

Sandwiching in History

Little Rock City Hall

December 1, 2017



Good afternoon, my name is Mark Christ, and I work for the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program. Welcome to the “Sandwiching in History” tour of Little Rock City Hall. I would like to thank Scott Carter for working with us on this tour and if you have any questions about this building, I will direct you to Scott, who literally knows everything.

Today's tour is also part of the Rachel Silva Tribute Tour, as she gathered the majority of the information we will hear today for a tour she did ten years ago. We will begin the tour here outside, but will have to go through security when we go in to the rotunda, so we'll have about a ten-minute intermission for that. And 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.

Before I get too far along, the first Sandwiching in History tour of 2018 will visit First United Methodist Church at 723 Center Street in Little Rock on January 5.

Introduction

The City of Little Rock was **growing upward and outward** at the turn of the twentieth century, as the ten-story **Southern Trust Building** (southeast corner of Second and Center)—the city's first skyscraper—opened in 1907, and people began moving into new suburban **residential areas to the west of downtown**. Little Rock's determination to be **"up to date"** was not only shown by the construction of several modern commercial buildings downtown, but also by the **construction of new public buildings**. The **"City Beautiful Movement,"** which

was an early attempt at urban planning and city beautification, coupled with the **Democratic connotations of ancient Greek and Roman architecture**, made the **Classical Revival style** popular for public buildings in the early 20th Century.

Little Rock City Hall was **completed in 1908**, and it was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in **1979**. The building was designed by renowned Arkansas architect **Charles L. Thompson**. **City Hall was one of the most impressive public buildings in Little Rock** when it opened in 1908. It replaced a previous City Hall, built in 1886, across from the Capital Hotel that was destroyed by urban renewal in 1964.

Little Rock City Hall is **now attached to the former Little Rock Central Fire Station and the City Jail Annex by hyphens**, and the **old city garage** is located just to the north of City Hall. From here, you can see the Little Rock Central Fire Station. It was designed by **Charles L. Thompson and Thomas Harding, Jr.**, **and was built in 1912-1913**. The Fire Station was also listed on the National Register in **1979**.

Little Rock City Hall is a good example of the **Classical Revival style**. The building is **symmetrical** and consists of **three bays** of equal size. The central bay is slightly recessed and features a monumental **two-story portico supported by**

four fluted Ionic columns. The building features a **dentiled cornice** along its roofline and porticos. A **cornice-line balustrade** runs along the roofline as well as the main entrance portico and the smaller eastern portico. **Heavily rusticated brickwork on the corners** of the building creates the appearance of **quoins.**

Its **rusticated stone ground (basement) floor is raised one-half story** and the “**piano nobile,**” or **first floor,** features high ceilings and is accessible from both outer staircases, indicating that it was intended to be the primary entertaining area. The first floor is faced in heavily rusticated brick topped by a **stone string course** with **egg-and-dart molding.** The first floor is punctuated by **six windows** and a central entrance surrounded by a **stone doorframe with floral moldings.**

The second floor features **three rectangular windows with transoms** (the central one has a wrought-iron balcony) and **four pairs of windows with arched transoms** (all of these window openings used to hold multi-paned windows). The second and third story windows have **stone lintels and sills.** **Stone keystones** are centered on the arched window surrounds, while **stone brackets** adorn the third floor lintels. **Seven paired windows** are evenly spaced along the building’s third story.

The building is **topped with a square base made of brick and stone**—a wood-frame **dome covered in copper tile** and capped by a finial rested on this base until its **removal in 1956**. A stone panel inscribed with the building's construction date **“1907”** is centered in the balustrade. **“City Hall” is engraved in the frieze.**

Fire Station

The Central Fire Station was designed by **Charles L. Thompson and Thomas Harding, Jr., in 1912-1913**. It is also designed in the **Classical Revival style** and features **four fluted Doric columns** which divide the building into 5 central bays. The building features a **dentiled cornice** and **“Little Rock Fire Department” is engraved in the frieze**. A **stone parapet** rises above the cornice and terminates in a **cast terra cotta molding of the fire department emblem**. The five bays on the first floor used to be **doors for the fire engines**, which needed access to the firefighting apparatus room on that floor. The five arched windows on the second story used to be **folding glass doors** that opened out onto the wrought-iron balconies from the firemen's quarters. An **addition to the rear** of the fire station was added in **1953**, but it is not visible from Markham Street. The Little Rock Fire

Department **occupied the building until 1977**, and then it served as storage and office space for the City until the City Hall complex was **renovated in 1986-88**.

