

Sandwiching in History
Karl L. Stahl House
1504 Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Drive, LR
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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 Karl L. Stahl House! I'd like to thank the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of Arkansas, and especially Charles Ray, for allowing us to tour the house today.

The Stahl House is significant for its Folk Victorian or restrained Queen Anne-style architecture and for its elaborate pressed metal ceilings. The house features five different ceiling patterns. Although quite common in historic commercial buildings throughout Arkansas, it is very rare to see pressed metal ceilings in residential buildings.

Early Neighborhood Development

The plat for the Original City of Little Rock was filed in 1822, and the boundaries were the AR River on the north, the Quapaw Line (or Commerce St.) on the east, Wright Ave. on the south, and Pulaski St. on the west. So High Street (the name of this street until 1993, when it became MLK) was one block west of the original city limits. Most of this area consisted of undeveloped fields and forest until the late 19th century. Benjamin Johnson, who died in 1851, owned 160 acres adjoining the western boundary of the original city—his land extended almost to Park Street on the west and from 12th Street down to Wright Avenue. After Johnson's death,

his heirs sold to different parties, and eventually, they had the land surveyed and platted. In April 1877 the Centennial Addition to the City of LR was platted and lots offered for sale. The addition was named in honor of our country's centennial celebration (1776-1876).

Before this neighborhood was associated with Central High School, it was known as the West End. The West End was one of several "street car suburbs," which were developed hand-in-hand with the construction of streetcar lines and other amenities such as water and sewer service, paved streets and sidewalks, electricity, and fire protection. LR's streetcar system began in the late 1870s as a horse or mule-drawn operation, but by 1894 it included 20 miles of electric railway with cars running on a rapid schedule. By the mid-1890s, High Street was a major north-south route for the streetcar, which ran on High from 9th Street south to Wright Avenue (and later beyond, as you can see from the 1913 streetcar map).

The Stahl House was built about 1892. The entire 1500 block of High Street (now MLK) first appeared in the 1893-94 city directory. Prior to that time, the 1500-1700 blocks of High Street were undeveloped. I'm sure that the construction of Old Main at Arkansas Baptist College in 1893 spurred additional development in the area.

Stahl Family

Karl Ludwig Stahl was born on October 4, 1884, at West Plains, Missouri, to Louis S. Stahl and his wife, Katie E. Stahl. Karl and his twin sister, Katie M., were the third and fourth eldest out of five children in the family (Louis P., Otto C., Katie M., Karl L., and William G.). Karl Stahl's parents, Louis and Katie, were first-generation German-Americans from Ohio and gradually moved their family west to Missouri and then down to Arkansas. By 1890 the Stahl family lived in Little Rock, and Louis Stahl worked as a tinner at Foster & Porter (later Foster Hardware Company), which sold hardware, house furnishing goods, and mill supplies at 301-303 Main Street.

The Stahl family moved around for a few years (lived at 1412 Izard, 1429 W. 9th, and 1403 W. 9th) before moving to 1510 High Street (next door to south) in 1896. Louis Stahl continued to work for Foster Hardware until about 1905 when he started his own business, the L. S. Stahl Tin Works at 113-115 E. Third Street. A 1907 advertisement read, "L. S. Stahl. Tin, Sheet-Iron and Cornice Worker. Hot Air Furnaces a Specialty. All Work Guaranteed." The following year, Stahl added

metal shingles and roofing to his offerings, and by 1911, he advertised skylights and his services as contractor for architectural sheet metal work.

Two of Louis Stahl's sons, Otto and Karl, followed their father into the tinning trade. About 1922 Louis Stahl moved his tin works to a new building at 412-414 W. 7th Street (the building is still there and has a projecting metal cornice as well as a panel on the upper façade reading "L. S. Stahl"—former home of Express Press and currently Relics Tattoo). Louis Stahl died in the early 1930s and his son, Karl, assumed control of the family business. Karl relocated to 1023 W. Markham (SE corner of Markham & Ringo—current occupant is Doe's Eat Place) and opened the Karl L. Stahl Sheet Metal Works.

The original house at 1510 High (not the current Alumni House) was occupied by a member of the Stahl family from 1896 until at least 1960. Karl Stahl and his wife, Maude, purchased this house at 1506 High (now 1504 MLK) about 1910 and remained here until his death about 1968. So this explains the pressed tin ceilings and skylights installed in this house (we'll talk about the skylights later...).

1506 High (now 1504 MLK)

This house was built about 1892 and had several short-term occupants, including Alonzo M. Buckley, who was a dentist; Charles M. Connor, deputy county clerk; Walter Lazenby, postal clerk; Chaney H. Briggs, printer; J. Albert Vinton, band saw operator; and William P. Koonce, legal clerk. After living next door with his parents for almost 15 years, in 1910 Karl Stahl purchased the house and lived here with his wife. Karl Stahl was a tinner or metal worker for most of his life but briefly worked for the State Revenue Department before retiring in the late 1960s. Interestingly, Stahl also taught metal working classes for a short time in the 1940s at the National Youth Administration trades and craft building (later the Little Rock Technical High School) at the NW corner of W. 8th & Fair Park (no longer extant; in the path of I-630). The Stahls lived here until 1968. After 1968, the house was converted into a duplex, and the address became 1504 and 1506 High.

