

**Sandwiching in History  
Taborian Hall  
800 W. Ninth Street, LR  
February 4, 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 Taborian Hall. I'd like to thank the owners, Kerry and Grady McCoy, for allowing us to tour the building today. And many thanks go to Amber Jones, executive director of the Friends of Dreamland Ballroom, for all of her help preparing the tour. Taborian Hall was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1982 because it is the only remaining historic building on West Ninth Street and stands as a reminder of Little Rock's once-prosperous African-American business district.

**Growth of African American Commerce in LR**

[This section paraphrased from Blake Wintory's W. 9<sup>th</sup> St. exhibit narrative at MTCC]

After the Civil War, Little Rock's African American population grew rapidly. Although a high percentage of Arkansas's blacks remained in the familiar rural environment of plantation life, many former slaves left their homes and the oversight of the master (and later landlord) for an increasingly more independent life in Little Rock. In 1860 Little Rock's total population was 3,727, with 853 African Americans, mostly slaves, accounting for just 22.9% of the total. By 1870 Little Rock grew to over 12,000 people. The influx of freedmen and freedwomen increased the black population to a total of 5,269, which accounted for 42.6% of the city's total population.

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the majority of blacks in Little Rock held working class jobs as skilled laborers or service providers. The abundance of these jobs created the right conditions for black businesses to develop and met the needs of the under served black community. Although the 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup>, and 15<sup>th</sup> Amendments to the U.S. Constitution officially abolished slavery and gave African Americans constitutional rights, Arkansans took a step back in time with the Separate Coach Law of 1891, which mandated separate railroad cars for white and black passengers, thus legalizing Jim Crow segregation in the state.

Jim Crow typically refers to the South's segregated facilities and the laws and customs that enforced it. The term was probably first used in the late 1820s by Thomas "Dandy" Rice, a white minstrel entertainer who "performed a song-and-dance routine called 'Jump Jim Crow'" in blackface. By the early 1840s, "Jim Crow" was used to describe segregated accommodations in the North. After Reconstruction, states passed "Jim Crow" laws that undid Reconstruction's advances, increased segregation of blacks and whites, and introduced a discriminatory poll tax.

The "separate but equal" doctrine was endorsed by the U.S. Supreme Court in the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision that upheld Louisiana's 1890 segregation law for railroad cars. **The legalizing of Jim Crow segregation practices forced African Americans to create their own businesses and cooperative networks to meet the needs of their community.**

### **West Ninth Street**

In the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, West Ninth Street emerged as an important place in the African American community, when slaves began worshiping in churches independent of their white masters. The congregations of the First Missionary Baptist Church and Wesley Chapel began meeting in this general vicinity in the 1840s because at that time, this area was considered to be the southwestern edge of town. African American churches continued to flourish in this neighborhood--the 1939 Sanborn map shows 7 African American churches in the area from Broadway to Chester and 7<sup>th</sup> down to 12<sup>th</sup> Street.

Although Philander Smith College had buildings on 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> streets, and the United Friends Colored Hospital and Phyllis Wheatley Colored YWCA were on 10<sup>th</sup> Street, the heart of the black community was along 9<sup>th</sup> Street. By 1910 there were 38 black businesses on 9<sup>th</sup> Street. That number increased to 63 by 1925. It

dropped a little during the Great Depression but then exploded after WWII, reaching a high of 102 black-owned businesses on 9<sup>th</sup> Street in 1959.

Because segregation limited access to professional health care and other services for blacks, there was a high demand for trained black professionals in all southern cities. West 9<sup>th</sup> Street attracted many of these black professionals in Little Rock. There were doctors, dentists, lawyers, and pharmacists. By 1920 there were 4 black-owned pharmacies on W. 9<sup>th</sup> Street—all within short walking distance of the 10 black physicians in LR at that time. Pharmacists played an important role in society because they often served as a substitute for the doctor—you could go buy patent medicine (usually with a high alcohol content), or commercial versions of home remedies, from the pharmacist and avoid the doctor. But pharmacies also had soda fountains where you could get ice cream or soda and therefore became popular 9<sup>th</sup> Street hangouts. Many clever doctors began locating their offices above pharmacies for this reason.

