

Sandwiching in History
Waldo Emerson Tiller House
35 Sherrill Road, Little Rock
March 4, 2016
By Rachel Silva



Rear elevation of Tiller House, ca. 1954



Rear elevation of Tiller House, 2016

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 the Waldo Tiller House! I’d like to thank Kent and Missy Sorrells for allowing us to tour their beautiful home. I’d also like to recognize several people who helped me find information about the house—Mason Toms, John and Pat Tiller, Phil Purifoy, Randy Wilbourn, Rosalyn Hastings, and Henry and Carolyn Nichols.

Several members of the Tiller family are here today, including Waldo and Joan Tiller’s sons—John and Robert. In addition, Carolyn Nichols, who owned this house from about 1970 until 2006, is here.

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 1954, the Waldo Tiller House was designed by the Little Rock architectural firm of Ginocchio, Cromwell & Associates. The principal architect on the project was Louisiana native Dietrich Neyland, who was hired in 1950 by Ed Cromwell. The house was designed for Waldo and Joan Tiller and was one of the earliest Modern homes in Little Rock.

Riverdale and Sherrill Heights

Much of Little Rock's present-day Riverdale neighborhood was farmland in the early twentieth century. Farms occupied the low land along the Arkansas River from the intersection of Cantrell Road and Riverfront Drive all the way down to the I-430 Bridge. The Chicago, Rock Island & Pacific Railroad ran along the southern bank of the Arkansas River and serviced numerous lumber, stave, and cooperage companies, grain and cotton warehouses, and three rock quarries. Quarries were located on the present-day sites of the Rivercliff Apartments, Holcombe Heights Apartments/Treetops Condos, and a little farther west at the foot of Scenic Drive.

Although small levees offered some protection for the farmland, the area was devastated by the 1927 Flood. The railroad was rebuilt, but the farms never recovered. The property now occupied by the Rebsamen Park Golf Course was acquired in 1936 by the Little Rock Waterworks for use as a well farm. The City of Little Rock bought the land in 1948 with the intent of making a riverside park, but few improvements were made to the property until 1954, when successful insurance broker Raymond Rebsamen gave \$30,000 for the development of a municipal golf course.

In addition to farmland and various industrial pursuits, the Riverdale neighborhood was historically home to a small black community. The West Rock Addition was platted in 1906 and eventually consisted of almost 100 homes for black residents. Most of these people worked as farm or industrial laborers, or were employed as servants and cooks in the white households of Pulaski Heights. In 1958 the West Rock neighborhood was designated a slum clearance project,

enabling the City of Little Rock to use federal Urban Renewal funds to purchase the 54-acre property, relocate residents, and bulldoze the area for redevelopment. This process was completed by 1964. A seven-acre portion of the property was added to Allsopp Park and is now the site of the Allsopp Park baseball diamond, tennis courts, and playground. The remaining 47 acres were redeveloped with houses, apartments, condos, and commercial buildings (centered on Cedar Hill Road; what we know today as the heart of Riverdale). And in the early 1960s, Cantrell Road was rerouted and widened, increasing accessibility to new residential developments in west Little Rock.

Located in the Riverdale neighborhood, the Sherrill Heights Addition to the City of Little Rock was platted in May 1950 by Mary Jane Sherrill Heerwagen. Mary Jane's great-grandfather was Dr. A. R. Sherrill, for whom the Jefferson County town of Sherrill is named. Mary Jane's husband was painter and interior decorator William R. "Bill" Heerwagen, who did the original 1950 interior decoration of the Arkansas Governor's Mansion. Bill Heerwagen was the grandson of Paul Martin Heerwagen, who in 1914 painted the *Education, Justice, Religion, and War* murals in the Arkansas State Capitol.

According to the Bill of Assurance for the Addition, Sherrill Heights initially consisted of 62 lots, 10 of which would be commercial. The 10 commercial lots were to be located along a short street called Prospect Place (these lots were never developed as commercial property). The remaining 52 lots were residential and fronted along Sherrill Road. Residences had to have at least 1,650 square feet of ground floor space, or cost at least \$20,000 (equal to about \$200,000 today).

By 1953, twelve homes were built in Sherrill Heights. They were all on the north (or river) side of the Sherrill Road loop. Construction on the house at 35 Sherrill Road began in 1953 and was completed in 1954. The home was designed for Waldo and Joan Tiller by architect Dietrich Neyland, who worked for the Little Rock firm of Ginocchio, Cromwell & Associates. Soon after its completion, the Tiller House was featured in the Home and Garden Section of the *Arkansas*

Gazette (April 11, 1954, Section E). The article characterized the house as “unusual” and “modern.”

