

**Sandwiching in History**  
**First Presbyterian Church**  
**800 Scott Street, Little Rock**  
**February 5, 2016**  
**By Rachel Silva**



**Intro**

Good afternoon, my name is Rachel Silva, and I work for the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program. Thank you for coming, and welcome to the “Sandwiching in History” tour of First Presbyterian Church. I’d like to thank Scott Seidenschwarz and Rosalie Cheatham for their help with the tour.

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.

Organized on July 27, 1828, Little Rock’s First Presbyterian Church is the oldest church in continuous service of any major denomination in Arkansas. The congregation met in several downtown locations before 1914, when it moved into a new three-story education building (and temporary sanctuary) at the southwest corner of 8<sup>th</sup> and Scott. The present sanctuary was completed in 1921, and a second education building was finished in 1957. All three sections of the church were designed by Little Rock architect John Parks Almand. First Presbyterian Church was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1986.

## Early History of Church

Arkansas's first Presbyterian congregation was organized at Little Rock by Rev. James Wilson Moore. Moore studied at Princeton Theological Seminary and was licensed in October 1827 by the Northumberland Presbytery, located in Pennsylvania. The following month, he was ordained to serve as a missionary in Arkansas Territory. Moore arrived at Little Rock in January 1828 and encountered a settlement of about 150 people, only six of whom were professing Christians. Despite this low number, Moore immediately got to work and preached the first Presbyterian sermon in Arkansas on January 28, 1828, at Jesse Brown's schoolhouse, which was located at the foot of Rock Street. Moore later recorded in his diary, "The first Sabbath I preached, I was told afterwards there were at least forty or fifty pistols, and as many bowie knives in the congregation. I was not afraid of them, but told them of heaven and hell and of Calvary."

Rev. Moore formally organized the First Presbyterian Church on July 27, 1828, with seven charter members—five women and two men. The church grew slowly during its first few years and held services in temporary locations until 1833, when a lot near the southeast corner of Second and Main was purchased from William E. Woodruff. The church constructed its first building on this site. Rev. Moore pastored the church until 1840, when he moved to Sylvania, near present-day Cabot, and established the Sylvania Academy for Boys and the Sylvania Presbyterian Church.

First Presbyterian struggled for a few years after Rev. Moore's departure but was reenergized during the pastorate of Rev. Joshua Green, who served from 1847 to 1854. Mary Ashley, widow of Chester Ashley, gave the church land on East Markham between Cumberland and Rock streets. In 1853 a new church with a wooden steeple was completed on the site. The church's second building burned in February 1866 when a fire started at the store of F. Sweeney, destroying nearby commercial buildings and the church. The congregation sold the lot on East Markham for \$6,250, which was put toward the purchase of property on the northwest corner of East Fifth (Capitol) and Scott.

In 1867 construction on the church's third building began at Fifth and Scott. Completed in 1869, it was the first church built in Little Rock after the Civil War. The brick, Gothic Revival-style church with tall corner spire set the standard for church design in Little Rock during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The size of the congregation grew considerably under the guidance of Rev. Thomas Rice Welch, who pastored the church from 1860 to 1885. In 1878 Rev. Welch reported an average attendance of 400 to 450 people at Sunday morning services and 200 people at Sunday School. In 1882 some members withdrew to form Second Presbyterian Church.

Rev. John Van Lear, who came to First Presbyterian in 1909, ushered in another important era of growth. Under his leadership, the congregation grew and soon needed additional rooms for Sunday School. Several church members favored the expansion of the existing church, but the increasing value of the property at 5<sup>th</sup> and Scott convinced the majority of church members to favor the sale of the property at 5<sup>th</sup> and Scott and construction of a new church three blocks to the south.

### **Site of Current Church at 8<sup>th</sup> & Scott**

In 1913 the church purchased lots at the southwest corner of 8<sup>th</sup> and Scott. Before the property was purchased by the church, the southwest corner of 8<sup>th</sup> and Scott was occupied by the 1875 home of U.S. District Judge Henry C. Caldwell. The Caldwell House originally faced east toward Scott Street with an address of 802 Scott. The home was later purchased by F. B. T. Hollenberg, president of the Hollenberg Music Company, who in 1913 moved the house slightly to the west and turned it to face north on 8<sup>th</sup> Street with an address of 115 E. 8<sup>th</sup>.

