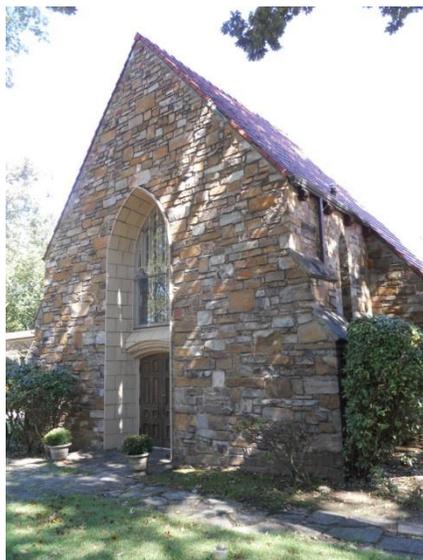


Sandwiching in History
Oak Forest United Methodist Church
2415 Fair Park Boulevard, Little Rock
August 7, 2015
By Rachel Silva



Intro

Good afternoon, my name is Rachel Silva, and I work for the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program. Welcome to the “Sandwiching in History” tour of Oak Forest United Methodist Church. I’d like to thank Rev. Mike Blanchard and Linda Terry for their help with the tour. And I know that church members volunteered to get the grounds and interior looking nice for us today, so many thanks to all who helped.

This tour is worth one hour of HSW continuing education credit through the American Institute of Architects. Please see me after the tour if you’re interested.

Completed in 1951, Oak Forest Methodist Church was designed by Little Rock architect John Parks Almand in the Gothic Revival style. The church was constructed and furnished at the cost of about \$125,000.

Early History of Oak Forest Methodist Church

The history of Oak Forest Methodist Church is rooted in mission work, and that legacy continues today. The Oak Forest Methodist Church traces its origin to August 1943, when Rev. John McCormack, pastor of the Scott Street Methodist Church, held open-air services at the corner of 25th and Tyler streets for 15 days straight.

The Scott Street Methodist Church, then located at the northwest corner of Scott and 14th streets (now Scott St. and Daisy Bates Dr.; across from the Villa Marre), had been organized just after the Civil War by the northern branch of the Methodist Episcopal Church. The Methodist Church divided into two branches in 1844 over the issue of slavery—the Methodist Episcopal Church and the Methodist Episcopal Church, South. The branches reunited in 1939 to become The Methodist Church. By the early 1940s, the Scott Street Methodist Church experienced a decline in membership and mounting debt. While some expressed the desire to sell the building at Scott and 14th streets to pay the debt, thereby closing the church indefinitely; others responded to the crisis by donating money and focusing on mission work.

During the summer of 1943, Rev. John McCormack made frequent visits—often by bicycle because gas was rationed during World War II—to members of the Scott Street Methodist Church who lived in the new Oak Forest neighborhood. At that time, the neighborhood had about 550 houses and no churches. On one of these visits, Rev. McCormack encountered two children playing in the dirt. He stopped to talk with them and asked if they attended Sunday School. The children said no, explaining that there wasn't a church nearby. The next Sunday, Rev. McCormack preached to the Scott Street congregation about reaching out to the Oak Forest neighborhood. A number of members responded and helped to organize an open-air revival near the present site of Oak Forest Methodist Church. The revival began on August 8, 1943, and lasted for 15 days. Pews from an abandoned church were brought to the site, and electric lights were hung in the trees. By the end of the revival, ten people came forward to join the church.

The congregation of Oak Forest Methodist Church was officially organized on August 29, 1943, with 25 charter members.

Sunday School classes were held in different homes, and open-air church services continued until September 30, 1943, when Sam and Mary Lou Ballou opened a room in their house at 2222 S. Tyler for church services. The room, known as “the chapel,” contained folding chairs, a pulpit, and a small organ. Rev. McCormack continued as pastor at Scott Street Methodist and preached at Oak Forest on Thursday nights. Retired Methodist minister H. C. Adams preached at Oak Forest on Sunday mornings until 1944, when the Annual Conference appointed Rev. A. H. Dulaney.

