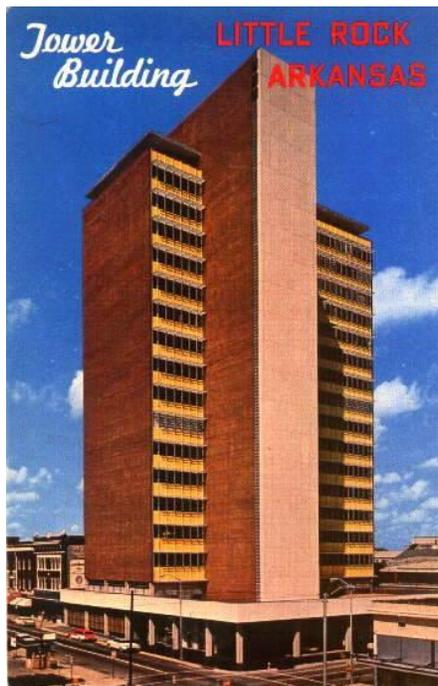


**Sandwiching in History**  
**Tower Building**  
**323 Center Street, Little Rock**  
**December 7, 2012**  
**By: Rachel Silva**



## **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 Tower Building! I'd like to thank the building's owners, Graham and Meredith Catlett, as well as building managers Brenda McKown and Rusty Arnold for allowing us to tour the building today. Another special thanks to the Catletts for letting us visit their apartment, and for generously providing \$10 coupons for the first floor restaurants. Thanks to all of my great colleagues for their help as well.

The Tower Building was completed in 1960 and was the tallest building in Arkansas for almost 10 years. It was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in September 2011 because it is the best example of an International-style skyscraper in Little Rock.

## Early Little Rock Skyscrapers

The term “skyscraper” originated in the United States in the late 1880s after buildings had reached a height of 10 to 12 stories. The height of the buildings made them appear to scrape the sky. However, since skyscrapers were masonry buildings during that time period, their height was limited because the thickness of the building’s lower walls had to increase with every additional story. [A 1-story masonry building needed a 1-foot thick wall. The wall had to increase by 4 inches for every additional story. So a 16-story building required 6-foot thick walls at the base.] The development of steel framing in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century allowed skyscrapers to reach new heights. This new technology flourished in Chicago and New York prior to World War I, but it took a little longer for the idea to really take root in Arkansas.

A limited amount of skyscraper construction occurred in Arkansas in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, mostly in Little Rock. The Southern Trust Building (now known as the Pyramid Building), designed by architect George R. Mann, was completed in December 1907 at the southeast corner of 2<sup>nd</sup> & Center streets. At 10 stories, it was Arkansas’s first skyscraper and the tallest building in the state at the time of its construction. It featured a steel frame, elevators, and a fire suppression system.

In 1909-1910 the State Bank Building (the Boyle Building) at the southwest corner of Capital and Main was constructed, and at 11 stories, it became Arkansas’s tallest building. It was also designed by George R. Mann. Like the Southern Trust Building, the State Bank Building followed the popular formula for skyscraper design during that period, which mimicked a classical column with a decorative base and capital (or cap).

Skyscraper construction continued on a limited basis in Little Rock between World War I and World War II. Notably, former Arkansas Governor George W. Donaghey (gov. 1909-1913) built the 14-story Donaghey Building in 1925-1926 at the southeast corner of 7<sup>th</sup> and Main. The Donaghey Building was designed by Little

Rock native and New York City architect Hunter McDonnell and assumed the title of state's tallest building.

But skyscraper construction wasn't confined to Little Rock. In 1928 the title of Arkansas's tallest building went to the Art Deco-style Medical Arts Building in Hot Springs. Designed by Arkansas architects John Parks Almand and Elmer Stuck as an office building for medical professionals, the Medical Arts Building remained the tallest building in Arkansas until the completion of the Tower Building in 1960 (32 years).

