

Sandwiching in History
Nannie C. Wright House
1617 S. Battery Street, Little Rock
April 1, 2016
By Rachel Silva



Intro

Good afternoon, my name is Rachel Silva, and I work for the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program.

**Before we get started, Carol Young from the Quapaw Quarter Association will tell you about the upcoming Spring Tour of Homes in Hillcrest May 7-8.

Thank you for coming, and welcome to the “Sandwiching in History” tour of the Nannie Wright House. I’d like to thank John Steel and Whitney Patterson Steel for allowing us to tour their beautiful home!

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.

Located in the Central High School Neighborhood Historic District (National Register-listed 8/16/1996), the Nannie C. Wright House was built about 1909. The house is an American Foursquare with an eclectic mix of architectural details.

Central High Neighborhood/Centennial Addition

Historically, Little Rock's Central High School neighborhood was called the West End because the area was literally at the western edge of the city. Platted in 1877, the Centennial Addition was the largest addition in the neighborhood. It was so named to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence (1776-1876).

Only a few scattered homes existed in the West End until the mid-to-late 1890s, when significant construction began. However, Little Rock residents were enticed to visit the West End beginning on May 16, 1885, when the Little Rock Street Railway Company opened West End Park at the end of the streetcar line.

West End Park covered six blocks from 14th (Daisy Bates) to 16th, and from Park to Jones. The densely wooded park boasted a large pavilion for dancing, refreshment stands, bicycle track, roller coaster, and a lake for boating. Admission to the park was usually 25 cents for adults and 15 cents for children. From all accounts in the *Arkansas Gazette*, West End Park was a hit as soon as it opened. The park was especially popular on Sunday afternoons, when music was provided by the Little Rock Band. During the heat of the summer, the streetcar company promised to keep the park open late for "the accommodation of those who wish to pass the hot nights out in the suburbs."

The first amateur baseball games were played at West End Park in 1893. In 1894 a baseball field and grandstand were built on the west side of the park. This became the home field for the Little Rock Baseball Association and later, the city's first minor league baseball team, the Little Rock Travelers. West End Park's field was also used for major league spring training camps. The grandstand was rebuilt in 1915 and named after Judge William Kavanaugh, who died in February of that year. Kavanaugh had been president of the Southern League since 1903 and was a strong supporter of the Little Rock Travelers. Kavanaugh Field was the home of the Travelers until 1932, when Ray Winder Field opened. Quigley Stadium, built in 1936 by the WPA, now occupies the site of Kavanaugh Field.

After the streetcar company opened Forest Park in Pulaski Heights in 1904, it sold West End Park to the City of Little Rock. However, the park grounds outside the baseball field were rarely used after 1912, and were no longer maintained. In 1922 a portion of the park was reestablished as Civitan Park—maintained by the Little Rock Civitan Club—but this only lasted a few years because in 1927 the new Little Rock Senior High School was built on the east side of the former West End Park property. Park Street, so named because it was the park’s eastern boundary, serves as a reminder of the area’s past.

In the 1890s, real estate developers began advertising residential lots for sale in the West End. Most homes in the neighborhood were built between 1900 and 1930. Although the streetcar line had slightly changed its route by 1913, it still offered excellent service to the West End. According to the *Arkansas Gazette*, the Little Rock Railway and Electric Company’s 15th Street Line “traversed the southwest portion of the city, passing through the most fashionable residential district.”

The West End was a solid, middle-class neighborhood. The cost of homes in the early 20th century ranged from about \$2,000 for a modest, wood-frame home to between \$5,000 and \$7,000 for a two-story home on Summit, Marshall, Wolfe, or Battery streets. These property values remained stable until at least the mid-20th century. A 1940 real estate survey indicated that property values in the West End were similar to those in Pulaski Heights, with the exception of the highest bracket—homes valued at more than \$20,000—which were only found in exclusive additions of the Heights, like Edgehill and Prospect Terrace.