At that time, the fire station building was connected to City Hall by a hyphen.

Now let's head inside the building, where everyone gets to go through security!

The first things you notice when you walk into City Hall are the **beautiful leaded-glass ceiling of the rotunda and the decorative detailing on the cornices, moldings, and column and pilaster capitals**. The blue, green, and gold design in the leaded-glass ceiling of the rotunda creates a **focal point** for the building's interior because it is visible from each of the three main floors. The columns, pilasters, stairs, and wainscoting are made from **Georgia marble**. The plaster cornices, moldings, and capitals feature **egg-and-dart and floral patterns**, which match the patterns used on the building's exterior. The floor is covered with **mosaic tile**.

The **divided staircase** features **marble steps** from the first to the second floors and partially down from the first floor to the basement, but the remaining steps are

textured steel. A decorative steel **balustrade and newels (posts)** add to the visual appeal of the staircase.

The mural on the first floor was created by artists living in the old Kramer School in 1999 to celebrate the millennium.

As early as **1886**, (earliest Sanborn map for LR) **City Hall was located in a two-story building on the northeast corner of Markham and Louisiana** (where part of the Statehouse Convention Center sits today). The Sanborn map shows **City Hall on the second floor, while a liquor store, police station, and barber shop occupied the first floor**. A fire station and the city jail were located just to the north of City Hall, close to the Arkansas River. This arrangement remained the same on the 1889 and 1892 Sanborn maps, but **by the 1897 map, City Hall occupied the entire two-story building**.

W. E. Lenon became Mayor of Little Rock in **1903**. By the beginning of his second term in 1905, he realized the need for a larger City Hall. In February 1906, Mayor Lenon appointed a committee to oversee the construction of a new City Hall. By July 1906, property had been acquired and the City Council approved plans for a new City Hall building with a large auditorium wing. Due to some public outcry about wasteful spending, the City Council revised the plans, and approved a simpler building for the **cost of \$175,000**. Construction began in 1907, and the building was **completed in 1908**. For the building's opening, a bold decision was made **NOT to have a formal ceremony** with a ball following because this was the **“people's building.”**

The grand opening of Little Rock City Hall took place on **April 15, 1908**, and an estimated 10,000 people filed through the building well into the night. The event was open to the public and featured a brass band. **Mayor Lenon resigned** after presiding over the first meeting inside the new City Hall. He had achieved his goal of building a new City Hall, and thought his work was done.

When the building opened, the **third floor was not finished** out because that space was not needed. The **Museum of Natural History and Antiquities** (now the Museum of Discovery, which is LR's oldest museum founded in 1927) was "given" to the City of Little Rock in 1929 by its founder, "Bernie" Babcock, to secure its future. The museum paid to have the third floor of City Hall completed when they moved into the building.

At first, **every city office was located inside this building**, including the Police Department and City Jail, which used the side entrance off Broadway. During the 1930s, the city grew, and more space was needed for municipal offices. A **garage** was constructed behind City Hall in **1936**, and a **City Jail Annex** was built behind the City Hall's east wing in **1938**. We will discuss these buildings shortly.

By **1955, the dome which sat on top of City Hall was in need of repair.** The wooden supports and copper tile were in bad shape. Mayor Pratt Remmel had set aside money to repair the dome. Remmel ran for a third term as mayor, but he was defeated by **Woodrow Mann**, who **conducted a survey** to determine the fate of the dome. Mayor Mann's survey was **open to anyone**—it didn't matter where you were from or how old you were. The three choices were to remove the dome, repair the copper dome, or replace it with an aluminum dome. **The choice to remove the dome won by a slim margin**—1,925 votes for removing the dome; 1,523 votes for replacing it with an aluminum dome; and 258 votes for repairing the copper dome. So in the **spring of 1956, the dome was removed from City Hall.**

The 1960s were not kind to City Hall. Many alterations were made to the building without any thought of historic preservation. Air conditioning was installed in 1960, but people were leaving their windows open because they were afraid that the A/C would make their offices too cool. So in order to increase energy efficiency and remedy this problem, the **windows were bricked in** on the building. That same year (1960), the Police Department and jail moved into a new facility.

