

Sandwiching in History
First Lutheran Church
314 E. 8th St., 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 September Sandwiching in History tour of First Lutheran Church! I'd like to thank Pastor Ronald Bacic for allowing us to tour the church today, and I also need to thank David & Joanne Karcher, who have graciously prepared refreshments for us. First Lutheran Church is a contributing resource in the MacArthur Park Historic District, which was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1977, making it Little Rock's first NR-listed historic district (followed closely by the Governor's Mansion HD in 1978).

MacArthur Park Neighborhood

This neighborhood derives its name from MacArthur Park, which is the oldest municipal park in LR...but it wasn't always a park. Beginning in 1836, the U.S. government constructed an arsenal at 9th & Commerce at what was then the edge of LR. The complex eventually included more than 30 buildings. In early 1861, amid rumors of Arkansas's secession from the Union, Captain James Totten surrendered the arsenal to the state of AR, and Federal troops left the city. When

Union troops captured LR in 1863, they occupied the arsenal buildings and stayed there for the duration of the war. After the Civil War, the arsenal was used to provide housing for soldiers and their families. Douglas MacArthur was born at the arsenal in 1880. MacArthur grew up to serve as supreme allied commander of the Southwest Pacific Theater during World War II, achieving the rank of five-star General in the U.S. Army.

In 1890 the U.S. Department of War decided to close hundreds of military bases across the country and instead establish a dozen large bases near reliable transportation routes (i.e. railroads). And the U.S. Arsenal at 9th & Commerce was slated to close, so a land swap was arranged in which the arsenal grounds were deeded to the City of Little Rock for use as a public park in exchange for about 1,000 acres on Big Rock Mountain for the construction of one of the Army's coveted new posts, which became Fort Logan H. Roots (has been a VA Hospital since 1921).

The old arsenal grounds were known as City Park until 1942, when the park was renamed MacArthur Park in honor of Gen. Douglas MacArthur. The Tower Building, constructed in 1840, is the only building remaining from the old U.S. Arsenal. It currently houses the MacArthur Museum of Arkansas Military History.

In addition to the significance of MacArthur Park itself, this neighborhood is also important because it contains some of the oldest residences in LR, including the Pike-Fletcher-Terry House (1840), the Absalom Fowler House (1840), Curran Hall (1842-43), and Trapnall Hall (1843).

German Immigration

Although Germans began settling in present-day Arkansas in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, they didn't come here in large numbers until after the Civil War. In the 1870s, Germans were actively recruited by the Arkansas state government as well as railroad companies in order to replenish the number of able-bodied white men in the state who either lost their lives or moved away during the Civil War. Given grants of government land, the railroads moved west, financing construction by selling land to immigrants. Both the Lutheran and the Catholic churches, the two denominations most closely associated with the German community, cooperated with the railroads in developing German immigrant communities in Arkansas. The Catholic Church was involved in direct recruitment, acting as an agent for the railroad, while the Lutheran Church concentrated on supporting immigrants after they arrived.

First Lutheran Church

In 1868 the state's first formal Lutheran congregations were chartered in Fort Smith and in Little Rock. The German Lutheran congregation in Little Rock was organized in the home of Charles Miller at 6th & Rector streets, and held services in the 3rd floor of the Kramer, Miller & Co. Building at the corner of Markham & Commerce. Frederick Kramer, longtime LR School Board president and namesake of Kramer Elementary School, partnered with his brother-in-law, Charles Miller, in the wholesale grocery business after the Civil War. The two were charter members of the First Lutheran Church.

In 1869 the Lutheran congregation purchased property at the corner of Rock and Holly (now 8th) streets. Later that year, they built a white, wood-frame church at a cost of \$3,360. It had a bell tower that was about 60 feet tall. This building was completed and formally dedicated in March 1870 as the First German Evangelical Lutheran Church. Also in 1870, a small school building was constructed west of the church (where the old parsonage/current office is now). The church's first pastor, J. H. Niemann, initially taught classes for 15 students. As church membership increased, the congregation made plans to construct a larger building.

1887-88 Church Building (current bldg.)

In 1884 a committee was organized to discuss the construction of a larger church building. The committee decided to proceed with new construction, and in September 1887, the cornerstone of the current church was laid as the old building was razed. Thomas Harding was chosen as the architect, probably because he had recently designed St. Andrew's Catholic Cathedral (1878-1881). Charles J. Fischer was contractor/builder with a low bid of \$13,400 (excluding furnishings & fixtures). The church was completed in April 1888. A second wood-frame school building was built just to the north of the church about 1890.

The 1888 church building was constructed with a red brick exterior, but the church was painted "dove gray" in 1910-1911. Presumably, this was done to make the brick resemble granite. In 1927 a layer of buff brick was added over the north, south, and east exterior walls, making those walls 14 inches thick. The west (or rear) wall is still faced with red brick under several coats of paint. By comparing historic photos with current photos, you can see that the buff brick obscures some of the brick detailing and contrasting colors from the original design.

It's important to mention that the congregation of First Lutheran Church was confronted with a dilemma regarding the use of traditional German language during worship services. In the early years of the church, the majority of its members were German immigrants and therefore, spoke the German language. However, their children primarily grew up speaking English. So there was a conflict about whether to maintain the traditional German services or offer services in English to appeal to a wider audience and increase the church membership. So First Lutheran Church started offering Sunday evening services in English in 1885. During World War I, the public's anti-German sentiment forced the church to offer all regular church services in English (officially done in 1921). However, they still provided some special services in German until 1940.