### **Winthrop Rockefeller & the Tower Building**

The Tower Building was the brainchild of Winthrop Rockefeller, who believed that Arkansas would never become the "industrialized economy of his dreams without a modern high-rise office tower in the capital city." Winthrop Rockefeller, grandson of Standard Oil Company founder John D. Rockefeller, Sr., was born in 1912 in New York City and had a privileged childhood. However, Win Rockefeller rebelled against his family's conservative lifestyle and worked as a roughneck in the oil fields before enlisting as a private in the U.S. Army during WWII. By war's end, he was promoted to the rank of lieutenant colonel. In 1953 Rockefeller fled to the very antithesis of New York high society when he visited an old Army friend, businessman Frank Newell, in Little Rock. Before the end of the year, Rockefeller purchased a large amount of land on Petit Jean Mountain, which he called Winrock Farms. In 1955 Governor Orval Faubus appointed Rockefeller to the Arkansas Industrial Development Commission. Rockefeller took this work seriously, and by the time he left the commission after nine years (1964), Arkansas had undergone a remarkable economic transformation. Rockefeller received credit for bringing more than 600 new industrial plants to Arkansas, providing 90,000 new jobs.

It was during this time that Rockefeller organized the Arkansas Realty Company with R. A. Lile, M. E. Moore, and Dallas developer Trammell Crow, to construct the Tower Building. Rockefeller was chairman of the company, Lile was president,

Crow and Moore were vice-presidents, and Glen F. Rogers was secretary-treasurer. Crow also served as general contractor for the building.

Historically, the Tower Building site at the northeast corner of 4<sup>th</sup> and Center was a residential area, occupied by 6 houses (5 facing west on Center and one facing south on 4<sup>th</sup>). Between 1897 and 1913, this part of the block was converted to commercial use, with 3-story commercial buildings fronting on Center Street and 4<sup>th</sup> Street. One building housed a printing company and new and 2<sup>nd</sup> hand furniture store, while another housed commercial tenants on the first floor and apartments upstairs. By 1950, the eastern half of the Tower Building site was a parking lot, as was the lot at the northwestern corner of 4<sup>th</sup> & Louisiana (current location of the Tower Building parking deck). By 1958 the entire site for the Tower Building had been cleared and was occupied by the National Garages Parking Lot. Construction began in 1958 and was completed in 1960.

[Rockefeller went on to serve two terms as the governor of Arkansas (1967-1971), becoming in 1967 the state's first Republican governor since Reconstruction (1872, specifically).]

## **Architects**

The Tower Building was designed by Dallas architect Harold A. Berry in collaboration with Little Rock architect Frank Eugene Withrow. Withrow was born in Little Rock on January 19, 1925, and served in the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers from 1943 to 1945 before studying architecture at Washington University in St. Louis. He received his architecture degree in 1950 and in 1954 organized his own firm in Little Rock. The Tower Building was his first big project. Withrow later designed a wide variety of buildings around the state, including West Hills Elementary School in Little Rock (1967), the Newton County Hospital in Jasper (1968), Woodruff County Hospital in McCrory (1969), and an addition to the Lee County Courthouse in Marianna (1969).

Harold A. Berry was born in 1922 in Texas to a family of builders. Both his father and grandfather were builders. Berry worked for his father while he was in high school and later pursued an architecture and engineering degree from Texas A & M. Like Withrow, Berry served in the Corps of Engineers during World War II and later practiced with Wyatt C. Hedrick and the firm of Thomas, Jameson & Merrill before going out on his own in 1953. Berry's practice covered a much wider area than Withrow's. He did a lot of work in Dallas, including offices and distribution facilities for firms like Safeway, Motorola, and Polaroid; the Preston Royal Shopping Center; the Hampton-Illinois Branch of the Dallas Public Library; and the 10-story Locke Medical Building. Berry also designed high-rise office buildings in Kansas City, Cincinnati, Indianapolis, Augusta, Las Vegas, and Wilmington, Delaware (where his 18-story Farmers Bank Building is similar to the Tower Building).

Berry became involved with the Tower Building project through his past association with Dallas developer Trammell Crow, while Withrow had previously worked with another partner in the project, Rick Lile. Lile sent Withrow to Dallas to meet Berry, and the two got along well, leading to a partnership for the building's design. Berry was the lead architect, while Withrow mainly worked on the building's interior design.

### **International-style Architecture**

The Tower Building was designed in the International style of architecture, which was developed by a group of European architects in the 1920s and 30s as a revolt against the revival of styles from the past. The International style also embraced modern building materials and technology rather than looking back to historic precedents. Materials like structural steel, reinforced concrete, and glass were used, and buildings were defined by clean lines, simple shapes, open spaces, and unornamented facades. The International style really caught on in the U.S. after World War II. After seeing the devastation in Europe, Americans looked forward and wanted to engineer new things. They didn't want to be reminded of the past.

