

Sandwiching in History
Robert E. Lee School
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***Have front façade photo on screen.**

Intro

Hello, my name is Rachel Silva, and I work for the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program. Welcome to the February Sandwiching in History tour of the Lee School. I'd like to introduce and thank Ward Hanna with the City of Little Rock's Dept. of Housing and Neighborhood Programs for his help with the tour.

The Robert E. Lee School was built in 1906-1907 on the 12th Street Pike in response to rapid population growth in Little Rock's West End neighborhoods around the turn of the 20th century. The original 8-room school building was designed by well-known Little Rock architects Frank Gibb and Theo Sanders using a combination of the Gothic and Tudor Revival styles. The school has had 2 additions—a 1910 classroom addition by Theo Sanders that virtually copied the design of the original building, and a 1930 auditorium and classroom addition by Thomas Harding, Jr., that used some restrained Art Deco elements.

The Robert E. Lee School was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2009 for its role in the history of education in Little Rock and for its eclectic blend of architectural styles, reflecting a transitional period in Little Rock school design between the Romanesque designs of the late 19th century and the more Classically inspired designs of the 20th century.

Development of LR's West End

As a result of the national Panic of 1873, there were only 3 additions to Little Rock platted between 1874 and 1887 (Centennial, Pettefer's & Stillman and Buchanan's). But by the late 1880s, Little Rock began to emerge from this financial depression, 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.

During this period of growth, Little Rock saw an increase in manufacturing industries with numerous factories, cooperage and stave mills, lumber mills, cotton gins, and cotton oil mills. These industries provided jobs for a growing number of working class residents, but they needed a place to live.

The major factor in Little Rock's westward expansion around the turn of the 20th century was the development of the streetcar line. Although mule or horse-driven streetcars were in operation by 1877, the city's first mechanically powered streetcars were put into service in July 1888 by the City Electric Street Railway Company. ***Photo of mule-drawn streetcar on Main St.** This system was initially called the "Dummy Line" because small steam engines resembling fake or "dummy" railroad locomotives were used to pull the streetcars. The first electric streetcars were put into service in November 1891. Streetcars provided a form of inexpensive and convenient transportation for working class residents, allowing them to live farther away from work, thus making suburban development possible. Prior to the advent of the streetcar, workers had to live close to their jobs because many had to walk to work—a horse and buggy was a luxury.

The City Electric Streetcar Company's Highland Park Line ran from 9th and High Street (now Dr. MLK, Jr., Drive) and zigzagged its way down to 13th and Barton (Barton was just west of Park) before heading west on 13th Street to the end of the line at Pine Street. The streetcar company also owned Highland Park, which was 2 blocks east of the school between 13th & 14th streets. This park, which was referred to as nothing more than a pine grove, had been established before 1890 as an African American park at the end of the dummy line. The park closed in 1913 because of frequent noise complaints from neighbors. ***1893 map shows streetcar line heading out west & show ca. 1915 map.**

The organizers of the streetcar company owned a large amount of land west of the downtown area, so they began subdividing lots and offered them for sale at an

affordable price. This prompted the platting of the numerous additions I mentioned earlier. ***West End Land & Improvement Co. ad**

The Lee School was constructed on Block 2 of W. B. Worthen's Addition, which was platted on May 22, 1906. The addition included the area from 12th St. down to 16th St. and from Maple west to Elm. Each block had 12 lots, each 46' x 130' with a 16' alley, the exception being Block 2, which was reserved for the school.

Additions to the north and east of Worthen's Addition were platted around 1900, and the population prior to 1906 was largely mixed race, but predominantly African American west of Valentine Street. Despite this fact, the Lee School was constructed in 1906 as an all-white grammar school.

As an interesting side note, the 1920s and 1930s saw a few commercial buildings constructed in this neighborhood near the streetcar line. ***Show slide of blown up Sanborn map.** The 3900 block of 13th Street between Pine and Cedar was lined with commercial buildings, and the Lamberton Building and Lee Theater Building were on the southeast corner of 13th and Pine. ***Show slide of Lee Theater and Lamberton Bldg.** Unfortunately, these two buildings are all that remain of the commercial strip.

Robert E. Lee School (1906-1907)

***Show slide of Lee School again**

The Little Rock School District initiated an ambitious construction campaign to meet the needs of the city's ever expanding population. Robert E. Lee was the second school built on the West End (the Centennial School (1894) near the streetcar line to West End Park was the first). When it was built, the Lee School was very close to the city limits.

While this building was being constructed, neighborhood students met in various temporary locations nearby. African American students attended the Highland Park School at the corner of 12th and Valmar, while other students were split between the West End School at 12th and Martin and the house at 3111 West 12th St. Although the Lee School was supposed to be completed by December 1906, it wasn't actually done until the fall of 1907. After 1909, the African American Highland Park School was rebuilt at 17th and Pine and named Stephens Elementary (after Charlotte Stephens, the first African American teacher in the LRSD).

The school's name was formally changed in September 1907 from the West End School to the Robert E. Lee School after Confederate General Robert E. Lee. The Lee School initially housed the primary grades up through grade 8; however, in its 1915-1916 Annual Report, the LRSD first mentioned creating a Jr. High School for 7-9th graders due to overcrowding in grammar schools and the realization that adolescents needed a separate learning environment. Up until this time, grammar school went up to 8th grade, and high school started in 9th grade. West Side Junior High opened in 1917 at 1300 Marshall to become Little Rock's first junior high school (and then Lee would've only gone up to grade 6).

Architecture & Architects

The Lee School's blend of architectural styles reflects the district's transition between the Romanesque schools of the late 19th century and the more Classically-inspired designs of the early 20th century.