In February 1944 the church rented the house at 2302 S. Tyler for the Sunday School. Rent was \$42.50/month. By March, church services had outgrown “the chapel” at the Ballou residence and were moved to the Sunday School building. Thanks to generous contributions from the Scott Street Church, the Board of Church Extension at Louisville, Kentucky, and area residents, the lot at the northwest corner of 25th and Tyler was purchased for the construction of the first church building. C. A. Booher served as general contractor on the first building, which was known as the basement church and measured 110 feet by 44 feet. The one-story building had a full basement and sat on the current church parking lot. The first church was dedicated on October 22, 1944.

Little Rock experienced a building boom in the mid-to-late 1940s as soldiers returned from World War II. The Oak Forest neighborhood grew quickly. For example, in 1940 the Little Rock City Directory listed 21 residences on Tyler Street between 12th and 29th streets, and there were only four houses between 16th and 26th. By 1949, the same stretch of Tyler Street (between 12th and 29th) had 125 buildings listed. The number of buildings on Tyler between 16th and 26th had increased from four in 1940 to 81 in 1949.

In March 1946 Rev. Dean Mouzon Mann, who had served as a Navy chaplain during World War II, became pastor at Oak Forest Methodist Church. Rev. Mann

was outgoing and energetic. He spent much of his time out in the neighborhood talking to people and inviting them to church. Within a year, the church membership increased from 94 to 152. It quickly became apparent that a larger and more substantial church building was necessary. However, the cost of a new building presented quite a challenge for the congregation, which was largely composed of veterans and young families. At that time, the average age of adult members was 29.

In 1947 the church obtained two lots at the northeast corner of Fair Park and 25th from H. T. Buhler at a reduced price. Architect John Parks Almand, who was a member at First Methodist in Little Rock, drew plans for a new church. Stone for the church's exterior walls was donated by Little Rock native Frank Pace, Jr., who served as Secretary of the U.S. Army under President Truman and later held numerous prominent positions in business and government. Pace owned land on the north side of Highway 10, west of present-day I-430. The area, now known as Walton Heights, was covered with fieldstone. Pace offered it to the church free of charge, provided they could find a way to haul it to the site at 25th and Fair Park.

Rev. Mann persuaded Atley Davis, who owned Davis Trailer and Equipment, to lend the church a truck. Davis provided a beat-up 1932 Chevrolet flatbed truck. After some new tires, the truck was used to haul loads of rock from the Pace Place to Oak Forest. Men and teenage boys in the congregation often used their own trucks in addition to the old flatbed, and got up at 4 a.m. to load and haul rock before going to their regular jobs.

During the summer of 1947, Rev. Mann left the key to the flatbed truck in a designated spot so that men and boys could get a load of rock in their spare time. The old flatbed often had to be pushed to get it started, sometimes when it was already loaded with rock. And it did not have good brakes. Church member Jerry Hamner, who was a young man at the time, remembered the flatbed truck, saying, "This truck had a hard life, and eventually consisted of nothing more than the engine, steering wheel, front seat, flat wooden bed with sideboards, and wheels. Everything else had been removed to make it easier to jump off if the

mechanical brakes failed. At that time, University was Hayes Street, was unpaved, and coming down Hayes Street hill with a load of rock was a risky thing. But we loved doing it.” When all of the rock had been hauled, the old truck was returned to Mr. Davis. The next time he tried to use it, the transmission fell out.

The rock was piled at the building site until 1948 when the church had raised \$2,000. In 1947 the Methodist Orphanage, then-located at 16th and Elm, moved to a new facility on 84 acres at the western edge of Little Rock and changed its name to the Methodist Children’s Home. Oak Forest Methodist Church would serve as the home church for the Methodist Children’s Home, which was just a few blocks to the northwest at Fillmore and 20th (now Charles Bussey). Because of its association with the Methodist Children’s Home, people from all over the state donated money for the construction of the new Oak Forest Methodist Church. The official groundbreaking ceremony took place on April 23, 1948.

