

**Sandwiching in History**  
**James A. Dibrell House**  
**1400 Spring Street, Little Rock**  
**April 7, 2017**  
**By Revis Edmonds**



**Good afternoon, my name is Revis Edmonds, and I work for the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program, an agency of the Department of Arkansas Heritage.**

**Thank you for coming, and welcome to the “Sandwiching in History” tour of the historic Dibrell House. I’d like to thank Carl Miller for allowing us to tour this amazing home which is such an important part of Little Rock’s history!**

**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 Dibrell House is part of the Governor's Mansion Historic District, which is a cohesive, 24-block, late 19<sup>th</sup>/early 20th century residential neighborhood located in the midst of the Quapaw Quarter (an area designating the boundaries of historic Little Rock) .**

**It was listed on the National Register of Historic Places on May 19, 1978, and its borders were increased in 1988 and 2002. The district includes a major cross-section of residential architecture designed by the noted Little Rock architect Charles L. Thompson. It is believed to be one of the oldest neighborhoods in Little Rock to retain its residential character.**

**The district is located south of Little Rock's central business district, in an area that was, until 1869, a country estate. The area was heavily developed between 1880 and 1940. It includes a number of high quality Queen Anne Victorians, including the Hornibrook House, a particularly fine example of the style in brick. One of the city's finest examples of Colonial Revival architecture, the Hotze House, stands at 1619 S. Louisiana Street. The Craftsman style is the best represented of the period styles in the district, with more than 92 houses, most two-story brick structures built in a modest scale. The district includes five historically significant churches, out of ten within its bounds. <sup>1</sup>**

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<sup>1</sup> National Register of Historic Places nomination, Governor's Mansion Historic District, Area 1, September 13, 1978.

When the district was first listed in 1978, the district covered a 65 acre area bounded by the Arkansas Governor's Mansion grounds, 13th, Center, Gaines, and 18<sup>th</sup> Streets.<sup>2</sup> However, there was concern over the scope of this listing, and the city later performed a detailed survey of a much larger area. The result was a significant expansion of the district in 1988, adding 224.5 acres and including 473 contributing buildings, roughly bounded by Louisiana Street, 23<sup>rd</sup> Street and Roosevelt Road, Chester and State Streets, and 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> Streets. It has since had smaller amendments and enlargements in 1993, 1996, 1999, and 2002. The 2002 increase added 12 contributing buildings in a 4.8 acre area located roughly along Louisiana Avenue from West 23<sup>rd</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> Streets.

Most of the 174 structures located within the boundaries of the district are historically and/or architecturally significant. There are a number of open, green spaces scattered throughout the district, of which most indicate the sites of razed buildings. Only a few open spaces have been paved over for parking use.

Adjacent to the northern boundary of the Governor's Mansion Historic District is Mount Holly Cemetery, which was added to the National Register on March 5, 1970. Northeast of the district is the MacArthur Park Historic District, and to the south, west and east lie other predominantly residential neighborhoods, possessing varying degrees of historical and architectural importance.

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<sup>2</sup> National Register of Historic Places nomination, Governor's Mansion Historic District, Area 1., September 13, 1978.

One of the most prominent homes in the district is the Dibrell House at 1400 Spring Street at Daisy Bates Drive. This home is considered to be in the American Queen Anne style with Eastlake detailing. It was constructed in 1892 by real estate agent H.A. Bowman as a real estate speculation for Dr. James A. Dibrell, who was an early president and dean of the Medical Department of the University of Arkansas.<sup>3</sup> Dr. Dibrell was born on August 20, 1846, near Van Buren, and his father, James A. Dibrell Sr., was a prominent pioneer physician in Crawford County who would become well known in state medical circles. The Civil War had taken a toll on the family finances, so young Dibrell began his medical education by “reading” medicine (much as young law students “read” law with an attorney) with his father in the evenings and working as an accountant during the day. He took a course of medical lectures at the Medical College of St. Louis in 1867–68 and at the University of Pennsylvania, from which he received his degree in 1870, as had his father in 1839.

Upon graduating, young Dibrell moved to Little Rock and immediately began his practice. Like his father, Dibrell soon became involved in the political scene of the medical community. During his lifetime, he served as president of the city, county, and state medical societies and was a vice president of the American Medical Association.

