

**Sandwiching in History
Justin Matthews House
406 Goshen Ave., NLR
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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 July Sandwiching in History tour of the Matthews House. I'd like to introduce and thank the owners, Charley and Carol Baxter, for allowing us to tour their beautiful home. The Matthews House was built in 1928-29 by the Justin Matthews Company as a show house in the second phase of the Park Hill subdivision. The Matthews House was listed on the National Register in 1983 for its International and Art Deco-style architecture as well as its importance to the development of Park Hill.

Park Hill: NLR's First Suburban Development

The Park Hill housing development, which now encompasses more than 1,600 acres, was the **brainchild of businessman Justin Matthews (1876-1955)**. Matthews was born in 1876 near Monticello, Arkansas, and moved to Little Rock in 1901. He opened the **Rose City Cotton Oil Mill in 1902** and amassed a

considerable amount of money, which enabled him to invest heavily in real estate. He bought land on a hill just beyond the northern boundary of North Little Rock.

But the north side of the Arkansas River was low-lying and swampy, most streets were unpaved, and there was no drainage or sewer system. Water usually stood on the streets after each heavy rain, making them impassable.

Justin Matthews spearheaded the plan to create **improvement districts in North Little Rock** to fund the **paving of city streets, a sewer and drainage system (1913-14)**, and the **construction of the Broadway Bridge (1923)** over the Arkansas River. Matthews also had the Main Street viaduct over the railroad yard between 9th and 13th Streets rebuilt to handle increased traffic (1927). These public improvements played an instrumental role in the growth of NLR by making it easily accessible and more desirable, but they also helped Matthews develop his own land north of the river. It was no accident that the **Arkansas-Missouri Highway** (which is now JFK Blvd.) was one of the first paving projects undertaken by the state's first highway commission. Matthews was appointed to the commission, and the highway just happened to be the main thoroughfare through the Park Hill development.

Park Hill was the **first major suburban development in North Little Rock** and the **second development in the Greater Little Rock area**—Pulaski Heights was the first (platted in 1892). Matthews **platted the first sections of Park Hill in 1921** on the land he had purchased. Because Matthews had worked to improve NLR's roads and bridges, Park Hill was accessible by automobile. So even though Park Hill was the LR area's **second** major suburban development (after Pulaski Heights), it was the **first to rely solely on automobile transportation** (Pulaski Heights developers relied on a streetcar system to transport residents). Park Hill was advertised as the "**second Pulaski Heights,**" but with more advantages like **closer proximity to downtown** Little Rock and North Little Rock, **greater elevation** (which provided cooler temperatures and health benefits), **better views**, and **level land**.

His advertisements even mentioned the fact that the roads leading to Park Hill ran north-south, so you **wouldn't have to face the sun** driving to and from work like you would if you lived in Pulaski Heights (located west of downtown).

Matthews formed the **Park Hill Land Company** to market, sell, and develop the area, while the Justin Matthews Company supervised other projects in central Arkansas (including Lakewood, Sylvan Hills, Country Club Manor...near current

North Hills Country Club, and Kellogg Acres). At its peak, the Park Hill Land Co. **employed over 200 people**, including an **architect/builder, brick mason, horticulturist/landscape artist, and road construction engineer**. The Justin Matthews Company proclaimed that they built houses to **“endure the ravages of time.”** Matthews cautiously opened one section of Park Hill at a time. In the first eight years of development, 159 houses and a school were built. The most **intense periods of growth in Park Hill** were the **1920s and 1940s**. Park Hill initially took off in the 1920s, development slowed in the 1930s b/c of the Great Depression, and then picked back up in the 1940s—first b/c of men being stationed at nearby Camp Robinson for training during WWII and then after the war when the soldiers came home.

The “Modernistic” House

This house was completed in April 1929 to serve as a show house in this section of Park Hill. It was advertised extensively in the newspaper as the company’s “modernistic” home. The Justin Matthews Company’s resident “architect”, Frank M. Carmean, designed this house as well as many others in Park Hill. Frank Carmean (1880-1955) came to NLR about 1920 from Missouri and was hired by Justin Matthews to design and build the more up-scale houses in Park Hill. Carmean was not a licensed architect, but he was a designer who specialized in concrete and masonry work. Carmean’s son, Frank M. Carmean, Jr., also worked for the Justin Matthews Company and specialized in tile work. He did the tile in this house—in the entry porch, upstairs bathroom, and originally on the rooftop terrace (since removed).

Matthews sent Carmean, Sr., on a tour of several southwestern cities, including Dallas, Fort Worth, Houston, San Antonio, El Paso, and Los Angeles, in order to “obtain the very latest ideas in design and construction.” Carmean probably learned about the International and Art Deco styles while he was on this trip. He employed the International style on the home’s exterior and the Art Deco style on the interior.

International:

Represents the height of the Modern movement, emphasizing progress and simplicity. Made use of steel-frame and concrete construction methods, had flat roofs, smooth wall surfaces, used a lot of windows and glass (especially corner windows), and had very little exterior ornamentation. This design was most commonly used on commercial and institutional buildings—rarely used on houses.

Art Deco:

Represented a break from traditional styles and an emphasis on modernism and the design of the future. Also inspired by the discovery of King Tut's tomb in 1922, whose Egyptian treasures influenced everything from jewelry, clothing, and furniture to architecture. The Art Deco style gets its name from an exposition of art and industry held in Paris in 1925. Buildings had a vertical emphasis, smooth walls (often of stucco), an asymmetrical layout, typically featured decorative geometric elements like chevrons, zigzags, flowers, starbursts, and steps (reminiscent of an Egyptian pyramid).

