

**Sandwiching in History**  
**Lakewood United Methodist Church**  
**1922 Topf Road, North Little Rock**  
**January 8, 2016**  
**By Rachel Silva**



*Sanctuary, ca. 1964*



*Sanctuary, 2016*

## **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 Lakewood United Methodist Church! I’d like to thank Senior Pastor Luke Conway for giving us permission to tour the church today, and I especially want to thank Associate Pastor Cindy Henry, who grew up in this church, for her help with the tour. The church’s Older Adult Ministry Group provided refreshments for us. Thank you!!

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.

The congregation of Lakewood Methodist Church was organized on June 5, 1955, when a group of neighborhood residents met at Lakewood Elementary School to form a new Methodist church. The church moved into its first building in 1958

(Gibson Hall), and ever since then, the physical plant has grown to accommodate the membership. The congregation of Lakewood United Methodist Church celebrated its 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary in June 2015.

## **History of Lakewood**

### *Justin Matthews*

Forward-thinking businessman Justin Matthews, Sr., shaped much of the residential character of present-day North Little Rock and Sherwood when he developed Park Hill, Sylvan Hills, and Lakewood.

Justin Matthews, a native of Monticello, Arkansas, moved to Little Rock in 1901, the same year he married Agnes Somers. Prior to his marriage, Matthews, who had a pharmacy degree, owned and operated three drug stores in southeast Arkansas. Agnes Somers Matthews, who was also from a prominent family, urged her new husband to take a job selling cotton oil mills over a four-state area for a company based out of St. Louis. Matthews got rid of his drug stores and began selling cotton oil mills. He enticed clients to buy a mill by investing his own 10 percent commission in the venture. In 1902, Matthews, himself, opened the Rose City Cotton Oil Mill, promoting development in the community east of downtown NLR. After about four years in the business, Matthews had sold 88 cotton oil mills and decided to sell his stock, earning him upwards of \$1 million (equivalent to almost \$24 million today; he was about 30 years old at the time).

### *Park Hill & Sylvan Hills*

After spearheading several public works projects in North Little Rock, Matthews got into real estate development. In 1921 he platted the first sections of Park Hill, which was North Little Rock's first suburban development. By 1930 Park Hill boasted 159 homes and a school; however, the Great Depression significantly slowed construction, forcing Matthews and fellow investor Henry Topf ("Toff"), then-president of Twin City Bank, to suffer financial losses. In the late 1920s, Matthews also developed some land in Sylvan Hills (modern-day Sherwood),

including the 18-hole Sylvan Hills Golf Course (1927), which provided upscale recreational opportunities for the residents of Park Hill.

### *The Old Mill*

By 1930, Matthews had already purchased the land on which he would later plat the Lakewood Addition, but because of the Great Depression and World War II, construction didn't begin until 1947. So in the meantime, Matthews established the Lakewood Development Company in 1931, which completed the construction of six lakes and dams the following year. Then Matthews took the most undesirable lot, which was situated in a drainage area between lakes number 2 and 3, and built the Old Mill on that site. This was an extremely smart move on his part because no one would have wanted to purchase that lot, and the Old Mill served as a popular attraction during the years prior to Lakewood's development, making people familiar with the area and enticing them to purchase lots once the addition was platted.

The Old Mill is a replica of a 19<sup>th</sup> century gristmill (never really functioned as a mill) and was built as a tribute to Arkansas's pioneer culture. The Old Mill at T. R. Pugh Memorial Park was dedicated in August 1933 and was named in honor of Thomas Robert Pugh, a longtime friend of Justin Matthews from Portland in Ashley County, Arkansas. The park featured a mill building designed by Frank Carmean and numerous faux bois sculptures made by Mexican artist Dionicio Rodriguez.