***Show slide of some Romanesque schools (Centennial School at 1501 S. Battery; 1894 & Kramer School at 701 S. Sherman; 1895) & slide of some Colonial/Classical Revival schools (East Side Jr. High/LR High School at 1401 Scott; 1904; James Mitchell School at 2410 S. Battery; 1908; and U. M. Rose School at Philander Smith College; 1915).**

***Back to slide of Lee School**

The 1906 design by Gibb & Sanders features elements of the Tudor Revival style in the use of flattened arches, double-hung multi-pane windows, and shaped parapet (above the northeast entrance). The label mold (or drip mold) over the first floor windows can be either Tudor or Gothic Revival, as can the central gabled parapet above the main entrance. However, Gibb and Sanders created a building with monumental stature just by way of its position on higher ground, and the building also features Classical characteristics in its symmetrical façade, quoins, keystones, and columns with decorative acanthus leaf capitals.

Sanders's 1910 addition starts at the second inset portion on the side elevation. His addition virtually copied the original design and is difficult to distinguish from the 1906 building.

Frank Wooster Gibb:

Frank Gibb (1861-1932) attended the Missouri School of Mines in Rolla, MO, and returned to Little Rock in 1882 to practice as a civil and mining engineer. Frank's father, Edward, built spec houses and invested in real estate, constructing several houses in the Governor's Mansion HD.

But upon returning to Little Rock he got involved in his father's business, and by the late 1880s he was designing houses for his father's clients without any formal architectural training.

Frank Gibb's obituary credits him with work on nearly 60 of Arkansas's county courthouses, including the Yell County Courthouse in Dardanelle and the Phillips County Courthouse in Helena. He also designed the Buckstaff Bathhouse in Hot Springs and East Side Junior High, First United Methodist Church, and the Ada Thompson Memorial Home in LR.

Sadly, after his death in 1932, Gibb's family cleaned out his office and apparently discarded most of his architectural drawings and records. As a result it is nearly impossible to clearly identify his works.

Theodore M. Sanders:

Theo Sanders (1880-1947) was a classically trained architect having studied in Paris after graduating from the University of Illinois, Urbana, in 1902. Sanders and Frank Gibb were partners from 1906 to 1910, when Sanders started his own firm. Sanders had a successful practice, designing many buildings including the Woodruff School, the Cornish House, and the Women's City Club (Elks Club) in LR. Sanders partnered with well-known architect Charles L. Thompson from 1927 to 1938, before entering semi-retirement in 1941. He died suddenly in 1947. His drawings are on file at the UALR Art Department.

A 1930 auditorium and classroom addition was designed by Thomas Harding, Jr., and featured some elements of the Art Deco style. The 1930 addition was constructed to the south of the 1910 Sanders addition and creates a "T-shape." It features very little ornamentation except for its belt courses (one continuing the line of the original building's projecting cornice and one delineating the original basement level), the ribbon windows, and the decorative limestone corbels on the addition's southwest and southeast corners.

Thomas Harding, Jr.:

Thomas Harding, Jr., was the son of respected Little Rock architect Thomas Harding, Sr. (who designed Saint Andrews Cathedral and 1st Lutheran Church in LR). Charles L. Thompson hired Thomas Harding, Jr., as a draftsman in 1898 at the age of 14. Like Thompson himself, Harding acquired most of his architectural training through experience and reading. Harding became a partner in the Thompson firm in 1916. Harding was a perfectionist who liked to be involved in every aspect of a project, from its conception to its completion. While partnered with Thompson, Harding helped design the Winfield Methodist Church (Quapaw Quarter M.C.) and a substantial addition for the Central Presbyterian Church (Christ Temple Cathedral). In 1925, Harding went out on his own, and the partnership was dissolved.

School Closing & Restoration

The Lee School played an integral role in the community and was the center of a small commercial district that was constructed in the 1920s and 1930s. However, by the 1960s, white enrollment was dropping, the African American population in the neighborhood was increasing, and a long-simmering argument over the integration of Little Rock's public schools placed the school in jeopardy. Coincidentally, after a 1971 federal district court ruling (in *Clark v. Board of Education of LRSD*) ordered the Little Rock School District to develop and implement a formal integration plan, the Lee School closed.

After the Lee School closed in 1971, the district used the building as the Institutional Resource Center to provide teacher training. Little money was dedicated to the upkeep of the building after this date. The Institutional Resource Center was later moved to Ish Elementary, and the Lee School sat vacant. The City of LR bought the building in 1995 and began a large restoration project.

***Before and after photos**

Using funds available through HUD (Housing & Urban Development), the City of LR initially spent \$1.8 million on the rehabilitation work and another \$300,000 to finish out the auditorium. The project took 5 years to complete. All work was done in accordance with the Secretary of the Interior's standards so the building would be eligible for the NR of HP when completed. Repairs included replacement of the roof, downspouts, and guttering; new drainage system to keep water away from the building's foundation; energy efficient HVAC systems; and

new windows were installed in the original openings and with the same glazing patterns as the originals. Few alterations were made to the interior spaces—a receptionist desk was installed on the first floor, the classrooms were retrofitted to serve as meeting spaces, and the auditorium was divided (it used to occupy the entire first floor of the back addition & the stage used to be on the building's west wall).

The building became the Little Rock Neighborhood Resource Center, serving as a community center, business incubator, and social service center. It was renamed the Willie L. Hinton Neighborhood Resource Center in 2005 to honor city director Willie L. Hinton and his efforts toward establishing the center. The former school now serves as the anchor of the community organization, planning, and redevelopment programs along West 12th Street.

Please feel free to tour the entire building. We're in the old auditorium now, and you may look at the old classrooms as well as the basement level, which housed a cafeteria and kitchen as well as additional classroom space. There's a really neat pressed tin ceiling in the basement, too.

Thank you for coming. Are there any questions?