The 1870s had brought an interest in the establishment of a medical school in Arkansas, but several issues had impeded its formation. Disagreements over

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<sup>3</sup> “Preservation Libations: James A. Dibrell House: 1400 Spring Street in Little Rock, Preserve Arkansas, January 15, 2016.

memberships based on educational background and practice philosophy had led to the formation of multiple local and state medical societies. By 1879, with the issues resolved and unity within the medical community, Dibrell and seven other Little Rock physicians organized the Medical Department of Arkansas Industrial University (now the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences). Dibrell became the institution's professor of anatomy, a position he held under several titles until his death in 1904.<sup>4</sup>

The construction cost in 1892 was believed to be approximately \$1,000 (\$25,792 today). Since the 1960s this house has enjoyed restoration of a quality rarely seen outside of museums. An extensive restoration began in 1967 under the ownership of Carl Miller, and the Dibrell House has become one of the finest, most extensive and detailed examples of private restoration in the state. Through analysis of old photographs, the present owner has reproduced outstanding features, such as hand-stenciled ceilings, and sections of ornate trim, woodwork and parquet floors.<sup>5</sup> The home also features seven different porches in six distinct styles, another reflection of its architectural blend of Victorian styles. In 1971 a fifteen-foot steeple was recreated and placed atop the forty-five-foot tower on the northeast corner of the house.

The Dibrells were able to add their own touches such as parquet floors and walnut woodwork. They added other touches such as inlaid "wood carpet" floors,

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<sup>4</sup> Flyer, "The Dibrell House 1400 Spring Street Little Rock, Arkansas."

<sup>5</sup> "Dibrell House Fact Sheet." (unpublished paper)

which were made from maple, walnut and cherry. <sup>6</sup>Dr. Dibrell was interested in innovations and the house became known as the "gadget" house for its modern devices such as electric doorbells, burglar alarms, and central heating.<sup>7</sup> There is a system of speaking tubes that functions as a modern-day intercom system.<sup>8</sup> A heating system also warmed every room in the house, an unusual convenience for that time. In fact, Dr. Dibrell was so caught up in the booming machine age that not one original feature was handmade; it was all mass-produced by machines. The Dibrell House has been carefully preserved and is a stunning example of both late-Nineteenth Century architecture and function.

By the 1960s, the house had been divided into apartments and had undergone several major structural changes. Since then the house has been carefully restored including rebuilding the turret and returning the seven porches to their original appearance.<sup>9</sup> The interior of the house was also fully restored. Among some of the interior restorations, the downstairs color schemes are said to be an exact restoration from Dr. Dibrell's day, while the upstairs is period correct. Becky Witsell is responsible for the authentic stenciling of the ceiling designs in the home's downstairs rooms, while Carl Miller's mother designed the Four Seasons themes on the bottom level. In the upstairs parlor, two pieces of Dr. Dibrell's legacy are readily apparent: his portrait of the Gilt Edge Hunting Club, and his military style cutlery and canteen set that were made in sterling silver, far beyond the normal hunting club traditions still prevalent in Arkansas to this

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<sup>6</sup> Site Visit, March 8, 2016.

<sup>7</sup> "Preservation Libations: James A. Dibrell House."

<sup>8</sup> Site Visit, March 8, 2016.

<sup>9</sup> "Preservation Libations: James A. Dibrell House."

day.<sup>10</sup> In the same room you will find Dr. Dibrell's portable medical instrument kit, which does not fit the normal stereotype of the bag of the circuit riding doctor that made house calls at the time. There is also commemoration of the Medical School's first female graduate, Dr. Annie Schoppach, certainly no small feat around the turn of the century.<sup>11</sup>

Since Carl Miller purchased the home in 1968, much of the renovation has remained true to Dr. Dibrell's reputation as a "tinkerer." For example, while modern heat and air systems have been installed, the return air for the air conditioning still follows the home's original pattern, being routed through the upstairs transoms. Heat was also plentiful from the start fed by eight fireplaces: four upstairs and four downstairs. Going further, the study has remained a central part of the home as when Dr. Dibrell might have seen patients there, and the adjacent sleeping porch was formerly screened in.<sup>12</sup> The newest addition to the home, added in 1940, contains probably what I consider to be the most spectacular part of what I consider to be a museum-quality antique collection: six early twentieth-century "nickelodeon" machines (Yes, they still take nickels!) that play delightful music as well as retaining such features as original stained glass. Plus, two of the machines play "different" instruments: one uses a banjo, and another, a violin! You don't want to miss this!<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> "Dibrell House Fact Sheet." (unpublished paper)

<sup>11</sup> Site Visit, March 8, 2016.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Site Visit, March 8, 2016.

**This prominent single-family home remains one of the cornerstones of Little Rock's Quapaw Quarter Historic District, and I'd like to thank you all for coming today! Please join us for our next Sandwiching in History tour of 2017 on Friday May 5 as we will visit Jacksonville for a tour of the Arkansas Ordnance Plant Guard House and the Jacksonville Museum of Military History at 100 Veterans Circle. We will begin at Noon. Also, next Saturday, April 15, you're invited to our next Walks Through History tour of the Keo Commercial Historic District beginning at the Cobb Cotton Gin Complex at Main and Fleming Streets starting at 11 AM. Hope to see you at both of these and our future tours this year!**

**And just a reminder, if you are dining out after the tour, be sure to patronize our locally owned establishments. You'll love the taste, and you're building a better Little Rock!**