Y continued to provide lodging for military recruits well into the 1950s.

In the 1950s, church basketball leagues frequently used the gyms, and afternoon volleyball, beginning at 5:00 p.m., was very popular among downtown businessmen. Programs for youth began to taper off in the early 1960s, and the Downtown Y eventually catered exclusively to adults (with the exception of the daycare, which was designed for the benefit of adults working downtown).

In 1967 racial discrimination was banned at all YMCAs across the country, but I’m not sure when the Little Rock YMCA first allowed black members. Sometime in the mid-to-late 1970s, the Little Rock Y changed its policy to allow women as regular members, and dormitory rooms on the north side of the second floor were removed to create space for a women’s locker room. A major renovation in 1978 removed the dorm rooms from the second and third floors (and perhaps enclosed the patio above the lobby) to provide larger areas for weight-lifting and aerobics as well as an indoor jogging track on the third floor. In 1980 the original clay tile roof was replaced with concrete tiles. The YMCA provided lodging services until 1987 (the 4th floor still had dorm rooms at that time).

In 1982 the Downtown Y had 950 members, 112 of whom were women. In 1987 the Downtown YMCA set an all-time membership record at 1,162 members. But by the mid-1990s, the Downtown Y was in financial crisis. Suburban growth and competition from other fitness centers—like War Memorial Fitness Center (now the Jim Dailey Fitness & Aquatic Center), which opened in 1992—hurt the aging downtown facility. In 1995 the Downtown Y had a membership of 608 people—in

just 8 years it had lost 48 percent of its membership. At that time, monthly memberships were \$34. In order to finance an asbestos abatement project and provide revenue for essential operating expenses, the YMCA board of directors asked members to make a one-time payment of \$200 by September 18, 1995, and incur a \$10 per month fee increase. Only 63 members responded to the fundraising effort, prompting the Metropolitan YMCA board to close the facility (at that time, the Metropolitan YMCA board operated the Downtown Y, Carver YMCA on Daisy Bates, Northside Y on JFK in NLR, and the Westside Y on Sam Peck Road). The Downtown Y was scheduled to close its doors on December 31, 1995, but a group of Little Rock businessmen got a 3-month extension on the building's closure. They formed the Broadway Group, LLC, and looked for ways to form a public-private partnership to operate the Y as a fitness center staffed by the City of Little Rock. Sadly, after a 3-month reprieve, the YMCA closed on March 29, 1996.

Recent Developments

The City did eventually end up with the building, however. About 2005 the City sold the YMCA Building to California-based Tower Investments, which planned to convert the building to retail space. That never happened, and in August 2010 Deseo, LLC, run by Little Rock residents Brad and Shellie Barnett, purchased the building. Brad and Shellie wanted to find a downtown location for their Nationwide Insurance business, and they felt that this building's history and architecture were worth saving. The Nationwide Insurance office opened here in November 2011, followed by Tropical Smoothie in March 2012.

Brad and Shellie have done a lot of work on the building, but there is much more to go. They had to remove about 15 tons of trash and non-historic building materials (the structure enclosing the 2nd floor patio and the 3rd floor jogging track). They have repaired/replaced roof tiles, exterior doors (like the ones on the north side of the courtyard), and pieces of ironwork on the building. They removed drop ceilings and scraped paint to reveal the original plaster beams with hand-stenciling. They've replaced all the copper downspouts with the exception

of the south tower. They reopened the fountain in the courtyard—it was full of dirt and had to be re-plumbed and re-tiled.

Brad and Shellie do not live here. Their 5-to-7-year plan is to have more commercial tenants on the first floor and rehab the upper floors for residential use. Shellie is very passionate about the building, and she really wanted me to stress that you don't have to be a big corporation to take on a project like this. It requires a lot of hands-on work, but you can do it.

And to follow up with the YMCA as an organization, the Little Rock YMCA still exists as an organization, but since closing the Westside Y in December 2011, it does not have a facility (but still offers soccer for youth, senior wellness programs, and father-child programs).

Architecture and Architects

The architectural firm of George Richard Mann and Eugene John Stern was one of Arkansas's premier firms during the first 30 years of the 20th century (another being the Thompson firm). George R. Mann is probably most well-known for being commissioned in 1899 to design the Arkansas State Capitol. He went on to design many landmark buildings in Little Rock, including the State Bank Building (Boyle Building), the Blass Department Store, the Gazette Building, and the addition to the Pulaski County Courthouse. The firm of Mann and Stern also designed several well-known Arkansas buildings, including the Arlington Hotel, Quapaw Bathhouse, and Ozark Bathhouse in Hot Springs; Union County Courthouse in El Dorado; Grim Hotel in Texarkana; and the Albert Pike Memorial Temple (1924) and Albert Pike Hotel (1929) in Little Rock.

And if you look closely at details on this building and the Albert Pike Hotel, you will see many similarities. Mann & Stern designed the YMCA building in the Spanish Revival style with buff brick walls, elaborate cast-stone detailing, a red tile roof, wrought-iron window grilles and balconies, and an open central courtyard. The building's two main entrances feature elaborate cast-stone surrounds with

different symbols (the 6th Street entrance features a Chi-Rho symbol with the YMCA's triangle logo for healthy body, mind, and spirit, while the Broadway entrance has two Christian shield symbols).

Interior Details

Building is about 56,000 square feet.

Note the elaborate tile work throughout the building—the small tiles with swastikas on them are interesting—remember the tiles were installed in the 1920s before the Nazi era. At that time, the swastika was thought to be a significant religious symbol in early European cultures and meant “good fortune” or “well-being.”

YMCA triangle logo in courtyard floor tile

Original iron fixtures from the front of the building were moved into the courtyard to protect them

We will see the lobby, courtyard, boys' social room, and men's social room.

Thank you! Next tour is July 12 at the Villa Marre at 1321 Scott Street, LR. **Note that it is pushed back a week to avoid the July 4th holiday weekend.**