There were many other types of black businesses along West 9<sup>th</sup> Street, including restaurants, boarding houses & hotels, tailors, dry cleaners, a movie theater (Gem Theater), a library, undertakers, barber shops, beauty parlors, service stations, night clubs, taverns, liquor stores, etc.

### **Knights and Daughters of Tabor**

Taborian Hall was built between 1916 and 1918 to serve as the new state headquarters for the Knights and Daughters of Tabor, an African American fraternal organization. On August 12, 1872, Rev. Moses Dickson organized the International Order of Twelve, of Knights and Daughters of Tabor, in Independence, MO. The group was formed to continue a tradition of Christian brotherhood, high moral principles, solidarity, commitment to education, home ownership, and financial independence. You see, prior to his involvement with the Knights and Daughters of Tabor, Rev. Dickson organized the Knights of Liberty (1855), which was a secret society of men who worked throughout the South to free slaves, help refugees going north, and establish black schools. This is where the number 12 gets its significance—there were 12 men, including Dickson, who joined to form the Knights of Liberty and they in turn recruited more members in the southern states. In his 1891 book called *Manual of the International Order of Twelve of Knights and Daughters of Tabor*, Dickson likened this group to the 12 apostles.

[Tabor probably refers to Mount Tabor, which is a mountain in Israel where the transfiguration of Jesus happened...Jesus spoke to Moses and Elijah and a voice from Heaven called him "Son."]

The organizational literature is full of references to "777" and "333," and these numbers appear on Taborian Hall's cornerstone. The 777 means "triple perfection of the International Order of Twelve, founded upon the solid principles of justice, equity, benevolence, prudence, loyalty, unity and impartiality." There are 7 founding principles listed. The number "7" is also supposed to mean purity and perfection in Christianity because God rested on the 7<sup>th</sup> day after creating the heavens and the earth.

The 333 refers to the members' strong commitment to God, specifically the Holy Trinity of the Father, Son, and the Holy Ghost.

Taborian Hall's cornerstone also features an engraving of an eye, which symbolizes the all-seeing eye of God.

Like the Mosaic Templars of America, who had offices down the street at 9<sup>th</sup> & Broadway, the Knights and Daughters of Tabor offered illness, death, and burial insurance to African Americans at a time when white insurers refused to treat black customers equally. This was all part of a larger fraternal movement in which thousands of men and women (white and black) joined organizations that offered insurance benefits and camaraderie. However, since white American fraternal organizations refused to issue charters to black groups, African American branches were forced to obtain a charter from an organization's European counterpart or create their own organizations.

A 1919 ad for the Knights and Daughters of Tabor in the LR City Directory reads, "The organization pays an endowment of three hundred dollars; for funeral expense fifty dollars and twenty dollars toward purchase of monument." Once you were an official member of the organization, you had to pay dues. Then if you were in need of financial assistance (specifically, if you were sick, disabled, or distressed), you were eligible to receive weekly payments. If a male member died, quarterly payments would be made to the widow (until she remarried) and to any orphaned children (until they reached the age of 15).

[On Taborian Hall's cornerstone, it lists the Board of Grand Curators with initials after each name. CGM stands for "Chief Grand Mentor," CGP for "Chief Grand Priestess or Preceptress," CGS for "Chief Grand Scribe," CGR for "Chief Grand

Recorder,” CGT for “Chief Grand Treasurer.” In 1916 Scipio A. Jordan was the Chief Grand Mentor for the Arkansas Chapter of the Knights and Daughters of Tabor.]

## **Construction of Taborian Hall**

### ***Northern commercial building (Doc’s)***

As I mentioned earlier, the cornerstone for Taborian Hall was laid in 1916, and the building was completed in 1918. Interestingly, what we know today as Taborian Hall is actually 2 buildings joined together. The northern portion (or rear) of the building is older than the front part. This northern portion was built circa 1913 as a 3-story commercial structure with 2 storefronts and faced east toward State Street. It had 3 ocular (round) windows in its upper façade and a pitched roof. In later years the lower floor of this building was occupied by Doc’s Pool Hall (now the break room)—you can still see hearts and clubs painted on the walls as well as black rectangles, which were used as chalk boards for keeping pool scores.