The style was called International because it could be executed anywhere. It didn't reflect any one culture. The style was actually based on utopian aspirations of a classless society, where the built environment did not reveal class distinction. The theory was that there could be one "right" way to build, and you could see high modern buildings in any city around the world. Modern architecture was founded on the principle that form follows function (or function over form), meaning the exterior of a building should reflect its function. And the Tower Building adhered to that principle.

The Tower Building was the first building in the area to employ composite steel construction, which means it was built using a structural steel frame joined together with concrete (both pre-formed concrete and concrete block). This system strengthened the building's skeleton and allowed it to have thin outer curtain walls filled with glass (because the glass was not structural, it could all be removed and the building would still stand). The thinner outer walls also provided an increase in valuable floor space and reduced the overall weight of the building, allowing it to reach greater heights.

When you look at the exterior of the Tower Building, it is easy to see where the elevator, fire stair, and mechanical systems are located (in the tower on the south side of the building)—an example of form follows function. The building was also designed to take advantage of the natural landscape—the north and south facades were made of glass and porcelain enamel panels to provide views of the Arkansas River and downtown Little Rock, while the east and west facades were clad in brick and are devoid of fenestration (no windows). Overall, the Tower Building has nice, clean lines; it's simple; and it presents an honesty of materials.

[For more information about mid-century modern architecture in Arkansas, see the award-winning AETN documentary produced by Mark Wilcken called "Clean Lines, Open Spaces: A View of Mid-Century Modern Architecture." It premiered on AETN in the fall of 2011.]

## Construction Details

Construction of the Tower Building began in 1958 and required about 2 years to complete. Construction was delayed at least once, when the steel framing reached the fourth floor, one of the pilings settled and had to be dug out and redone. When completed in 1960, the Tower Building cost \$4 million. The Tower Building was the first skyscraper built in Little Rock since the Donaghey Building in 1925-26. And it was the first International-style skyscraper in LR as well. Standing at 18 stories, it was the tallest building in Arkansas and dominated the LR skyline. If you look at the old postcard of the Tower Building, you will notice that the porcelain enamel panels were originally yellow, and the building had aluminum sun screens that projected from the top of each window. The building features minimal exterior ornamentation, but it does include a dentil course going up each side of the elevator tower with three brown squares at the top. The steel spire at the top of the elevator tower is a symbol of optimism and reaching new heights, but it also served as a support for Little Rock radio station KNNK-FM's antenna (the station was located on the 17<sup>th</sup> floor).

The main lobby was the most elaborate of the interior spaces and featured tile floors, marble walls and planters, and four elevators with decorative wire-mesh doors. Also, notice the ashtrays between the elevators in the lobby. Used to have them on each floor (some are still there).

### *Quest*

Another unique feature of the building was its outdoor fountain area on the 4<sup>th</sup> Street side. The fountain was in a 14-foot ceramic tile basin edged with brick and stone. A bronze and steel sculpture designed by architect F. Eugene Withrow and executed by artist Sascha Brastoff of Los Angeles (a friend of Rockefeller's) called "Quest" was situated on a pedestal on the side of the reflecting pool. The sculpture was dedicated on March 1, 1960, and was reportedly the "coldest art dedication ceremony in Little Rock history." According to Withrow, the sculpture didn't represent any certain thing, but it complemented the building. He said, "We named it 'Quest,' which means searching."

## **Occupants**

When the Tower Building opened in the spring of 1960, many of the tenants were allowed to do their own decorating and partitioning. The 1960 Little Rock City Directory showed that there was still quite a bit of vacant space when the building opened.

The first floor storefronts were for commercial tenants, including Merrill Lynch; Rebsamen & East, insurance; the Pebble Room, restaurant; and the Tower Office of First National Bank.

Most of the upper floors were leased for office space in 1960, and the majority of the tenants were insurance companies and attorneys' offices. The third, fourth, fifth, and sixth floors were vacant, as were a few office suites on other floors.