Stone mason Dewey Breadon and his helper, Jeff Davidson, were hired to do the stone work. The cornerstone was laid on May 20, 1949, and reads, “Oak Forest Methodist Church. For the Glory of God and the Service of Man. 1949.” Included in the cornerstone is a box with the following items: History of the Church, with names of Bishops, Superintendents, Pastors, Officers, Sunday School members, and Church members; Copies of *Arkansas Methodist*, *The Christian Advocate*, and *The Upper Room*; Discipline of The Methodist Church, a Methodist Hymnal, and the Holy Bible. [When the church celebrated its 50th anniversary in 1993, the cornerstone was opened and an updated history of the church added to its contents. It was then resealed.]

Construction came to a halt in June 1950 due to a lack of funds. A pledge drive and fundraisers allowed the church to resume construction in early 1951. Although much of the early work was completed by church members and craftsmen hired by the church, in September 1950 architect John Parks Almand advertised for contractors to finish the job. Although the interior was not yet completed, the Easter service was held in the new building in 1951. The church formally opened on October 21, 1951, and drew a crowd of more than 500

people. By that time, the church had about 530 members. In 1954 the church began having two Sunday morning services.

Ground was broken for an education building in November 1960, and the basement and first story were completed in July 1961. According to architect John Parks Almand's plans, a second story was supposed to be added at a later date, but it was never built. In September 1961 the old basement church was demolished, and the debris was pushed into the basement cavity. The asphalt parking lot was then put on top of the site.

Architecture & John Parks Almand

Little Rock architect John Parks Almand designed Oak Forest Methodist Church in the Gothic Revival style with an irregular plan, steeply pitched roof, buttresses, and lancet (pointed arch) window and door openings. His design also incorporated a distinctive stepped parapet, which served as the bell tower. Almand's design for Oak Forest Methodist Church was very similar to his 1949 design for Crossett Methodist Church (Ashley County) and the 1954 sanctuary at First Presbyterian Church in North Little Rock.

John Parks Almand was born on May 8, 1885, at Lithonia, Georgia, to Alexander James Almand and his wife, Clara Bond Almand. He was the fourth of eight children. In 1903 he entered Emory College at Oxford, Georgia (now Emory University in Atlanta). He was undecided on whether to pursue a career in medicine or architecture, and it was not until he graduated from Emory in 1907 that he chose architecture. Almand continued his education at Columbia University in New York, where he received an architecture degree.

Almand's first job after graduation was with the T. L. Hudson Company in Havana, Cuba. He stayed with the company for one year before he learned that Charles Thompson was looking to hire an architect. He applied and got the position. Almand arrived in Little Rock on July 13, 1912. Shortly after his arrival, he met Frances Reeve Edmonson, whom he married on November 4, 1914. The couple

had two sons, Alexander James Almand (always called A. J.) and John Parks Almand, Jr., who died as an infant during the influenza epidemic of 1918.

Almand worked for Charles Thompson from July 1912 to December 1915. His first solo commission, which he designed in May 1915 while working for the Thompson firm, was the U. M. Rose School, now the Administration Building at Philander Smith College. He opened his own office in January 1916 in room 1107 of the State Bank Building (later known as the Boyle Building). His architectural practice grew tremendously during the 1920s. Some of his most notable designs included Little Rock High School (later Little Rock Central High School), which he designed with the firms of Mann & Stern and Wittenberg & Delony; First Presbyterian Church in Little Rock; The Big House at Couchwood near Hot Springs; and the Medical Arts Building at Hot Springs. He went on to design sanctuaries, chapels, education buildings, and parsonages at more than fifty churches throughout Arkansas.

Almand was characterized as a hard worker who demanded high quality materials and workmanship from those he employed. In fact, on several occasions, he required contractors to tear out and re-do work if it was not up to par. In 1962 Almand suffered a small stroke. He recovered, but suffered another stroke in mid-1963. He was significantly disabled after the second stroke but lived for another six years. Almand died on March 24, 1969, as the result of a major heart attack. He was interred at the Mount Holly Mausoleum. His influence on Arkansas's built environment is significant, spanning a time period of more than fifty years and reaching all across the state.

Almand, who was a member of First Methodist Church in Little Rock, donated the bell for the bell tower at Oak Forest and later provided money for furnishings in the education building. When Mr. Almand died, his son, A. J. Almand, donated a large oil painting of the church and \$5,000 to Oak Forest.