### ***Southern Portion (Taborian)***

In 1916 the Knights and Daughters of Tabor built the southern portion of the building (the front). The organization employed a local black contractor named Simeon “Sim” Johnson to supervise construction. They matched the brick very closely to the original commercial building, continued the use of pilasters, and used a similar window size and arrangement. They employed Classical detailing on the building’s front façade, featuring a prominent cornice with decorative brackets and dentils, pilasters with cast stone capitals, and a front entrance crowned by a segmental arch pediment with two Ionic columns. There were also decorative vents positioned just below the cornice line on the front and side elevations.

On August 31, 1918, the *Arkansas Democrat* published a description of the newly completed building:

This building known as Taborian hall...cost about \$65,000 to complete, is of concrete and brick, three stories and basement, and occupies a space 85 by 65 feet. The first floor is given over to five large and beautifully finished store rooms [rooms for commercial businesses]...On the second floor are the lodge rooms, and five large well-lighted and ventilated offices, occupied by professional men. The third floor is devoted to rest rooms, auditorium, etc., and is cozy and comfortable and strictly modern in its appointments.

The bricks by the front entrance list local chapters of the Knights and Daughters of Tabor who offered financial support for the construction of this building.

Interesting to note an Argenta chapter as well as a few Scotts chapters—if you were at our tour last month, we talked about how the name of Scott evolved from Scott’s Station to Scott’s to just Scott.

### ***Buildings Joined***

A photo in the 1919 LR City Directory reveals that the 1916 Taborian Hall portion did not originally have the ocular windows around its upper façade. The building stopped at the projecting cornice and had some type of sloped, flat roof. [There was a drainage pipe where the two buildings met and water drained off the roofs on the east and west sides.]

At some point between 1919 and 1939 (date of next Sanborn map and before next historic photo), the ocular windows were added around the southern portion of the building, creating the illusion of one large building. A new pitched roof was added at this time over both buildings, and portions of the party wall (shared wall) were removed to join the buildings together. This allowed for the creation of the Dreamland Ballroom space on the third floor. Prior to this, the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor auditorium was much smaller and didn’t have the current stage and box seats (they were obviously added after the building’s completion b/c they block windows & there wouldn’t have been enough head clearance to stand up in the box seats with the original roofline).

Because the Taborians lost the building in 1929 after the stock market crash, the remodel probably took place during the mid-1920s when times were prosperous.

### **First Floor occupants**

A variety of businesses were located here over the years, but the Gem Pharmacy was the longest running occupant. E. C. Carter’s Gem Pharmacy was in the eastern storefront (right hand side) from about 1920 until 1971. A 1923 advertisement read, “We Carry a Complete line of Stationery and School Supplies. We serve the best lunch, Chocolate candies and ice cream in the city.”

Others:

Taborian Restaurant, 1926

Albert Witherspoon Billiards, 1931

Beauty Nook Beauty Shop, 1962

There was also a notary, insurance agency, and taxi cab stand

### ***Negro Soldiers Service Center & USO***

During WWI, this building served as a Negro Soldiers Service Center (catering to soldiers from nearby Camp Pike).

During WWII, the building became the Ninth Street USO (United Service Organizations; created in 1941 to support troops during WWII). It opened in January 1942 and, of course, catered to soldiers from Camp Robinson. There is a basement under the 1918 part of the building, and it was used as a locker room with lockers and showers. A snack bar was located on the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor. The USO had game rooms, basketball, boxing, crafts, a library, religious services, and dances.

Note the missing staircase on the first floor (converted to storage space).

