

**Sandwiching in History  
Ashley-Alexander House  
3514 Walkers Corner Rd., Scott  
April 1, 2011  
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 Ashley-Alexander House! I want to introduce and thank the owner, Bitsy Davis, for allowing us to tour her beautiful house today.

The Ashley-Alexander House was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1976 for its association with the Ashley and Alexander families and for its Colonial Revival-style architecture.

### **Ashley's Mills & the Scott community**

Early settlers in this area were enticed by the rich bottomlands of the Arkansas River. Chester Ashley, one of early Little Rock's most prominent and prosperous residents, purchased a sizeable amount of land about 10 miles southeast of LR. In 1835 Ashley built a portion of this house as well as another house just to the north of here. This house served as the plantation manager's house and was occupied by Chester Ashley's brother, Elisha Pomeroy, who looked after the plantation. The other house was supposed to be a country home for Chester Ashley and his wife, Mary Elliott Ashley, but it burned. It was located near the old cistern in the side yard.

Ashley constructed a gristmill and sawmill across the bayou from this house, so the area was locally known as Ashley's Mills. However, the community would later become Scott.

William Scott emigrated here from Kentucky in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. His son, Conoway Scott, was born here in 1815. By 1862 the Scott family owned 2,000 acres, 10 slaves, and other property valued at about \$38,000. Conoway Scott died in 1866 just before the birth of his son, Conoway Scott, Jr.

Conoway Scott, Jr., grew up to operate the family plantation that had been established many years earlier by his father, and he also owned a general store. In 1870 the Memphis & Little Rock Railroad was built through a portion of Mr. Scott's property, shifting the focus of area commerce from the Arkansas River to the railroad. His landholdings were eventually crossed by the St. Louis & Southwestern Railroad, or the Cotton Belt line, and the railroad crossing became known as "Scott's Station" or "Scott's Crossing." At some point, the sign at Scott's Station was damaged, so the name was shortened to "Scott's" and then just to "Scott," giving the town its name. By the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a thriving community dominated by cotton plantations was well established.

[As the cotton farms grew in size and number, merchants opened several general stores. There was also a post office, train depot, church (All Soul's Church est. 1906), and school.]

### **Chester Ashley**

Chester Ashley was born on June 1, 1791, in Amherst, Massachusetts. He graduated from Williams College in Williamstown, Massachusetts, in 1813, and briefly practiced law in Hudson, NY, before moving west. Ashley first settled in Edwardsville, Illinois, and then in Missouri. He came to Little Rock in 1820 and a year later, he married Mary Watkins Worthington Elliott of St. Genevieve, MO. Ashley was one of the first lawyers to settle in LR and became heavily involved in the dispute over the ownership of land in what is now downtown LR. Two groups of land speculators held conflicting claims on the land—one faction based its claim on New Madrid certificates, while the other faction referenced pre-emption claims.

New Madrid certificates were issued by the federal government to owners of land destroyed by the New Madrid Earthquakes of 1811-1812. You could claim public land equal in amount to your land destroyed by the earthquake. Pre-emption claims were purchased from squatters who had previously settled along the AR River.

Because these early settlers had advanced the frontier, the federal government gave them first preference or the “right of pre-emption” on buying the land when it was offered for sale.

Ashley represented the New Madrid faction, and although his group lost in court, the two factions eventually compromised and split up downtown LR between them. Ultimately, Ashley’s ownership of much of downtown LR would contribute to his wealth—in fact, he was probably the wealthiest Arkansan during that time period because of his vast landholdings; therefore, he was referred to as “the father of LR.”

Ashley was also involved in litigation over the relocation of the territorial capital from Arkansas Post to LR (1821).

Rose Law Firm, the oldest law firm west of the MS River, traces its origins back to 1820 when Chester Ashley and Robert Crittenden entered into a partnership to practice law. Ashley and Crittenden ended their partnership over political issues (Crittenden was part of the pre-emption faction), but Ashley continued to practice law and partnered with George C. Watkins (who later became chief justice of the AR Supreme Court and partnered with Uriah Milton Rose, thus the name of the law firm today).