Interior Details

Ceiling: Made of Arkansas yellow pine.

Light fixtures: Church originally equipped with 8 chandeliers with gas lamps. Converted from gas to electric about 1910. The old chandelier fixtures were still present in a 1925 photo, so these date to sometime after 1925.

Windows: These are the original 1888 stained glass windows. They were assembled in St. Louis by H. A. Wallis using Belz glass imported from Germany. The west window depicts "the Ascension" of Jesus. The north window is "the Good Shepherd." The south window is "Jesus and the children." [This one was presented by the Kramer, Reichardt, and Miller families, who were all founding members of the church...Kramer and Miller both married Reichardt daughters...remember the Edward Reichardt House on Welch Street from our May tour?] Storm windows added in 1960s.

Columns: The columns and Corinthian capitals were added in 1911. Originally, the columns were more slender and had smaller, simpler capitals.

Interior transom windows: Installed in 1911. These pointed arch doorways were originally just alcoves and in 1911 were converted into doors with transoms above.

Pews: These are the 1888 pews made of native cherry and ash and manufactured in Richmond, Indiana.

Altar, pulpit, lectern, baptismal font: These are hand-carved wood pieces from Germany and were painted to look marbleized. The current altar was reworked in

the 1960s to make it smaller than the original (although I think most of the back portion is original), and the current lectern replaced a 1910 model at an unknown date. However, the current pulpit and baptismal font are original to 1888.

Pipe organ: The original pipe organ from 1888 was replaced in 1920 with a 1918-model made by the Reuter-Schwartz Organ Co. of Lawrence, Kansas.

Basement: In 1947 a full basement was constructed under the church building.

Church Exterior

The church is an excellent example of the Gothic Revival style of architecture with its asymmetrical façade, multiple towers of different size and shape, steeply pitched roof, gables ending in parapets, and the pointed arch or lancet window and door openings (some with elaborate tracery).

The steeple rises to a height of 167 feet, but the cross portion alone measures 16 feet. In 1936 neon lighting was first added to the cross on the steeple—as was the small opening and ladder to provide access for repairs. To this day, if something needs to be repaired on the steeple, the only access is through that little door.

First Lutheran Church Parsonage

This Craftsman-style building was constructed in 1927 to replace an existing parsonage. The church received a layer of buff brick on three of its exterior walls at the same time, so the bricks match. This house currently serves as the church office.

Charter House (not church property, but next door)

Located at 308 E. 8th Street just west of the old parsonage. This house was built in 1879 and in the early 1880s, it was occupied by William Charter, who was a cotton buyer and banker. Edward Reichardt later owned the house and used it as a rental property for over 40 years. It is currently a law office.

Luther Education Building (Lutheran Church School)

This building was constructed in 1907 to house the Lutheran Church School (it was the third building to serve this purpose). It was designed by well-known Arkansas architect Charles L. Thompson in the Colonial Revival style with a Mission-style

parapet. As I mentioned earlier, the Lutheran Church operated a school almost as soon as they organized a congregation in Little Rock. Their first school building was built on the site of the old parsonage in 1870. The school operated successfully until 1919, when it was forced to close due to low enrollment.

In 1941 a basement was constructed under the school building to serve as a Soldiers' Center during World War II. The Lutheran School reopened in 1943, and by 1949, it had 75 pupils in grades K-8.

The school building interior was updated in 1948, and in 1981-82, the building was renovated again. Although the interior has been changed from its original appearance, the architectural integrity of the exterior has been maintained.

The Lutheran school campus was moved to Markham & Hughes in 1965, and Christ Lutheran School still offers classes for Pre-K-8th grade. The Lutheran High School (grades 10-12) closed in 2010 due to financial problems.

Parking lot

The Lutheran church purchased the house to the north of the school building in 1947 and used it as a school annex until 1975, when it was demolished to make way for a church parking lot.

Welch-Cherry House & property to west of it facing 7th St.

In 1958 the Lutheran Church purchased the Welch-Cherry House and the adjacent house to the west. The Welch-Cherry House was built about 1884 by the Rev. Thomas R. Welch at a cost of \$9,000. Rev. Welch served as pastor of Little Rock's First Presbyterian Church for 25 years. After Rev. Welch's death, the house was purchased in 1892 by Lewis W. Cherry, who was in the ice manufacturing business and later became president of the State National Bank in Little Rock. Cherry lived here until his death in 1922, and his widow remained here until she died in 1957. It has an Italianate style influence provided by its tall, narrow windows crowned by decorative hood molding.

The church rents the building out for special events, weddings, and receptions.

House at 307 E. 7th St.: Probably built in the 1890s. This property belongs to the church and is rented out as apartments with the income coming to the church.

Lincoln House (not church property, but located on same block)

Lincoln House at 301 E. 7th St. Built in 1872 by Dr. Charles James Lincoln, owner of C. J. Lincoln Drug Company, which was located on Main Street between Markham and the Arkansas River. This house is a wonderful example of the Italianate style in the historic district—hood molding over windows, brackets under eaves, etc.

Cannon ball rumor...

Rumored that a Union gunboat fired on the city of LR during the Civil War and the cannon ball landed about where the bird bath is today. This would have been before the Lutheran church owned the property. This is theoretically possible, but not likely. No Union gunboats were used during the Battle of Little Rock in 1863, and no Rebel gunboats fired on the city either. However, it is possible that a regular cannon (on land) lobbed a shell in this vicinity during the 1863 battle.