### *Old Education Building, 1913-1914*

In 1914 First Presbyterian Church completed a three-story education building on the south end of the former Caldwell-Hollenberg property. The 1914 education building was designed by Little Rock architect John Parks Almand, who was

working at the Charles Thompson firm at the time. Worship services were held on the second floor of the education building for seven years.

It is interesting to note that the 1869 church building at Capitol and Scott was demolished in fall 1916 to make way for the 1917 Theo Sanders-designed Hollenberg Building at 112-114 E. Capitol, as well as auto parking. Most people know the Hollenberg Building as the old Stephens Building (now offices of the Arkansas Department of Higher Education; along with the old Exchange Bank Building).

### *Present Sanctuary, 1920-1921*

The present Gothic Revival-style sanctuary was designed by John Parks Almand, who was then working on his own. Almand's design for the sanctuary blended with the earlier education building, as the two structures would be connected. Ground was broken for the sanctuary in May 1920, and the cornerstone was laid on Sunday, November 7, 1920, in front of many church members and friends. Items placed in the cornerstone included the roll of the bench of elders, roll of the board of deacons, roster of the Ladies' Auxiliary, roll of the Sunday School, roll of church membership, history of the church, the original prayer book used by William E. Woodruff (founder of the *Gazette*), a copy of the *Gazette's* Centennial edition, and a list of church members who fought in the Great War (WWI). The sanctuary was erected at a cost of about \$300,000, including furnishings (equal to almost \$4 million today). The first service was held in the new sanctuary on October 2, 1921.

When the sanctuary was first completed, the windows contained a type of clear glass. All but two of the stained-glass windows in the church were paid for by the generous bequest of church member Frances Ann "Fannie" Ashley Johnson, who died in 1926 (she was the granddaughter of Chester and Mary Ashley). The other two windows were given by T. H. Humphreys in memory of his wife, Beulah, and by George B. and Marion Rose in memory of their daughter, Miriam. The stained-

glass windows were hand-made by Payne Studios of Paterson, New Jersey, and dedicated in 1928.

### *New Education Building, 1956-1957*

I mentioned the old Caldwell-Hollenberg House earlier and told you that it was moved to face north on 8<sup>th</sup> Street. The church sanctuary was built right next door to the house. First Presbyterian acquired the house in 1937 and rented it as apartments until June 1951. The church demolished the house in March 1952 to make more room for parking.

On August 12, 1956, ground was broken for a new education building west of the sanctuary on the site formerly occupied by the Caldwell-Hollenberg House. The “new” education building was also designed by John Parks Almand and featured a square tower at the entrance and one of his trademark design elements, a loggia with pointed arch openings and faux exposed rafters made from Cypress (these exposed rafters or “look-outs” created an interesting architectural detail and held up the gutters and downspouts). The new education building was formally opened on November 3, 1957. During the construction of the new education building, the 1914 education building was remodeled and a chapel added on the first floor.

### *1958 Fire*

On the morning of May 29, 1958, the sanctuary was significantly damaged by a fire. At the time, the sanctuary was getting a new roof, and roofers were actually working on the west side of the sanctuary roof when the fire broke out on the east side. The fire was likely caused by the exposure of electrical wiring in the ceiling. Luckily, the fire department had the blaze under control within about 45 minutes, and no one was injured. The new \$225,000 education building was not damaged. Only a few of the lower stained-glass window panels were broken, and the main chandelier remained intact because it was anchored to a steel beam in the sanctuary roof. However, the sanctuary and basement below it sustained

smoke and water damage valued at \$160,000 (\$1.3 million today). After the fire, the roof structure was rebuilt and the stained-glass windows, organ, and light fixtures repaired. The original cork floor was replaced with hardwood, and the pews were replaced. One church service was held in the auditorium of the Albert Pike Memorial Temple after the fire, and then services were moved to the fellowship hall in the 1957 education building until the sanctuary was repaired.

### *Residential lots south of church*

The Dudley E. Jones/Arthur Jones House, built in the mid-1860s, was located right behind the 1914 First Pres education building and faced Scott Street (814 Scott). About 2005, the house was moved to the 1300 block of Broadway, just south of Mt. Holly Cemetery.

The Gus Blass House, built in 1879, was located at the northwest corner of 9<sup>th</sup> and Scott (818 Scott). The Queen Anne-style home was occupied by Blass's widow until 1945 and was later rented by the state headquarters of the American Legion, followed by Alcoholics Anonymous. First Pres bought the property in 1965 and demolished the house in March 1966 to make way for a parking lot.