Dietrich Neyland & Architecture of Tiller House

When Ed Cromwell hired Dietrich Neyland in 1950, he intended for Neyland to bring unusual, modern, and innovative design principles to the firm. Neyland was born in 1914 at Shreveport, Louisiana, to Junius and Mary Neyland. His maternal grandfather was well-known Texas architect Diedrich Rulfs. Neyland spent many summers with his grandparents, who instilled in him a love of architecture. As a young man, Neyland went to work for brothers Samuel and William Wiener in Shreveport. The Wiener brothers were some of the earliest Modernist architects in the South. From 1934 to 1938, Neyland attended architecture school at Tulane University and upon graduation was awarded an internship with internationally-known Modernist architect Richard Neutra of southern California. Neyland served in the U.S. Navy during World War II and later returned to Shreveport, where he went to work for the local architecture firm of Van Os & Flaxman. During his time at Van Os & Flaxman, Neyland’s design for the Booker T. Washington High School was recognized by *Life Magazine* as one of the ten best high schools in America. Shortly after the completion of this school, Neyland received a job offer from Ed Cromwell and in spring 1950 moved to Little Rock.

Neyland’s career at Cromwell spanned more than 30 years and included commissions throughout the state and all over the world. He designed buildings for several colleges in Arkansas as well as the residential buildings at the U.S. Embassy in New Delhi, India. Neyland produced some of the most innovative Mid-Century Modern designs in the state. You may be familiar with some of his work, including the Museum of Automobiles on Petit Jean Mountain, KTHV Building in Little Rock, Brough Commons at the U of A (Fayetteville), Diamond Café at UALR, and the Fine Arts Building at Philander Smith College (LR). Dietrich Neyland died in 2009 at the age of 94. His widow, Linda, still lives in Little Rock.

Neyland's design for the Waldo Tiller House was completed early in his career at the Cromwell firm and was heavily influenced by the work of his mentor, Richard Neutra. Neutra's influence is evident in the home's linear form, large banks of windows facing the back yard (private area), and long balcony. Although there are windows on the front, or public, side of the house, Neyland's original design included a wall running east-west in the kitchen that blocked the line of sight to the private living areas and back yard (this area was reoriented in 2007—we'll get to that in a minute).

According to the April 11, 1954, *Gazette* article about the Tiller House, the exterior materials were originally narrow yellow pine painted dove gray and rosy (pink) brick. Railroad ties were used as flooring for the back patio. Notable interior features included a free-standing, black, metal chimney and a wrought-iron window with abstract segments of glass. As you probably already noticed, some of these materials have changed. I will explain the changes as I talk about the owners who made them.

Occupants of the Tiller House

Waldo and Joan Tiller

Because the house was built for the Tiller family, I will go into more detail about them.

Waldo Emerson Tiller was born on September 5, 1904, at Bloomfield, Missouri, to Dr. John A. Tiller and his wife, Minnie Palmer Tiller. Dr. Tiller practiced medicine in Missouri until 1912, when he went to work for his father, James H. Tiller, at the Tiller Tie & Lumber Company in Bloomfield. In 1917 Dr. and Mrs. Tiller moved to Lake Village, Arkansas, where they started a railroad tie and lumber company of their own. Their son, Waldo, attended preparatory school at the Columbia Military Academy in Columbia, Tennessee. Waldo Tiller later attended Washington University in St. Louis but graduated from Hendrix College in Conway.

By the mid-1920s, Waldo's parents, Dr. and Mrs. Tiller, had moved to Little Rock. Waldo joined his father in the firm of John A. Tiller and Son, which sold railroad crossties and pulpwood. After Dr. Tiller's death in 1940, Waldo Tiller formed and served as president of the Tiller Tie & Lumber Company. Although the company's main office was located in the Union Life Building at 212 Center Street in Little Rock, production facilities (pulpwood yards, logging yards, railroad tie yards and plants) were located throughout Arkansas, Louisiana, and Oklahoma. In the 1970s, the Tiller Tie & Lumber Company became Arkoma Wood Products. Mr. Tiller continued to serve as president of this company.

Waldo Tiller served as a director of the Little Rock Branch of the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis (1958-64) and as a board member at the Country Club of Little Rock. He was president of the National Railway Tie Association. He also served as president (1954-58) and later, executive secretary (1959-63), of the Arkansas Forestry Association.