The 17<sup>th</sup> floor housed the offices of F. Eugene Withrow, architect; Winthrop Rockefeller, investing; "Ark Soft Pine Bur," business organization; Keep Arkansas Green Association; Brooks-Pollard Company, advertising; Winrock Enterprises, Inc., investing; J. Wythe Walker, investing; the Industrial Development Company; Goff Enterprises; Arkansas Super Market Service; Goff Super Market; Goff Wholesale Grocery; and KNNK-FM, radio station.

The 18<sup>th</sup> floor was the exclusive Top of the Rock Club, one of Little Rock's finest private dining rooms at the time. The exterior walls on the 18<sup>th</sup> floor are recessed and surrounded by a balcony.

## **Tower Building Eclipsed as Tallest Building**

In 1967 Worthen Bank announced that it would build an 18-story building, which was the same height as the Tower Building, the tallest in the state. But then Union National Bank announced that they would build a 21-story building. So Worthen Bank board members had secret meetings to discuss the possibility of adding a few more stories to their building to make it the tallest. They waited until the last

piece of structural steel was added to the top of the Union National Bank Building, and then announced that they would construct a 25-story building.

The Union National Bank Building at the northeast corner of Capital and Louisiana was completed in August 1968, and at the height of 21 stories, took the tallest building title away from the Tower Building. Interestingly, the Top of the Rock Club later moved to the Union National Building and became the Little Rock Club, which is now in the Regions Building.

Union National was not the tallest for long.

1970—Worthen Bank (now Bank of America)

1975—First National Bank (now Regions Bank)

1986—Capital Tower (later TCBY Tower and now Metropolitan National Bank Tower)

Currently, the Tower Building is the 6<sup>th</sup> tallest, behind Metropolitan, Regions, Bank of America, Stephens (formerly the Rogers Building), and One Union National Plaza.

## **Alterations**

In 1982 the Catlett Tower Partnership purchased the Tower Building from Bruce Bartley. The purchase price, which was over \$5 million, included the Elrock Parking Deck at 4<sup>th</sup> & Louisiana. At that time, the partnership invested over \$3 million to bring new prestige to the building.

The most notable renovations on the building's exterior included the removal of the aluminum sun shades and painting the porcelain enamel panels a silver-gray color instead of yellow. The original outdoor fountain was replaced with a semi-circular concrete and ceramic tile fountain. [Currently, the "Quest" sculpture is in the possession of the Rockefeller family and is stored at their home on Petit Jean Mountain.]

Interior renovations included new Otis Elevonic 401 elevators, making the Tower Building one of the first buildings in the South to have talking elevators. The “microcomputer wizardry” of the elevators supposedly made it so that passengers would not have to wait longer than 4 seconds for a ride. A synthesized voice, female in the west cars and male in the east cars, announced the floors and other important information. The upper floors also received new restrooms, which were handicapped accessible, and a new conference center, lounge, and snack-vending area was added on the third floor.

The Catletts have continued to upgrade the building over the years, and one of the most recent changes has been the conversion of the 17<sup>th</sup> floor into their penthouse apartment, which was completed in November 2008.

### **Current Use**

You may have noticed that the building says “Catlett-Prien Tower” on the 4<sup>th</sup> & Center corner. Catlett is obviously after the Catlett family, owners of the building, but Prien is in honor of Henry Prien, who was Graham Catlett’s friend and the banker who loaned him the money to buy the building.

Currently, the first floor of the building is still leased to commercial tenants, including restaurants Bray Gourmet Deli and Natchez, a dry cleaners, and a hair salon. The upper floors are leased as office space, and tenants include law firms, the Arkansas Attorney General’s office, and the Department of Arkansas Heritage. And as you can see, the 17<sup>th</sup> floor is now residential.

Questions?

You may look around the Catletts’ apartment.

Then we will go up to the Catlett Law Firm on the 18<sup>th</sup> floor to see the balcony. You have the option to stop on the 16<sup>th</sup> floor to see the AHPP offices as well as the 12<sup>th</sup> floor to see some 1960s features in the lobby and the offices of the Historic Preservation Alliance of Arkansas, which has its office on 12.

Then you're done!

The next tour will be January 4 at the BPOE Elks Club (now the Junior League of Little Rock) at 401 Scott Street in Little Rock.

Thank you!!