### **Architecture/John Parks Almand**

The three buildings that now compose First Presbyterian Church were designed by John Parks Almand. His design for the 1921 Gothic Revival-style sanctuary is most notable. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Gothic Revival style was very popular, especially for churches, because it embraced medieval forms and details which drew the line of sight upward toward God and heaven.

Characteristics of the style at First Pres include the pointed arch stained-glass windows with elaborate tracery, a parapet featuring twin octagonal towers with battlements, buttresses, and a steeply-pitched roof.

John Parks Almand was born on May 8, 1885, at Lithonia, Georgia, to Alexander James Almand and his wife, Clara Bond Almand. He attended Emory College at

Oxford, Georgia (now Emory University in Atlanta) and 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 died on March 24, 1969, and was interred at the Mount Holly Mausoleum.

### **Interior specs**

Organ:

The original organ was made by the E. M. Skinner Company of Boston but wasn't installed until spring 1922. Since the sanctuary was completed in 1921, it was necessary to fit the organ into a chamber that was already finished. This dictated that the Swell organ be placed high in the pitch of the ceiling and that other modifications be made during the installation. The Skinner organ was repaired

after the 1958 fire and re-worked in 1976-1977. It was completely replaced during the 2003-2004 renovation of the sanctuary. The church now has a 2004 Nichols-Simpson concert organ, made here in Little Rock. The Arkansas Guild of Organists holds a concert here at least once a year. Church organist Scott Seidenschwarz will play the organ in a few minutes.

In 2003-2004, the church redid the chancel arrangement and installed a new slate floor.

Bell:

The bell in the east tower is the bronze bell from the church at 5<sup>th</sup> and Scott. It was cast in West Troy, New York, in 1869 (Meneely Bell Foundry).

Light fixtures:

Sanctuary contains its original light fixtures, made by the Arkansas Electric Company out of solid amber glass for \$6,143 (total cost for all; equal to \$81,000 today). The main chandelier did not fall during the 1958 fire because it was anchored to a steel beam. The other fixtures fell and were repaired.

Stewpot:

The church's longest running outreach ministry is Stewpot, which began in the 1970s and provides hot meals to about 150 people in need every weekday from noon to 1 p.m. The program also offers free clothing and medical care.

Pastor:

Currently looking for a pastor. Steven Moody is the pulpit supply now (preaches regularly but not technically the interim pastor).

### **Connection to the last lynching in Little Rock (1927)**

On April 30, 1927, the body of a 12-year-old white girl named Floella McDonald was discovered in the belfry at First Presbyterian Church. Little Rock police found the body after the church's black janitor, Frank Dixon, reported a persistent



stench coming from the belfry. Dixon immediately became the prime suspect. Dixon's teenage son, Lonnie, was also arrested because an 8-year-old white girl told police that he had accosted her near the church a few weeks earlier.

The next day, Lonnie Dixon confessed to murdering Floella McDonald after being interrogated for 24 hours straight. In order to protect Lonnie Dixon and his father, Frank, from mob violence, the police secretly moved them to the Texarkana city jail. This decision turned out to be prudent, for a mob of a few thousand people showed up at City Hall and at the State Penitentiary (on Roosevelt Road), demanding to know the whereabouts of Lonnie Dixon.

On the morning of May 4, a black man named John Carter allegedly assaulted a white woman and her daughter a few miles west of downtown Little Rock. News of the attack spread quickly. Racial tension was already high on the heels of Floella McDonald's murder. Poses of white men volunteered to help Sheriff Mike Haynie search for Carter. About 5 p.m., a group found Carter hiding in a tree. They lynched him and dragged his body behind a car through the streets of downtown Little Rock. They stopped at the intersection of 9<sup>th</sup> and Broadway, in the heart of the city's black business district, and set his body on fire. A mob of about 5,000 people rioted in the neighborhood for three hours before Governor John Martineau called out the National Guard to disperse it.

The lynching of John Carter made national headlines and scarred Little Rock residents for decades. Lonnie Dixon was tried and convicted for the murder of Floella McDonald. He was sentenced to death in the electric chair and was executed on June 24, 1927, his 18<sup>th</sup> birthday.

### **Questions?**

Next tour is Friday, March 4 at the Waldo Tiller House, 35 Sherrill Road, Little Rock.

Scott is going to play the organ for us! Then we will go down to the fellowship hall, where Rosalie has some items on display as well as refreshments.