Nannie Wright House

Architecture

Located on lot 5, block 31 in the Centennial Addition, the Nannie Wright House was built about 1909 and is essentially an American Foursquare with an eclectic mix of architectural details. An American Foursquare is a two-story, box-shaped

house with four rooms on each floor. The dentil molding and corbels on the front porch as well as the triangular pediment on the north elevation of the house are Colonial Revival in style. The brackets under the eaves, square brick porch supports, casement windows, transom windows with decorative pane arrangements, and built-in window seats in the entryway are representative of the English Arts and Crafts Movement.

This particular variation of the American Foursquare is also known as a Seattle Box. A trademark of the Seattle Box is the presence of extended bay windows on the second floor corners of the front façade, often with ornamental brackets below. Other characteristics include low, hipped roofs with prominent dormer windows, front porches supported by blocky columns, and a front entrance set to the left or right (not in the center).

The basic plan for a Seattle Box was first described by architect Victor W. Voorhees in his residential plan book, *Western Home Builder*, which went through six editions between 1907 and 1911. Voorhees practiced architecture in Seattle during the first half of the 20th century. His plan for a “Northwest Craftsman” became so popular in Seattle and throughout the Pacific Northwest that it became known as the Seattle Box.

While Nannie Wright had no obvious connections to Seattle, it is likely that she found the plans for the homes at 1611, 1615, and 1617 S. Battery in *Western Home Builder* or a similar publication.

1600 block of Battery Street

In 1907 there were only three houses on this block—1601 (gone), 1608 (gone), and 1612/1614 S. Battery (still there). Those three houses had been built in the late 1890s, just a block south of Centennial Elementary School. The front entrance of the Centennial School was at 1500 Wolfe Street. The Romanesque Revival-style school was designed by Little Rock architect Thomas Harding, Sr., and opened in September 1894. The school closed in 1971 and was demolished, with the

exception of the building's front staircase and porch, which was intended to serve as a focal point for a new city park on the site. Centennial Park was dedicated on November 12, 1975.

Nannie C. Wright built the houses at 1611 (original house demolished ca. 2001 and replaced with current structure), 1615, and 1617 S. Battery in 1908 and 1909 for herself and her two married daughters. All three houses were similar in plan, and the original house at 1611 very closely resembled 1617. The remaining houses on the block were built by the 1920s, and the Williamsburg Apartments were built in the early 1940s.

Nannie C. Wright

Nannie Caroline Wood Wright was born on January 26, 1848, at Charlottesville, Virginia, to Drury Wood and his wife, Laura Poore Wood. In 1872 she married Captain William Henry "Dan" Wright and in 1875 moved to Little Rock. The couple had four children: a son, Drury Wright (b. 5/28/1873); and three daughters, Mary Wright Bodman (b. Jan. 1875), Laura Wright McClerkin (b. 8/21/1878), and Nan Wright Wendell (b. 8/4/1882).

Nannie Wright's husband, W. H. "Dan" Wright, was one of the city's most well-known residents and was a pioneer in Arkansas's cotton oil industry. Captain Wright was born on August 11, 1849, at Senatobia, Mississippi. He served in the Confederate Army and settled at Memphis after the war. Wright worked in the cotton oil business at Memphis, and after he moved to Little Rock in 1875, he and Edward Urquhart started the Little Rock Oil and Compress Company, which manufactured cotton seed oils, cake, and meal (used for lamp fuel, animal feed, fertilizer, and later, for cooking—cotton seed oil was the main ingredient in Crisco shortening for many years).