Waldo Tiller's first marriage to Lillian Robins Tiller produced two children: Emily Anne Tiller Bransford (1929-2012) and James Edward Tiller (1938-1964). In 1951 Waldo Tiller married Joan Alexander. The couple lived at the Rivercliff Apartments, apartment 15B. Their first child, John Albert Tiller, was born in 1953 while the couple lived at Rivercliff. Also in 1953, Waldo and Joan Tiller hired Ginocchio, Cromwell & Associates to design a new modern home for them in the nearby neighborhood of Sherrill Heights. The Tiller family moved into the house at 35 Sherrill Road in 1954. At that time, the house had a master bedroom, nursery for Baby John, and a bedroom for Jim (who would have been about 16). The maid's room was located on the far eastern end of the house next to the kitchen. The Tillers' second child, Thomas "Tommy" Emerson Tiller, was born in 1956. In late 1958 or early '59, the Tillers moved to 18 Rosewood Circle (off of Oakwood Road). Their youngest son, Robert Alexander Tiller, was born in 1960 while the family lived on Rosewood.

John Tiller, Waldo and Joan's oldest son, was only about 5 or 6 years old when the family moved out of the Tiller House. The thing he remembered most was the tile

floor in the game room (lower level)—it was done in a geometric pattern with white, black, and terra cotta-colored tile. No longer there.

Waldo and Joan Tiller later lived at 2303 Beechwood, 501 McAdoo Street, and 5410 Grandview Road. Waldo Tiller died on August 12, 1982, at the age of 77. Arkoma Wood Products was sold after his death. His widow, Joan Tiller Hart, died on April 5, 1995, at the age of 70.

Jess and Willastein Odom

In 1959 Jess P. Odom and his wife, Willastein Johnson Odom, purchased the Tiller House. Jess Odom was a successful insurance broker, eventually serving as president of Associated Investors Securities, Inc., National Investors Fire & Casualty Insurance Company, and National Investors Life Insurance Company. In 1967 Odom bought about 5,000 acres west of the Crystal Hill neighborhood in North Little Rock and formed Maumelle Land Development, Inc. He hired architects and city planners to create a master plan for the new community, which saw its first residents in the early 1970s. Odom sold the remainder of his land to other developers in 1982 but is considered the founding father of Maumelle. The Jess Odom Community Center at Maumelle is named in his honor.

In 1968 Odom bought controlling interest in Dogpatch USA, the Newton County amusement park based on characters in Al Capp's "Li'l Abner" comic strip. By 1972, Odom built a winter ski resort (with artificial snow machine) called Marble Falls near Dogpatch. A number of factors combined to doom this venture, and Dogpatch declared bankruptcy in 1980. [It reopened and closed for the last time in 1993.]

The Odoms lived at 35 Sherrill Road from 1959 to 1968. The Odoms added a den to the east end of the house and enclosed the original screened porch and terrace to make an office and solarium between the living room and den. They also added the pool.

[The Tiller house sat vacant for one year between Odom and Nichols.]

Henry and Carolyn Nichols

In 1970 Henry and Carolyn Nichols moved into the Tiller House. Henry served as chairman of the board of Central Distribution Centers and later, Terminal Distribution Centers. These were warehousing companies that provided both dry and refrigerated storage. At one time, this company did warehousing at the Terminal Warehouse Building in the River Market. Nichols also owned an interest in the Lafayette Hotel when it was used as office space, a restaurant, and special event venue. By 1995, Nichols was president of the Southern Compress Company cotton warehouse at 1600 E. Gregory in North Little Rock. He converted this cotton warehouse into a commercial record center with temperature-controlled vaults for the storage of computer tapes, microfilm, and microfiche.

The Nichols' two sons, Mark and Lance, grew up in the Tiller House. The most significant change made by the Nichols family occurred in 1990, when they added a native stone veneer to parts of the house and the walls by the driveway (covered up the rosy brick). In 2006 Henry and Carolyn Nichols sold the house to their oldest son, Mark.

Mark Nichols

In 2007 Mark Nichols hired Fennell-Purifoy Architects to remodel the house in order to provide necessary updates while preserving the home's unique, Mid-Century Modern character. The most significant functional changes during the 2007 remodel were the incorporation of the solarium into the living area and the reorientation of the kitchen/dining room. The project also included new HVAC, electrical, plumbing, windows, and roof.

Kent and Missy Sorrells

In December 2013 Mark Nichols sold the house to Kent and Missy Sorrells. The Sorrells family moved into the home in April 2014, so they have been here almost two years. Kent and Missy have made a few changes of their own, including:

- the enclosure of the carport to make a garage;
- removal of a wall between the garage and the front door that used to screen off a patio space used for entertaining; and the
- addition of the pool deck, fish pond, fire pit, and stone & concrete bench.

Details

Square footage = ~4,600 sq. ft.

Bedrooms/bathrooms = 4 bed/4.5 bath

Explain changes—reorientation of kitchen/dining room & incorporation of solarium

Copies of original drawings

Before and after floorplans (2007 remodel)

Before pics

Any questions right now?

I'm happy to answer questions as you go through the house.

Next tour is Friday, April 1 at the Nannie C. Wright House, 1617 S. Battery, Little Rock.