### *Lakewood Development*

In the early 1930s, present-day Lakewood was considered to be out in the boondocks. A few unpaved roads provided access to the lakes and the Old Mill. McCain Boulevard, named after E. A. McCain (longtime friend of Justin Matthews and superintendent of the Park Hill Water Company), only went from the Ark-Mo Highway (JFK) to Lakeshore Drive. Matthews's friend and fellow investor, Twin

City Bank president Henry Topf (“Toff”), even had a hunting lodge out near the present-day site of Lakewood Elementary (and Topf Road).

In 1946 North Little Rock annexed the Park Hill neighborhood, and in 1947 the first lots sold in Lakewood. Lakewood was advertised as an expansion of Park Hill, and it was a planned development from the very beginning. Justin Matthews’s Metropolitan Trust Company hired Buford L. Pickens, AIA, the head of the school of architecture at Tulane, as a planning consultant, and he and his students created an 8’ x 8’ model to represent Lakewood in miniature. The model was on display at the Metropolitan Trust Company office, so you could see where future streets and buildings would be constructed in relation to your lot.

The neighborhood was laid out to minimize traffic along most streets and reserved sites for parks, schools, and churches. Apartments would serve as a buffer between proposed shopping centers and single-family homes. A 1948 promotional brochure proclaimed, “Lakewood now has by far the most modern Protective Covenants any local subdivision has ever had...Among other things, they provide for the inspection and architectural approval of all house plans, assuring you that houses built next door to you, or anywhere in the neighborhood, will compliment your home and create a harmonious neighborhood.” And like many subdivisions at this time, Lakewood was restricted to whites only. The first 20 homes in Lakewood were built on the west side of Lakeshore Drive, facing the median, and along Lakeview Road, which is one block to the west.

In 1953 the Arkansas Home Builders Association held its annual Parade of Homes in Lakewood, featuring 12 houses on Lochridge Road. The following year, Lakewood won the prestigious National Association of Home Builders Award of Merit for Neighborhood Development. A promotional piece from 1955 described the advantages of “year round resort living” at Lakewood:

“If a boy today dreamed about living in a ‘dream neighborhood,’ it would likely be a wonderful place where he could go swimming in his own back yard; a lake next

door where he could fish with Dad, and picnic and park areas down the street for Mom, Sis and the whole family. It would probably also include baseball diamonds, tennis courts, and maybe even a water ski course. The wide concrete streets would be virtually traffic free so he could ride his bike to the new school a few blocks away, with no danger. From the standpoint of appearance, the 'dream neighborhood' would consist of a large area of rolling tree-covered hills surrounding a half dozen lakes of clear blue water. Modern homes with well kept yards would complete this neighborhood. But this actually is no 'dream neighborhood' in that sense but a reality—Lakewood, a subdivision with recreational facilities unequalled.”

North Little Rock annexed most of present-day Lakewood in 1951. At that time, there were 4,000 people living in Lakewood. Justin Matthews, Sr., died in 1955, and his children divided his assets (Justin, Jr., Thomas Somers “Nook,” and Anne taking Metropolitan Trust; John P. Matthews starting John Matthews Company). His son, John Matthews, started the John Matthews Company, which continued the development of Lakewood and later became General Properties and the Crestwood Company. 1955 was a record construction year for Lakewood, followed by 1963. And Lakewood continued to grow—the 16-story Lakewood House building at the northwest corner of McCain and North Hills was completed in 1965 (designed by Erhart, Eichenbaum, Rauch, and Blass of LR). The John Matthews Co. began selling lots in Heritage Park in 1964 to compete with other upscale additions in Little Rock, like Robinwood. Homes in Heritage Park were required to cost a minimum of \$65,000 and have at least 3,000 square feet of living space. And the Lakewood Pool opened in 1966 at the northeast corner of McCain and Fairway (no longer extant).