Although John Parks Almand was a member of First Methodist Church, he stopped attending services there in 1949. Almand, a longtime member of the

Board of Stewards at First Church, had designed an education building for the church in 1926, the Methodist parsonage at 401 W. 18th in 1928, and a new organ screen for the sanctuary in 1931. In 1949 First Church commissioned him to design a chapel and education building. His perspective drawing, which depicted the new structure in a lighter shade than the adjacent sanctuary, was displayed in the narthex. For reasons unknown and unexplained, the project was taken from Almand and given to another architect. It was thought, perhaps, that people misunderstood his perspective drawing and believed the new addition would be a cream-colored brick. Regardless, he was deeply hurt. I think that is part of the reason why Almand gave so much of his time to Oak Forest. After the church was completed, Almand attended services at Oak Forest. He especially loved the Oak Forest building because the congregation did not make any changes to the plans. It was essentially just as he wanted it.

Details

- The building's exterior walls were made of native fieldstone laid in regular courses with only weathered surfaces exposed. The stone walls were backed by load-bearing, hollow clay tile.
- The roof was covered with inter-locking shingle tiles.
- Steel casement windows and simple, stained-glass windows—some with tracery—were used in the sanctuary and chapel. In 1970 the original windows in the choir loft were replaced with three memorial windows depicting the Holy Trinity—Father (the hand of God), Son (Jesus as the Lamb of God), and Holy Ghost (Holy Spirit descending like a dove).
 - The Hand—given in memory of Jess A. Morgan, Jr., by the Jess A. Morgan, Jr., family and friends
 - The Lamb of God—given in memory of John Parks Almand by church members and friends
 - The Descending Dove—given in memory of Mrs. Kathleen H. Robertson by Mr. and Mrs. G. E. Snell and family

- The exterior walls of the sanctuary and chapel featured faux exposed rafters, which John Parks Almand called “look-outs.” They were made of Cypress and were built into the stone walls to create an interesting architectural detail and serve a functional purpose as well—they held up the gutters and downspouts. Almand designed a custom guttering system for the church, where water flowed from the downspouts into buried clay pipes, which dispersed the water away from the building’s foundation.
- The interior walls of the sanctuary, chapel, foyer, and vestibule were covered with random-width boards of clear red oak.
- The sanctuary and chapel ceilings featured California redwood. The exposed beams in both rooms are steel trusses boxed with redwood.
- The sanctuary furnishings, including the pews, pulpit, lectern, and altar and choir railing, were made from Juanacosta (“Wanacosta”), which was a hardwood similar to mahogany and oak found in the forests of southern Mexico. A California trade journal called *Southwest Contractor and Manufacturer* touted the wood beginning in the early 20th century. However, when employees of the Central Manufacturing Company began to make the furnishings for Oak Forest, they realized that the wood, when worked, released a toxin that made them sneeze and cough. The employees were forced to work outdoors to make the furniture, and the company never used Juanacosta wood again.

Current Mission Work at Oak Forest

By the mid-1960s, Oak Forest Methodist Church had two Sunday morning services with more than 400 people at each service. Sunday night and Wednesday night services were also offered. Membership had grown to more than 1,400. However, membership and average attendance dropped significantly in the mid-to-late-1970s and continued to decline. The current membership is about 230 and average attendance on Sunday morning is 70.

Oak Forest Methodist was founded as a mission church, and it continues that legacy of mission work today. The church supports free medical and dental clinics, which are located in two houses behind the church. The medical clinic is open the first four Thursdays of each month and is staffed by volunteers from all over the city. The dental clinic is open the first three Tuesdays of each month. A vision clinic is located in the church basement and is open one Monday each month. Barnabus House, located at 25th and Tyler, is a partnership between Oak Forest and the UALR School of Rehabilitation Counseling to provide free counseling and social services for area residents. Oak Forest has a food pantry that is open the first and third Fridays of each month and serves 200 to 300 people every month. And this summer, the church partnered with the USDA and Arkansas Hunger Alliance to serve as a summer feeding program site. The list goes on, but you get the idea. The church does a lot of good work for the community.

The next tour is September 4 at Shiloh Baptist Church, 1200 Hanger Street, Little Rock.