In 1965, the balcony in the Council Chambers was enclosed and turned into office space. The **City Council anticipated the construction of a new City Hall building at a more central location** in Little Rock by 1970, so they didn't worry about the alterations they were making to this building. The Fire Department moved out of their building next door in 1977.

The early 1980s brought new discussions of whether to stay in the current building or build a new City Hall. By 1984, the decision was made to stay in the building at the corner of Markham and Broadway. After an **extensive renovation and restoration effort from 1986-88, the City Hall was returned (almost) to its 1908 appearance.**

City Hall was connected to the Fire Station in the 1986 renovation. The interior of the old fire station bares no resemblance to its original appearance. They did leave the **white glazed brick** that was used on the building's interior (maybe to make it easy to clean/hose off—glazed brick wouldn't absorb water).

The **firemen's quarters were located upstairs**, and the **apparatus room was on this floor**. The **basement level was used as a garage for the police department and a store room and repair shop for fire equipment**. You can still see the spots

on the ceiling where the poles came through, and if you notice the narrow staircase leading to the second floor, it indicates that those poles eliminated the need for two-way traffic.

East Wing (Old Police Dept. and Jail)

The area where the **Parks and Recreation offices are now was not enclosed**. It was just an open hallway with offices on either side. This was the police department, and further back at the end of the hallway was part of the city jail. The other portion of the jail was downstairs in the basement. **The jail was segregated**, and white prisoners were kept on this floor, while black prisoners were kept on the basement level. **When the building opened in 1908**, people could tour the jail and see the white prisoners inside their cells; however, the **black prisoners were forced to dance for entertainment**.

The **conference room** on the second floor was enclosed in the early 1990s—it used to be part of the rotunda. Inside the City Clerk’s office is the **vault** that contains the City Council minutes, deeds, and other City records.

The **watercolor of City Hall** (1906?) does not accurately portray the building as it was finished. The **western-most wing was never built** (it was in the original plans, but was cut because of costs). The dome in the painting is not exactly the same as the dome that was constructed. The Cromwell architectural firm restored this painting in 2015 as part of their commemoration of their 130th anniversary.

The **City of Little Rock flag** was found in an **estate sale of a descendant of Mayor Charles Taylor** (April 1911-April 1919). It was a gift from the Downtown Rotary Club on his retirement as mayor.

The **windows in the council chambers are still bricked in** because they telecast from that room and don’t need the outside light. As I mentioned earlier, there used to be a balcony inside the council chambers, but it was enclosed as office space in 1965.

Basement

In the basement, you can see the area that was used as the jail down the hallway. Currently, the public access television station operates out of a studio in the basement.

Behind the building, you can see the old City Garage, which was **built by the WPA in 1936** and was designed as a utilitarian facility for city vehicles. It is now used for **mowing equipment storage** among other things. A **gas pump** used to be located where the light strip of concrete is to the west of the garage.

You can see the **fire station annex** that was constructed in 1953 (now probation offices). You can also see that the **north elevation of City Hall lacks the decorative detailing present on the front façade (still see bricked in windows, too).**

The Jail Annex was **built by the WPA in 1938**. This **Art Deco-style building** served as a jail until 1960. After that it was used as a storage facility for the Parks and Recreation department. A portion of the building was recently renovated and turned into a **fitness center for city employees**. The building exhibits several characteristics of the Art Deco style, such as a **flat roofline with stone coping**, a **smooth exterior surface**, and **geometric floral designs** in the cast stone door surround. The **cast stone window headers** also give the building a vertical focus, which is another characteristic of the Art Deco style.

So look around YOUR City Hall and reflect on its history. And remember, our next Sandwiching in History tour will be at First United Methodist Church on January 5.