In the mid-1820s, Ashley constructed a 1 ½-story brick house on the southeast corner of Markham and Scott streets (current location of The Hop and the AR Times). He owned the entire block bounded by Markham, Scott, 2<sup>nd</sup>, and Cumberland. In the 1840s the house was enlarged and remodeled in the Greek Revival style with a 2-story portico supported by 6 Doric columns. After this point, it was called the “Ashley Mansion.” The remaining part of the block contained a large garden, a conservatory, orchard, stables, and a stone carriage house. [The Ashley Mansion eventually became the Oakleaf Hotel and was demolished about 1900.]

In 1844 Ashley became the third Arkansan elected to the U.S. Senate. He was reelected in 1846 and served until his death on April 29, 1848. Ashley County is named after him, as is Chester Street in LR.

## **Civil War**

I’ve already told you that a portion of this house was built in 1835 by Chester Ashley and that his brother lived here to manage the plantation, the sawmill, and

the gristmill. During the Civil War, there was a skirmish at Ashley's Mills as the Union troops advanced toward Little Rock in September 1863. Historical records suggest that Confederate troops camped near here (there is a Civil War marker down by the entrance to Scott Connections). It has also been said that Union General Frederick Steele and his officers stayed in the Ashley-Alexander House prior to the capture of LR. However, this is not well-documented—what is documented is that General Steele used the Ashley Mansion in downtown LR as his headquarters during the federal occupation of LR.

A good quote describing the Ashley's Mills area at the time of the Civil War came from Edward Redington of the 28<sup>th</sup> Wisconsin Infantry, who wrote: "If it were not for the...six or eight kinds of vermin, snakes, a smart sprinkling of alligators, and several other little annoyances, it would be a nice place to live." (Edward to Dear Mary, September 19, 1863, Edward S. Redington Papers)

### **Alexander Era**

This house remained in the Ashley family until 1868 when it was sold at auction to settle estate debts. From 1868 to 1879 the land was owned by Henry Page, and then by R. L. Dodge. In 1893 the land was sold to Watt Worthen, and in December 1898, Arthur Lee Alexander and his wife, Otelia George Alexander, purchased the property for \$35,000.

Originally, the house had a full front porch supported by delicate, turned posts. The two small dormer windows were not there—only the large center dormer was present. The interior consisted of the central hall with two rooms on either side, plus the upstairs. [Show everyone the interior doorway where the house originally stopped in the back.] A screened porch ran across the back of the house, and a detached kitchen and dining room were located in the back yard and were connected to the house by a walkway.

In 1910 there was a fire in the kitchen, but the Alexanders were able to save the house. However, the fire prompted a remodeling of the house. The two small dormers were added on the front façade, and the front porch was altered to its current Colonial Revival appearance. In addition, the plain front entrance was embellished with multi-pane sidelights and a fanlight with a web-like pattern. Finally, rooms were added to the rear of the house. Otelia Alexander had no formal education, but she designed the large back rooms especially for "tea dances," which were held periodically for her friends. They would come out from LR for the day, eat lunch, have tea, and dance.

## **Arthur Lee Alexander and Otelia George Alexander**

Arthur Lee Alexander was born in Asheville, North Carolina, on December 27, 1865. He came to Arkansas and settled at Scott in 1889 and worked for several years as a bookkeeper on the Fred Bryson plantation. On November 10, 1897, he married Otelia George. And in the first week of December 1898 the Alexanders took possession of this property.

Mr. Alexander operated a cypress mill, grew cotton, and raised livestock. He was a forward-thinking man, always interested in the newest farming techniques. He was one of the first farmers in the area to do away with the commissary system and instead paid his tenants in cash twice a month based on the number of acres tilled. Then the workers had their own money to do shopping wherever they pleased—not restricted to the plantation commissary.

It is said that Mr. Alexander planted some of the first alfalfa in the county and owned the first registered dairy bull and purebred cattle here as well. The first carload of registered hogs sent to the St. Louis market came from the Alexander plantation. And Arthur Alexander was one of the charter members of the Scotts Cotton Growers Association, which was the first cotton cooperative association in the U.S. This Association later became part of a larger organization called the Arkansas Profitable Farming Bureau (see photo of them boarding a train to Washington, D.C., inside).

Otelia George Alexander was born at Reads Landing, AR, on August 20, 1878. The George family was originally from Germany, and Otelia's grandfather and great-uncles ("the George Brothers") operated several successful business ventures in downtown LR in the early to mid-1800s. Her great-uncle, Alexander George, built the George House in 1858-59 (it sat where the Clinton Library is today). [This house served as the first St. Vincent Infirmary (1888) and was later used as offices (1900-1960s) for the Choctaw, Oklahoma & Gulf RR and the Rock Island RR.]

