

Sandwiching in History
Dr. Morgan Smith House
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Intro

Hello, my name is Rachel Silva, and I work for the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program. Welcome to the March Sandwiching in History tour of the Dr. Morgan Smith House. I'd like to introduce and thank Alda and Buddy Ellis for allowing us to tour their beautiful home today. The Dr. Morgan Smith House was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in May 2009 as an excellent example of the Craftsman style of architecture in southwest Little Rock.

Stagecoach Road

Modern-day Stagecoach Road (also formerly known as 19th Street Pike and the Little Rock to Hot Springs Road) runs along the route of the Southwest Trail as it came through Little Rock. [The road gets its current name from the stagecoaches traveling the Southwest Trail.] The Southwest Trail was a network of overland routes in the 19th century stretching from the St. Louis area of Missouri to the Red River Valley in northeast Texas and northwest Louisiana. The Southwest Trail entered Arkansas in northeastern Randolph County and ran diagonally across the state, skirting the foothills of the Ozark Plateau and Ouachita Mountains and avoiding the swamps of eastern Arkansas, and came out at several crossings of the Red River in southwest Arkansas. The Southwest Trail was later known as the Military Road after Congress appropriated funds for its improvement in the 1830s. The Army resurveyed the route and cleared a better path at that time so it could be used as a mail route. [Arkansas had several "military roads," including the military road from Memphis to LR.]

During the Civil War Battle of LR on September 10, 1863, Little Rock fell to Major General Frederick Steele's Union army. The Confederate forces under Major General Sterling Price retreated along the old Southwest Trail heading toward Arkadelphia. Union Colonel Lewis Merrill took up pursuit of Price's army and engaged in a running skirmish with the slowly retreating Southerners. This location on a hill with a creek below would have been a good defensive point for the retreating Confederate army, and one of these skirmishes occurred here at Brodie Creek. The Ellis family has recovered a cannonball and some bullets on the grounds.

Nearby points of interest...

Ten Mile House: The Ten Mile House (or Stagecoach House or McHenry House) is located just a little southwest of here on Stagecoach Road. It is so named b/c it was 10 miles from downtown LR and possibly an overnight stop for stagecoach travelers. Built circa 1830 by John and Henry McHenry, this house stands as a relatively unaltered example of an early 19th century homestead. During the Civil War, Union troops occupied the Ten Mile House and even held "boy martyr of the Confederacy" David O. Dodd overnight in the smokehouse before his execution. Also, before this area was annexed into the city limits, the addresses were different. The Ten Mile House was at 1000 Stagecoach Road, meaning it was 10 miles from downtown, and the Dr. Smith House was 890 Stagecoach, meaning it was about 8.9 miles from downtown.

"The Castle": Also located just a little way down the road. This rock house was built by a prominent LR dentist (Dr. Coke??) in the early 1940s as his wife's "dream house."

Southwest LR

The original city of LR was bounded by the AR River, Quapaw Line (or Commerce St.), Wright Ave., and Pulaski St. (city plat filed in 1822). The City's initial growth was concentrated just to the south and east of the original plat (in today's Governor's Mansion HD and the area east of I-30 like Hanger Hill). But by the late 1880s, Little Rock was emerging from the financial depression caused by the national Panic of 1873, and the city experienced rapid population growth. Just between 1880 and 1890, the city's population nearly doubled to 25,874. In response to this population increase, more than 20 new additions were platted west and southwest of the Original City of Little Rock between 1888 and 1893. LR had to grow in this direction because of geographic limitations like the AR River on the north and flooding from Fouche Bayou and the backwaters of the AR

River further to the south and east. In the mid-1890s significant construction began in the Central High neighborhood and spread westward.

However, this area on Stagecoach Road remained quite rural and was far outside the city limits (southwestern city limits stopped near the corner of Washington & W. 20th or Charles Bussey in 1913). The 1890 *Guide to Little Rock* described the area west of the city limits as “a capital place for a picnic and big enough for half the families of town to go at once without disturbing each other.” In fact, this area was still not included on the 1950 Sanborn maps of LR. They stop about where Stagecoach Rd. branches off of Asher.

So when Dr. Morgan Smith built this house in 1918, it was in the country and his closest neighbor was the Tall Timber Jersey Farm just to the north of Brodie Creek. The Tall Timber subdivision is there today. [Tall Timber Dairy was owned by William H. Williams and his wife, Helon Brown Williams. Their eldest child, Mary Brown “Brownie” Williams Ledbetter, grew up to become a social activist dedicated to fair education and equality along racial, religious, and cultural lines.]