The company's Little Rock mill was located at the northeast corner of E. Second and Byrd streets, which is presently the green space in front of the Clinton Presidential Library. The Little Rock Oil and Compress Company also operated

plants at Brinkley, Helena, Newport, Fort Smith, Texarkana, Pine Bluff, and Arkansas City. W. H. Wright initially served as secretary and treasurer of the company but was later promoted to vice president. The chain of cotton oil mills was later purchased by the American Cotton Oil Company, and Wright served as vice president and manager of that company's Arkansas interests until 1897, when he resigned to start the Pine Bluff Cotton Oil Company, of which he was president and manager until the end of 1902. Wright also served as president of the Brinkley, Helena & Indian Bay Railroad, later known as the Arkansas Midland Railroad and ultimately, a branch of Missouri Pacific. While visiting New York City in 1903, Wright "was taken ill" and never fully recovered. He died on January 30, 1905, at his Little Rock home at 810 Cumberland Street (810 Cumberland is no longer extant) and was buried in the family plot at Mount Holly Cemetery.

According to the 1907 Little Rock City Directory, Wright's widow, Nannie C. Wright, continued to live in the family home at 810 Cumberland with her youngest child, Nan, for a couple years after her husband's death. By 1908, Nannie Wright lived at 1611 S. Battery with her daughter, Nan. Her other two daughters, Mary Wright Bodman (Mrs. Ernest J. Bodman) and Laura Wright McClerkin (Mrs. Felix W. McClerkin), along with their husbands, lived at 1615 Battery. By 1910, the house at 1617 S. Battery was completed, and Nannie C. Wright and her daughter, Nan, moved there. 1615 then became the home of Nannie's daughter, Laura, and son-in-law, Felix McClerkin, who owned and operated McClerkin's Drug Store at 700 Main Street. 1611 became the residence of Nannie's daughter, Mary, and son-in-law, Ernest Bodman, then-assistant secretary of the Union & Mercantile Trust Company.

About 1919 Nannie Wright moved in with her daughter and son-in-law, Laura and Felix McClerkin, at 1615 Battery. The 1920 Census actually lists Nannie Wright twice—it shows her living with her daughter, Mary Bodman, at 1611 Battery, and it shows her living with her daughter, Laura McClerkin, at 1615 Battery. Nannie Wright would have been in her early 70s at that time.

About 1927 the Bodmans moved to a house in the upscale Prospect Terrace Addition in the Heights (5124 Crestwood), and Nannie Wright remained in her daughter, Laura McClerkin's, home at 1615 S. Battery. Nannie C. Wright died on June 26, 1930, at the home of her daughter, Laura. She was 82 years old.

Later occupants of 1617 S. Battery

After Nannie Wright moved out of the house at 1617 S. Battery about 1919, the home belonged to Robert H. McNair and his wife, Birdie. McNair was president of the Little Rock Barrel & Box Company at 1420 E. Sixth Street (presently the concrete foundations by the railroad spur on the north side of E. 6th, across from the Darragh Company). The McNair family lived here until about 1938.

From 1939 to 1941, the house was occupied by Mrs. Jessie W. McLaughlin, widow of state legislator and Lonoke County farmer William Heber McLaughlin.

Granville H. Sutton and his wife, Dolphine, purchased the house in 1941 and remained here until 1956, when their children were grown. Granville Sutton was the superintendent of the Little Rock Municipal Waterworks.

In the 1960s, the house was occupied by Luke and Vyrl Arnett. Mr. Arnett was general counsel for the State Employment Security Division until his death in 1968.

From 1970 to present, the house changed ownership every five to ten years. Before John and Whitney Steel purchased the house in August 2014, it was owned by Todd Raney and used as a rental property.

Details

- ~2,300 square feet
- 4 bedroom/2 bath

- The house originally had an open, 2-story sleeping porch on the rear elevation, but it was enclosed in the 1920s or '30s.
- Has original windows, interior doors, and wood floors
- Entryway has original built-in window seats
- The house originally had two sets of pocket doors, but they have long since been removed.
- When John and Whitney acquired the house, none of the original light fixtures remained, so they've had fun with it and added funky, modern fixtures.
- John and Whitney recently remodeled the kitchen by removing a wall between the kitchen and the enclosed back porch room to enlarge and open up the space. That space now has new flooring, cabinets, appliances, and wood wainscoting.

Questions?

**Next tour is Friday, May 6 at the Fulk Building (new CJRW offices), 300 Main Street, Little Rock.