



**Sandwiching in History
First United Methodist Church
Historically known as Methodist Episcopal Church, South
723 Center Street, Little Rock
January 5, 2018
By: Rachel Silva Patton
Revisions by: Holly Hope**

Intro

Hello, my name is Holly Hope, and I work for the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program. Welcome to the January Sandwiching in History tour of the First United Methodist Church or Methodist Episcopal Church, South. FUMC was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1986 for its Romanesque Revival-style architecture.

I would like to thank Senior Pastor David Freeman, church members, Richard Butler, Robert Nelson, church historian, Carl Miller, Martha Sowell. I would also like to thank church volunteers, Jane and Paul Brown, Linda Baker, Keith Martin, Dick and Sue Blake and Ron and Hazel Clark who will be helping with the tour today. This will be an exciting tour today because you will have access to areas besides the sanctuary, which I will tell you about in a moment. I would also like to recognize Rachel Silva Patton for her work on the original script for this tour in 2009.

Architecture

From 1880 to 1900 the Romanesque Revival was used on large public buildings in the United States. This particular version of the style was made popular by Henry Hobson Richardson beginning in 1872 when he built Trinity Church in Boston, Massachusetts. He added different elements to the original Romanesque style, which had traditionally used taller, leaner features and smooth walls. His version included: multiple towers – some square with pyramidal roofs and some rounded with cone-shaped roofs, he always used heavy masonry walls – here he used brick and rusticated granite, asymmetrical façade, rounded arches over windows and doors, use of contrasting colors to emphasize details, the “eyebrow” or small dormer, and arches supported by squat columns with cushion capitals.

A lot of these features are seen in the sanctuary area of First United Methodist Church, which was designed by Little Rock architect Frank Gibb. When you go outside you will see those features in combinations of brick, terra cotta and granite. The two corner towers on the primary façade are topped with pyramidal roofs and the tower on the southeast corner of the church is topped with a cone roof. Also you’ll see repeating arches at the entry with fan lights.

Frank Gibb:

Frank Gibb is credited with the design of many buildings in Little Rock as well as 60 courthouses throughout Arkansas. However, were it not for his father’s interest in real estate development Frank would probably never have gotten interested in architecture. When the family arrived in Little Rock in 1871 Frank’s father, Edward, built spec houses and invested in real estate to take advantage of Little Rock’s favorable housing market at that time. During the 1880s Edward Gibb built several houses in what is now known as the Governor’s Mansion Historic District.

While his father was in Little Rock, Frank was in school in Missouri working on a degree in engineering. Frank attended the Missouri School of Mines in Rolla and returned to Little Rock after his 1882 graduation. He appeared in the Little Rock paper many times for his successes in school, but when he returned to Little Rock he helped with his father’s business and by the late 1880s he was designing houses for his father’s clients without any formal architectural training.

Frank Gibb’s obituary credits him with work on nearly 60 of Arkansas’s county courthouses, including the Yell County Courthouse in Dardanelle and the Phillips County Courthouse in Helena. He also designed the Buckstaff Bathhouse in Hot Springs, East Side Junior High in Little Rock, and the Ada Thompson Memorial Home in Little Rock.

Unfortunately, after his death in 1932, Gibb’s family cleaned out his office and apparently discarded most of his architectural drawings and records. As a result it is nearly impossible to clearly identify his works.

Sections of FUMC

The cornerstone for the chapel, which is to the east of the sanctuary, was laid in 1896 and the chapel was completed by June 1897. The cornerstone for the sanctuary was laid on August 16, 1899, and services were held in the chapel until the sanctuary was completed in November 1900.

There were frame buildings constructed to the north of the sanctuary in the 1920s to house Sunday School classrooms, but they were removed to make way for the Education Annex in 1951. You'll notice that the Education Annex is designed in a style that is compatible with that of the sanctuary. It is connected by a series of arches supported by the same squat columns with cushion capitals that you see at the front door and it features a rose window with pairs of narrow arched windows.

A rose window or Catherine window is often used as a generic term to describe a circular window that is divided into segments by tracery or decorative mullions.

The Activities Building was constructed in 1971 to the north of the Education Annex. The building features a restrained arch motif that provides a modern link to the original Romanesque architecture.

The only major exterior alteration to the historic sanctuary has been the realignment of the Center Street stairs. The stairs originally came straight down toward the west, but they were altered in 1950 to have north and south approaches.

History of FUMC

Little Rock's first Methodist congregation was organized in 1831 in a Cumberland Presbyterian church building at the southwest corner of Main and Second streets. By 1832, the congregation was meeting in a warehouse building just to the east of the present-day Capital Hotel built in 1877. The first Methodist church building was constructed in 1833 on West Second Street, then called Cherry Street, behind the current Capital Hotel. The new church was made out of large, hand-made bricks, which were readily available because brick had been selected as the primary building material for the new state capitol building, or the Old State House, which was under construction about a block away.