It is not surprising that Dr. Smith wanted to build a house away from the hustle and bustle of downtown Little Rock. His motto was: “Rise early, go to bed early, live close to nature, have high ideals, take less medicine and more advice.” This has a lot to do with the popular medical remedies of the time—get plenty of rest, fresh air, and sunshine, etc. Smith subscribed to the Jeffersonian ideal of leading a self-sufficient, agrarian lifestyle; therefore, he constructed his house on a large plot of land beyond the city limits with plenty of space for his livestock. Also in keeping with this country living philosophy, Smith chose to employ the Craftsman style of architecture on his home. The “Craftsman” style was named for the popular architectural magazine of the same name published by Gustav Stickley.

Craftsman architecture

This house is an excellent example of the Craftsman style with its side-gabled roof and large, front-gabled dormer. And true to the Craftsman form, this house has widely overhanging eaves with exposed rafter tails and a large front porch with massive square porch supports that extend all the way down below the porch floor. The use of large triangular knee braces under the eaves is also a common characteristic of the Craftsman style. Craftsman houses often made use of natural materials and were designed to blend in to their surroundings. Here, you see the use of wood and stone, which is said to have been recovered from cobblestone streets in downtown LR. Craftsman houses were also designed to be very practical

and liveable, and since this house was completed in 1918 and people spent a lot of time outside to stay cool, it featured a large front porch as well as a sleeping porch above the porte-cochere. You'll also notice the number of windows for natural light and air circulation. Finally, Craftsman houses were designed to give the impression of human craftsmanship and typically had built-in bookcases or cabinets, custom staircases, and exposed ceiling beams. This house retains its original newel posts and balustrade on the stairway as well as the exposed oak ceiling beams (now painted, but probably were unpainted oak originally). The living area, which used to be Dr. Smith's library, had built-in bookshelves, which have since been removed.

Dr. Morgan Smith

Dr. Morgan Smith was born on March 8, 1868, in El Dorado, Arkansas. His father, James Monroe Smith, was a wealthy planter and state senator from Union County. At the age of 17, Morgan Smith enrolled in the academic department of the Arkansas Industrial University (U of A) in Fayetteville. After one year of instruction, he entered the medical department in Little Rock. In January 1889 he received a medical degree from the AR Industrial University, but because of a rule at that time, his diploma was held up until his 21st birthday in March 1889.

After graduation, Dr. Smith practiced in the Union County community of Hillsboro, near the birthplace and family home of his father. On December 2, 1890, he married Henri Ellen Schulenberger. Smith practiced in Hillsboro until 1896 when he moved back to El Dorado, serving as city physician for 2 years and building up an extensive practice. In 1903 he enrolled in the Tulane University Medical School in New Orleans and earned an additional medical degree in 1904. Dr. Smith moved to Little Rock in the fall of 1904.

Because he specialized in pediatrics, he was appointed as the physician for both the School for the Blind and the School for Deaf-Mutes. He also reopened his private practice and joined the faculty of the Medical Department of the AR Industrial University (became U of A School of Medicine in 1918). Dr. Smith was an active member of the Arkansas Medical Society, even serving as its president in 1912, and enthusiastically supported progressive reform in the field of public health. From 1909 to 1912, Dr. Smith served as the State Director of Rural Sanitation under the authority of the Rockefeller Sanitary Commission for the Eradication of Hookworm Disease. While serving in this position, Smith convinced Governor George Donaghey in 1913 to create a State Board of Health. Smith also served as State Health Officer in 1913.

In 1912 Smith was named dean of the medical school, where he was also chair of the children's diseases department. Again, thanks to Dr. Smith's influence with Governor Donaghey, the medical department was allowed to move its teaching laboratories into the central and east wings of the Old State House, which was left vacant in 1911 when the new State Capitol Building opened. [The Medical School remained in the Old State House from 1912 to 1935, when New Deal funds through the Public Works Administration allowed for the construction of a new building linked with the LR City Hospital. This Art Deco-style building on McAlmont St. was the first built specifically for use as a hospital and teaching institution. It is currently the UALR Law School.]

Frustrated by the legislature's refusal to appropriate funds for the construction of a teaching hospital for the medical students, Dr. Smith resigned as dean of the medical school in 1923. However, he was immediately asked in 1924 to serve another appointment and agreed—this time serving as dean until 1927. Dr. Smith is said to be the first formally educated pediatrician in the state of Arkansas. When he constructed this home in 1918, he used it as both his personal residence and his medical clinic. Dr. Smith was even elected to the state legislature in 1929, 1931, and 1933. As a result of his leadership, the Arkansas Pediatric Society was created in 1935.