By 1985 the house was vacant and remained so until 2007, when Arkansas Baptist College purchased it. At that point, the house had deteriorated considerably and faced imminent demolition.

ABC rehabilitated the house, and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship moved its state office into the building in January 2008. This rehab was part of ABC's Vision 2020, which aims to improve the school and community. One of the plan's first

priorities was to improve safety and remove blight, so ABC purchased numerous buildings and lots to rehab, demolish, or repurpose. But I'm not going to talk a lot about ABC now because we will tour Old Main on June 1.

Interior Details

Pressed Tin Ceilings

From the late 1880s into the early 20th century, pre-manufactured building components became popular across the U.S. Buyers could order parts from a catalogue and receive their goods by train. And prefabricated building parts were especially popular in small towns, where it might be difficult to find an architect. Pressed metal building facades, roof shingles and cresting, ceiling tiles, furnaces and duct work, and cast iron storefront components were touted as being affordable, durable, and fireproof. By the turn of the 20th century, several hardware stores and specialized tin, copper, and sheet iron businesses in LR provided these products, including the L. S. Stahl Tin Works, and later the Karl L. Stahl Tin Works.

In particular, pressed tin ceilings became popular because they were a cheaper alternative to ornate plaster work. For this reason, most pressed tin ceilings were painted white to resemble plaster. Companies produced a variety of ceiling tile and cornice patterns on custom-made molds, so the consumer had different choices. See examples from catalogs—1904 Mesker and 1933 Penco.

Point out the different patterns in each room—squares surrounded by egg-and-dart pattern and cross-hatching with floral motif on cornice (entryway); circles surrounded by egg-and-dart pattern and cross-hatching with garland motif on cornice (right front office); square patterns with fleur-de-lis motif on cornice (kitchen); circles and cross-hatching with large egg-and-dart cornice (back left office); elaborate floral patterns with concave cornice and draped bead/garland-inspired lower border panel (Charles's office).

[There were several companies in the Midwest manufacturing embossed sheet metal facades and cast iron storefront components, but two of the largest manufacturers were Mesker Brothers Iron Works of St. Louis and the George L. Mesker Co. of Evansville, Indiana. The companies were owned by brothers and competed against each other. Whenever a building is called a "Mesker," it means that the building features some ornamental metal component made by one of the Mesker companies. Mesker components typically have a nameplate at the base of a

storefront column. The Illinois Historic Preservation Agency has a project called “Got Mesker” that identifies and documents Mesker buildings across the country.]

More Details

Because this house was built almost 20 years before Karl Stahl lived here, I don’t think it was intended to be a “showroom” or “display house” for his products. I think he simply upgraded the home using some of his products. But I’m sure it improved sales if his neighbors could see it in his own house.

- No ceilings were moved or altered during rehab. Only minor sanding and repainting. Ceilings were previously white.
- The house originally had a metal roof as well but it was badly damaged and had to be replaced with synthetic shingles. See piece of roof. Look at roof on rock house at NW corner of 15th and MLK—it still has its original metal roof, likely sold to the homeowners by the Stahl family!!
- Three additions were built onto the west side (rear) of the house sometime in the 1920s or 30s. During the rehab, two additions were removed because of their poor condition, but one addition was incorporated into the design to make the board room. This addition and another one each contained a skylight from that time period. Recall that I mentioned the Stahl company advertising skylights by 1911. The remaining skylight is still there but is not visible—the low roof pitch caused problems, so they built a gable roof over it and had to lower the ceiling in the board room, so the skylight is in between.
- Trim and interior doors are original
- Windows and transoms original
- Original cypress floors in entryway and front right office. Other floors are replacements.
- No original fixtures but two period-appropriate antique fixtures in left offices
- New door hardware and new exterior doors
- All plaster walls removed; now sheet rock
- Room by back door was originally the back porch (at time of rehab, it contained a bathtub)
- Another front door had been added into Charles’s office to make it a duplex and was enclosed during rehab.
- Front porch design—porch was already concrete when ABC purchased house. Only original porch element remaining was one decorative bracket (now on the CBF sign in front yard). Charles Ray had the bracket replicated

at a smaller size and re-installed brackets on porch. He also reproduced a balustrade from the house at 1418 Spring Street for this house.

- Cistern in back yard

Extras:

House at 1510 High demolished about 1994 and current ABC Alumni House built on the site.

House at 1500 High (on corner) was demolished sometime between 1970 and 1975. Slab out back was for garage behind 1500 High.

High Street became MLK Dr. in 1993.

Price for purchase and rehab of 1504 MLK was about \$98,000.

Any questions?

Next tour is April 6 at Mosely W. Hardy House at 2400 Broadway in LR.

Thank you for coming!