### **Lakewood United Methodist Church**

As I told you earlier, 1955 was a record construction year in Lakewood. Why? Little Rock Air Force Base opened in 1955, and many base personnel and their families built homes in Lakewood. It was during this time that a group of Methodists canvased the neighborhood to gauge interest in forming a new

Methodist Church. Several people were interested, so a worship service and organizational meeting were scheduled for June 5, 1955, in the Lakewood Elementary School cafeteria. Rev. William Elliott, associate pastor at Winfield Methodist, was invited to preach the sermon for the morning worship service. District Superintendent Rev. Henry Rickey led an organizational meeting that evening, at which 38 people became charter members of Lakewood Methodist Church. When charter membership closed in mid-July 1955, the church had almost 100 members. Rev. George W. Martin was the first pastor assigned to the church.

The congregation rented space from Lakewood Elementary School for more than three years. Services were held in the cafeteria, and Sunday School classes occupied every classroom. On February 19, 1956, the church purchased a lot at McCain and Lakeview (near the Starbucks at JFK & McCain) for \$16,000 (equal to \$140,000 today). Three and a half months later, the lot was paid for, and a building committee formed. The property at McCain and Lakeview was traded to the John Matthews Company for the present location at Topf ("Toff") and Avondale Road (now Fairway Avenue) for the consideration of \$5,000. The new lot was twice the size of the original property, and the additional cost was paid off in just 90 days.

The first parsonage, located at 4405 Greenway, was completed in October 1957. On December 15, 1957, ground was broken for the church's first building, which was designed by the Little Rock architectural firm of Ginocchio-Cromwell & Associates. Completed in July 1958, the building, now known as Gibson Hall (this building!), consisted of a fellowship hall/sanctuary, kitchen, and 10 classrooms. It originally featured a steeple on its northernmost gable. This space is called Gibson Hall in honor of the church's second pastor, Rev. Worth W. Gibson, who purchased the first construction bonds for the building. When this served as the sanctuary, the congregation faced south.

The church had already outgrown its new building before the completion date, so Rip Munnerlyn gave money for a supplemental classroom building, known as Rip

Hall. The Boy Scouts later met in this building, which was located west of the church (demolished ca. 2004). An addition with five more classrooms was completed in December 1960. By this time, Lakewood Methodist Church was having two Sunday Schools and two morning worship services to accommodate its 573 members.

The 1958 building (Gibson Hall) was intended to serve as a temporary worship space until the church could afford to build a separate sanctuary. On October 20, 1963, a groundbreaking ceremony was held for a new sanctuary with 10 additional classrooms. The sanctuary building was designed by Robert H. “Bob” Millett, Lakewood Methodist Church member and architect in the Little Rock firm of Ginocchio, Cromwell, Carter & Neyland. The first service was held in the new sanctuary on December 20, 1964. The building, completed at the cost of \$330,000 (equal to \$2.5 million today), featured an A-frame design with short side walls. It was constructed with a steel frame, concrete block, and brick—it’s solid. A one-story wing north of the sanctuary and a full basement housed classrooms, restrooms, and offices. The sanctuary building was connected to Gibson Hall by a breezeway.

### *A-frame*

The A-frame became popular in the 1950s. The simple form traced its roots to the medieval villages of northern Europe. During the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the A-frame was often used to create grand sanctuary spaces for churches. And because the A-frame was relatively easy to build, it was a more affordable option. The front-facing gable of the Lakewood Methodist Church sanctuary featured stained wood and diamond-shaped porcelain enamel panels with a narrow stained glass window. The front porch was originally very simple and had a gabled roof with a low pitch (almost flat). The roof/wall junction on the side elevations featured a simple dentil course, similar to the one used on portions of Gibson Hall.

### *Bob Millett*

Sanctuary architect Bob Millett attended the University of Illinois, where he met his future wife, Marion Davidson. The couple married in 1946 and soon moved to Boston, where Bob studied architecture at MIT. They moved to central Arkansas in 1950, and Bob went to work for what is now the Cromwell firm. Millett often worked with fellow Cromwell architect Dietrich Neyland. Their joint projects included the Petit Jean Auto Museum and the UALR Cafeteria. Bob Millett died of cancer in 1974. We'll talk about him again when we go inside the sanctuary.