Interesting note: Dr. Smith also owned a commercial property at the southeast corner of Kavanaugh and Beechwood in Hillcrest. It was designed by Charles L. Thompson in 1915 in the English Revival style. However, the second story of the building, which briefly housed the Pulaski Heights Town Hall (before Pulaski Heights consolidated with LR in 1916), was destroyed by fire in the late 1970s. This building currently houses a jazz club called the Afterthought.

Dr. Smith died on September 14, 1935, here at his house. He had been ill for a few years, and he apparently suffered a heart attack while resting in his easy chair. His "stepdaughter" (actually a cousin or niece of his), Fannie Marie Smith, discovered the doctor slumped in his chair after returning from an afternoon shopping trip. Dr. Smith is buried in Roselawn Memorial Park.

Later Owners

Because Dr. Smith's wife was already dead (she died in 1929), the house was left to his "stepdaughter," Fannie Marie Smith, and her sister, Nettie Smith Faulkner. In 1947 the house was sold to Dr. Lester M. Hill, and his wife, Doris W. Hill. [I

think the Smiths and Hills were related somehow...maybe cousins. Alda said Dr. Hill was raised here as a child, and one of Dr. Smith's cousins was listed as a Hill. Maybe Dr. Hill returned to purchase the family home as an adult???)

Dr. Hill lived here with his wife and three teenage sons. In 1941 Dr. Hill dammed up a small creek to form the 3-acre pond you see today. Mrs. Hill fished in the pond every single day.

The house was then sold to Atley and Betty Davis in 1960. The Davises added the rear carport in 1969. While the Davises owned the house, Cooley Mason was hired to replace the kitchen cabinets. While on the job, he signed his name on the wall inside the cabinet above the stove. It just so happens that Cooley Mason was the father of the current owner, Alda Ellis.

The Ellises purchased the house in March 1980. The home had sat vacant for 2 or 3 years, and they came up to look at it and decided to buy it. The Ellises raised their two sons here and continue to reside in the house. In 2009 the Ellises began renting the grounds as an outdoor venue for weddings and other events.

The Ellis family added the dock on the pond in 1986, a stone fountain in 1998, and the white cross rail fence in 1990. The large red barn was constructed in 1998, and a guesthouse has recently been constructed behind the main house.

The detached garage is original to the property, and the foundation, which consists of large sections of concrete, is said to be salvaged from concrete sidewalks in downtown LR. A well house and detached kitchen were located to the west of the garage, but have been demolished. You can still see the well opening and the cistern.

The rock wall along Stagecoach Rd. was either constructed around the same time as the house, or at least by the mid-1930s (based on historic photo). The "little gate" in the wall has always been a pedestrian gate. The post office box used to be located at that gate. It is likely that the planters in the front yard are also original to the house.

Interior

We are looking at the first floor only!!!!

Paint on exterior and interior was matched to the original colors used in the house.

Notice the original hardware on all doors; however, all of the original light fixtures were removed when the home sat vacant for a few years in the late 1970s.

The original wood floors are present throughout the house, but most of them are covered with carpet. You can see them back toward the kitchen.

When you come in the front door and go to the left, that room was Dr. Smith's formal living room. It now serves as a bedroom/bridal dressing room during weddings.

As you go inside, the room to your right was Dr. Smith's library/study and was lined with bookshelves. It is now the living room.

The dining room has always been used for that purpose. It features an original mural entitled "Going Home." The artist is unknown, but the painting draws the viewer's eyes down the winding road home regardless of where one stands in the room. Alda added stained glass windows in dining room and living room in the 1980s.

Hallway—first door on left was a breakfast room originally. The Hills used it as a bedroom. It has a great view of the lake. The Ellises converted it into a bathroom.

Kitchen—the area where the kitchen table is used to be walled off, and Dr. Smith used this area as a small office for his medical practice. The Hills removed the wall and enlarged the kitchen. When the Ellises went to restore the original tile floors in the kitchen, the tile just stopped here, and they could see where a wall had been. Prevented the restoration of the floor throughout the whole room though.

Original downstairs bathroom—has original tile floor and commode, but everything else has been modernized.

Back porch used to be screened. Now completely enclosed.

**Extra: There is still a coal chute on the south side of the house where coal would be fed into the basement, where it would heat a boiler. The house was heated by steam radiators that have since been removed.

Are there any questions?

Thank Alda and Buddy Ellis again for having us. Thanks for coming. See you next time!