Mrs. Alexander was involved in civic and social affairs, and she was very energetic and adventurous. In addition to raising a family of 5 children, Otelia's work on the State Penitentiary Board led to her appointment on the National Board of Prison Workers. She organized the Woman's Exchange Club of LR, which was supported by the Catholic Diocese of Arkansas, and provided a means for the elderly and underprivileged to market their goods. Mrs. Alexander also served on the staff of

the *Arkansas Gazette* for 2 years. Otelia Alexander named the plantation “Illallee” after a Native American word meaning “home.”

In 1926 Arthur L. Alexander and his eldest son, William George Alexander, formed a partnership and operated the plantation of 1,883 acres with 1,383 acres of that in cultivation. Arthur Alexander died on December 7, 1938, and his son, George, continued to operate the plantation.

Otelia Alexander continued to live here until 1957 when she moved down the road to the old Scott teacherage (yellow house across from old school).

In 1957 George Alexander, who had been managing the plantation, moved into the Ashley-Alexander House with his new bride (he got married for the first time when he was 60 years old). George did some remodeling on the house—for instance, he added a bathroom off the front right bedroom, added closets in some rooms, installed a black & white tile floor in the dining room, built brick terraces at the rear and side of the house, and replaced some windows in the dining and living areas (they were originally casement windows above long window seats, but they are now multi-pane, stationary windows with glass doors opening out to the terraces).

George Alexander lived here until 1993, and then Bitsy’s son, Arthur Alexander Davis, lived here with his family. Bitsy Davis bought the house from her son in 2009. She currently uses the house for weddings, special events, dinners, receptions, lunches, showers, etc.

Bitsy’s mother, Virginia Alexander, is the youngest child of Arthur and Otelia Alexander. Virginia was born in this house in 1907 and she is still alive—104 years old. So Arthur and Otelia Alexander were Bitsy’s grandparents.

### **Details about the house**

- 5,400 square feet
- 6 bedrooms & 4 bathrooms
- 18-foot ceilings
- Built with hand-hewn cypress logs covered in clapboard
- Transom windows above interior doors
- Fireplace in every room
- 1835 house stopped at large doorway from main hall to living room
- 1910 additions/remodeling

- Last additions done in 1957 by George Alexander
- Pocket doors
- House surrounded by pecan grove
- Old sleeping porch off side—Bitsy removed the screens
- Metal patio furniture (green) belonged to Otelia
- Dining room table was built by A. L. Alexander and Bob Dortch—over 100 years old.
- When she was young, Otelia drove a car through the front window of the Hotel Marion in downtown LR. After that, Arthur told her that he would get her a chauffeur if she never drove again. She liked to go to Mexico, and she would get high school boys to drive her to Mexico so she could shop and vacation. The light fixture below the stairs in the main hall is from Mexico, and the large chandelier is likely also from Mexico (purchased in late 1930s or early 1940s).
- Otelia had 7 people working for her in the house at all times, including 2 cooks, maids, a gardener, someone who only cleaned the floors, etc.
- House is supposedly haunted—while she was looking in her dressing table mirror in 1899, Otelia Alexander saw a woman standing behind a chair in the next room. When she turned to look at her, she was gone. After much questioning, the cooks finally admitted that the ghost was well-known among the African-American staff in the house. Mrs. Alexander was certain that something catastrophic happened to their family every 5 or 10 years after the sighting. She also smelled another woman's perfume in the house sometimes. So she put bottles of other perfumes in each room, and the maids would open the bottles when they cleaned to give a different scent. In 1911 author Jack London unexpectedly stopped by the house and missed Otelia Alexander. But he left her a note saying, "There is a peculiar atmosphere pervading the entire place and some day I'm coming back." See newspaper article on wall.
- Actual ghost story originates from a former owner (before the Alexanders) who fathered a child with a woman and then didn't want to have anything to do with her again. So she put a hex on the house.

Point out portraits of Arthur Lee Alexander in hallway and Otelia in right front bedroom. Portrait of Arthur Lee Alexander, Jr., holding dog—beside the stairs—he died at 15 from appendicitis (Bitsy's uncle).

Thank you!

Next tour is May 6 at the Rogers House on 18<sup>th</sup> St. in LR.