### *Back to the church history...*

A new parsonage, located at 2016 Topf ("Toff") Road, was built in 1970 to replace the first one on Greenway. In 1975 the church purchased an associate pastor's parsonage at 3612 Sevier (off of Justin Matthews Drive, east of North Hills).

In May 1979 an Activities Building was completed west of Gibson Hall. It included a half-court gym with stage, youth rooms, classrooms, and offices. The 1979 Activities Building served its purpose until 2004, when it was demolished to make way for a new structure. The North Little Rock firm of Taggart Foster Currence Gray Architects designed the Christian Life Center (Wesley Hall), which was completed in September 2005 and included a full-court gym with stage, classrooms, youth rooms, theater, café, and shower facilities.

In 2005-2006 the sanctuary was remodeled. Taggart also did the sanctuary remodel, including a new entrance with a radiused, accordion-roof porch, ADA ramp, covered drive-through, and a narthex with restrooms. The chancel area was rebuilt and a replica of the organ pipe structure on the west side of the chancel was installed on the east side to make the area symmetrical. A new organ was installed in 2007.



The columbarium garden was consecrated on August 9, 2015. It was designed by Gary Dean of Williams & Dean Architects. The first people interred were James and Audrey Woodward, charter members of the church.

Since its beginning, the Lakewood United Methodist Church has worked closely with Lakewood Elementary School and residents of the neighborhood. Lakewood Methodist started a Mother's Day Out program in 1965, and that program is now offered three days a week and serves about 250 children. In 2008 the church began an after-school program for K-5 and middle school students. This program now serves about 125 children. And these are just two of the church's many outreach ministries. The current membership at Lakewood UMC is about 1,525, and the average attendance on Sunday is about 450. The church offers two traditional and two contemporary services every Sunday.

I mentioned earlier that the congregation of Lakewood United Methodist Church celebrated its 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary in June 2015. Before we look around, we're going to watch the church's 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary video (8.5 minutes).

Questions?

\*\*Next tour is Friday, February 5 at First Presbyterian Church, 800 Scott Street, Little Rock.

*Sanctuary—built 1963-1964 (Bob Millett of Cromwell firm)*

Groundbreaking for sanctuary—October 20, 1963

First service held in sanctuary—December 20, 1964

First hymn sung in sanctuary—"Joy to the World"

According to church literature from April 1964, the sanctuary originally seated 478 people, including 50 seats in the balcony.

The interior walls were off-white, and the pews and other wood surfaces were stained in fruitwood (color of wood from fruit-bearing trees; medium stain).

The carpet and pew cushions were originally red.

The steel beams used in construction are visible from the interior, and create an interesting detail. If you look up, you will see an original stained-glass skylight above the chancel area as well as the catwalk, accessed by stairs in the balcony. The narrow stained-glass window in the sanctuary's front façade features images of a dove (Holy Spirit), cross, cup (Holy Communion), and a lamb (Jesus is the Lamb of God).

Point out things done in remodel (2005-2006)—

- Rebuilt chancel area

- Added organ pipe structure on right to balance

- Moved choir seating to center instead of on left

- Replaced carpet

- Built narthex with restrooms and accordion-roof porch with drive-thru and ADA ramp

Cross story—Lakewood Methodist Church member and sanctuary architect Bob Millett wanted to recreate a cross just like the one used in the crucifixion of Jesus to serve as the centerpiece of the new sanctuary. He painstakingly researched the cross and eventually came up with what he thought were the accurate dimensions, weight, type of wood, and appearance. The cross was made out of olive wood imported from Italy and was crafted at the Monarch Mill and Lumber Company in Little Rock, under the direct supervision of Millett, whose father-in-law owned the mill. It measured 14 feet tall by 7 feet across and had 6-inch square beams. It weighed 300 pounds. Bob had it “roughed up” and stained to appear old.

For many years, the cross was mounted on the floor behind the altar but was moved during the 2006 remodel to its current position on the wall. It remains the focal point of the sanctuary.