### **Second Floor occupants**

The second floor originally housed Taborian lodge rooms and professional offices. After the Taborians moved out of the building, their rooms were converted to office space as well. Occupants include:

W. B. Black, physician, 1920

Fred T. Jones, physician and surgeon (specialized in chronic diseases and women's complaints)

J. V. Jordan, dentist

Jesse B. Woods, physician

Civil Rights attorneys Thad Williams and Harold Anderson

Ritz Beer Garden Restaurant, 1934-35

After the two buildings were joined, the northern (back) portion of the second floor had a stage in it. Several different groups met there in the 1950s, including the Bronze League, the Cavaliers Club, and the BMW Club (which stands for bellboys, musicians, and waiters).

Point out brick wall that was once an exterior wall & the area where the banners are made.

### **Third Floor occupants**

By 1936 the third floor became the Dreamland Ballroom. Beginning in the mid-1930s there were dances, basketball games, boxing matches, and concerts here.

Notable performers:

Cab Calloway, not confirmed, but rumored to have played during his national tour in 1934.

Count Basie, 1940

**From May 10, 1941 to July 11, 1941, Dreamland was under new management as Club Aristocrat.**

**Re-opening of Dreamland Ballroom was on Sunday, July 27, 1941**

**In January 1942 the Ninth Street USO opened; Dreamland Ballroom was still on the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor.**

Some acts during WWII in the Dreamland:

Louis Jordon & Claude Trenier, June 16, 1942

Ida Cox and Her Darktown Scandals, May 31, 1942

Ella Fitzgerald and Dizzy Gillespie, November 15, 1946

In the late 1940s and 1950s, the Dreamland was the smallest theatre on the Chitlin' Circuit, which were safe venues for African American performers throughout the South during segregation.

Artists who performed here during this time:

Lucky Millinder, February 18th, 1947

Cootie Williams, May 22, 1947

Jimmie Lunceford, June 11, 1947

Louis Armstrong, April 1, 1949

Jimmy Witherspoon, February 13, 1950

**In 1951 Dreamland Ballroom became Club Moracco** (or Morocco, spelled both ways). Some artists who performed there:

Ruth Brown performed at the opening of Club Morocco, Sept. 1951

Al Hibbler, Nov. 1951.

B. B. King, played Club Morocco three times: November 7, 1952,

December 10, 1952, and June 13, 1953.



Ray Charles, February 4, 1953

Etta James, February 18, 1956

Duke Ellington, probably played Dreamland in 1936; he was on a tour list, at least. In the 1940s and in 1951, he played Robinson Auditorium, and possibly played the Dreamland, but not confirmed.

**In 1960 Club Morocco became the Magnolia Ballroom.**

**The Twin City Club, which actually opened in the Taborian Hall basement in the 1950s, was the last club in the building.** Last tenants listed 1975.

**Decline of 9<sup>th</sup> Street**—By the mid-1970s Ninth Street was in real trouble. In 1979 the *Arkansas Democrat* ran an article entitled “West Ninth Street is Decaying.”

But the actual demise of the once-prosperous African American business district began in the 1960s with **Urban Renewal**. Some of the first areas targeted for demolition and “renewal” were “slums,” which usually happened to be in predominantly black neighborhoods. And **integration** actually hurt black-owned businesses because then their reliable customer base was free to conduct business elsewhere (in white-owned establishments). Black businesses couldn’t compete with these huge white-owned conglomerates, so they closed. Finally, the construction of the **Wilbur Mills Expressway (I-630)** through Little Rock from the late 1960s to the 1980s delivered the death blow. This 200-foot-wide interstate was designed to provide quicker transportation to the suburbs in west Little Rock, but it also claimed most of the black business and entertainment center that once stood along 8<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup>, and 11<sup>th</sup> streets. During the construction of 630, planners went out of their way to preserve white landmarks like MacArthur Park and Mt. Holly Cemetery, but black sections of town were bulldozed. And I-630 has had the unintended effect of creating a race line through LR with majority white north of 630 and majority black south of 630.

**November 1991 – Taborian Hall purchased by Kerry & Grady McCoy. They had to put a new roof on the building because it had a giant hole, and the interior had been exposed to the weather for over a year (it was about to be demolished). In March 1992 the building became the new headquarters of Arkansas Flag and Banner.**