House Details

The house is composed of square shapes with a cylinder-shaped stair tower at the center. This was known as the "boat house" because the stair cylinder and the railing around the "roof garden" resembled the deck of a battleship. The house was constructed of concrete and steel with walls of stucco over Malvern brick (Malvern was and is by far the leading brick producing city in AR, and at one time, claimed to be the "Brick Capital of the World" ...several different companies over the years, including AR Brick & Tile, Malvern Brick & Tile, and Acme Brick Co.). The house featured Fenestra steel casement windows as well as a paneled mahogany front door. The original garage door was decorated with a geometric pattern, but it has been replaced. The walled garden patio is original to the house, as is the fish pond/flower bed below the front window. The house has always had a "roof garden" or terrace, but it has been bumped out and extended over the garage and 1950s laundry room addition.

**Additions: Notice where the house originally ended to the right of the garage door. The laundry room and carport addition were done in the 1950s, as was the upstairs den area, which has the two new windows in it. Originally, the rooftop deck was accessed by a door in the cylinder tower, but now it is accessed by a door in the den addition. The dining room and kitchen were also expanded on the rear of the house in the 1950s. Show them inside. Finally, the Baxters built an addition to the rear of the house in 2008 to house additional downstairs living space, a full bathroom, and a screened porch.

The Show House

Matthews designed this house as a show house in a new section of Park Hill, so when it was built in 1928-29, it was one of the only houses in this area. And there

weren't many houses built up here until after WWII because of the Depression. In fact, the 1939 Sanborn map shows how sparsely developed this street was—a house further down Goshen had a large chicken house in the back yard. This house was supposed to attract people to this area to tour the “modernistic” home and make them want to live in Park Hill. The house was furnished and opened for public viewing between 1929 and 1932. During that time, it was toured by an estimated 28,000 people. Keep in mind that the population of NLR in 1930 was just over 19,000 people. On May 5, 1929, over 2,700 people saw the house in one day, and several hundred were turned away. An ad in the following Sunday's *Arkansas Gazette* read, “Traffic men will be on hand so that the traffic jams of last Sunday should not occur.”

A variety of companies advertised their most modern products in the house, including Crane Plumbing Fixtures, Servel Electric Refrigeration, furniture and drapes from the Arkansas Carpet and Furniture Co., and tile from LR Tile & Mantel. The house had an Atwater/Kent Screen-Grid Radio, and the Madison-Smith Cadillac Co. even displayed a new 5-passenger Cadillac sedan in the driveway.

**Notice the framed 8 x 10 photos in the entryway. The Baxters found the negatives in the house and made these prints. These photos were taken when the house was used as a show home, and they were probably taken by a professional photographer. This would have been necessary because a variety of national publications requested photos and descriptions of the house after it was built (also featured in *House Beautiful* and *The Homemaker*).

A 1929 article about the house in *The Homemaker* said, “The Modernistic idea is not a fad, but is here to stay.”

Notice the Art Deco designs in the home's interior—

the walls are of plaster with a variety of surface textures, including basket weave, swirls, and straight lines (walls were originally unpainted plaster to emphasize the textures)

the slope-sided doorway (which is also seen in 2 places outside the house...leading from the front porch to the back yard and at the rear entrance to the walled-in patio)

the winding staircase in the tower has Malvern oak treads and risers with arch-shaped cut-outs

recessed alcoves

the asymmetrical, stepped projections on the fireplace mantel

octagonal columns with chevron detailing at the top to divide living & dining areas

and the upstairs bathroom features recessed, stepped alcoves around the commode and sink as well as venetian glass floor tiles and piano key tile along the baseboards and around the bottom of the bathtub.

Other features that add to the interior are the original Malvern oak floors, original Art Deco door hardware, and a few original light fixtures—the green one in the entryway, recessed one in the slanted doorway, one in the top of the stairwell, and one in the upstairs bathroom. The other fixtures and stained glass were either purchased later or made by Charley Baxter.

Occupants

Despite the modern design of the home, it was hard to sell. The Matthews family kept the home through the Depression years, with Justin Matthews's son, John, and his wife, Martha, moving into the house in 1932. Then the Matthews family used it as rental property for a few years. In 1945, Matthews sold the house to Eugene and Martina Woods, who owned and operated the Broadway Ice Company at the NE corner of E. Broadway and Birch in NLR. The Woods family occupied the house until 1982, when it was purchased by Charley and Carol Baxter.

**Have Charley tell the story about John Matthews, the baseball player, being robbed in the house.

Extra info:

The divided driveway originally had concrete steps in the center on the lower slope, but when the Woods's daughter, Mary Ann, was learning how to drive, she kept hitting the steps. So her father paved over them to make one solid slab on the lower portion.

Frank M. Carmean, Sr., was of German ancestry, so during WWII, he could not find work because no one wanted to hire a German. He ended up working in a liquor store on Washington Avenue in NLR.

Rural nature of Park Hill—Eugene Woods even had a barn and horses in the backyard in the 1960s. After that, he raised Beagles in a series of chain link pens in the backyard.

The Matthews House sits on 3 pie-shaped lots, which total ½ acre.

2008 Baxter addition was done by Gary Clements's office (actually Chris Diamond) and tried to mimic the design of the original house, even the textured walls.

The upstairs doors are walnut & pine.

House originally had radiator heat and copper gutters.

The downstairs walled patio originally had a grass floor, and Charley put in a flagstone floor.