The building was 35 by 45 feet and the pews consisted of split log puncheons or logs with a flat side and a rounded side. In 1836 Arkansas churches formed the Arkansas Conference and the church on Cherry Street received the designation of station, which meant they were capable of supporting a full-time pastor. In 1844 the church became Methodist Episcopal Church, South. The largest and most divisive split happened in that year over the issue of slavery. The Methodist Protestant church had already split off at that time. The Methodist Episcopal Church, South supported slavery while the Methodist Church did not. Although churches in northern and western Arkansas attempted to stand with the Methodist Episcopal Church most of them ceased worship until Reconstruction. Even after the Civil War the congregations remained segregated within two separate conferences, or regional governing bodies, within the state. The division would not be healed until the United Conference of 1979, which saw the formation of the Methodist church. The Little Rock congregation was aligned with the Methodist

Episcopal Church, South until 1939. The United Methodist Church was created in 1968 when the Methodist Church joined with the Evangelical Brethren Church in Dallas, Texas.

During the Civil War, the Union Army used the Second Street church as a hospital, so the Methodist congregation met in the synagogue, the Presbyterian Church and in a variety theater on the northwest corner of Main and 4th streets. In 1865 the Second Street church building was returned to the Methodist congregation, which as I said, had split before the war. The Methodist Episcopal Church, South took over the church in that year. By the mid-1870s the membership dwindled; however money was raised, much of it through the efforts of the Ladies' Floral Society and the sale of the Second Street church building to Fones Brothers Hardware. Property was purchased at the northeast corner of 8th and Center streets in 1879. St. Louis architect J.H. Legg furnished plans free of charge but a lot of problems emerged at this time, including the illness of the pastor and infighting among the congregants so the building wasn't finished until 1880 when the brick Gothic Revival style structure was finally completed.

During construction the congregation moved around from the Opera House on Main Street, the Centenary Methodist Episcopal Church and Buell Hall between 5th and 6th streets. When the new Gothic Revival style building was completed in 1880 they entered a period of stability. So the church had about ten good years but in 1895 a wood stove in the church caused a fire, which killed two firemen and destroyed the building. While the new church was being constructed the congregation met at the YMCA in Glenwood Park, which was at 17th and Main. The chapel portion to the southeast of the sanctuary was built in 1896 to replace the 1880 building, which had burned. By Thanksgiving 1900, the new sanctuary was completed by Frank Gibb.

In the 1920s this church was the largest in Arkansas and one of the nine largest Methodist churches in the south. Ninety-five new members joined the church in 1922. And if you visit the R.L. Bearden History Hall in the basement, which was completed in 1972 be sure to look at a photo of particular interest in the hallway. It is a photo of the 1926 congregation when there were 2800 members. Also, in the hall is a photo of Horace Jewell who was the church pastor from 1880 to 1884. This man was the great-great-grandfather of the current pastor Dave Freeman.

Interior Details

The sanctuary interior looks much like it did when it was completed in 1900. The sanctuary retains its original pews, windows, color scheme and design. All of the wood in the sanctuary is pine, except for the pews, which are oak. You'll notice the repetition of the rounded arch design in the ends of the pews. Also notice how the pews are curved toward the center of the room and to mirror the curved design of the 2nd floor gallery above. The columns on the side are steel covered with plaster. This is the original communion rail and the kneelers were embroidered by the ladies of the church in 1983.

The craftsman that produced the windows is unknown. Some of the windows were gifts of the congregation and others were given as memorials. Each rose window was paid for by the congregation and they have different Christian symbols at the center. The south window has a cross to symbolize the

risen and living Christ, the north window features a crown to symbolize Christ's kingship and the western window displays an open Bible to symbolize the sacred literature of the church. One of the stained glass windows in particular is considered to be irreplaceable because it was created using varying thicknesses of glass rather than color. That is the window featuring a woman in a blue robe on the north wall. It might be repaired but it cannot be replaced.

In 1931, as part of the Centennial celebration of the organization of the Methodist congregation in Little Rock, the sanctuary received a new organ and a decorative grill designed by local architect John Parks Almand. Almand changed the organ opening from rectangular to arched in order to match the Romanesque design. There are Art Deco elements in the organ grill, which include chevrons, fans, scalloped patterns and overlapping arches. The current pipe organ is from the 1980s.

New lighting was also added in 1931. The two light fixtures at the front of the sanctuary were replaced in 2008 and were designed to match the existing fixtures. The choir loft area was redesigned by local architect John Gerard ca. 2000 because the railing was too high and you couldn't see the choir when they sat down so it was shortened.

This is the original 19th century color scheme used in the church; it was restored in 2000 by Becky Witsell. She also made the banners in the sanctuary at the time. Becky Witsell grew up in Little Rock and attended Washington University School of Fine Arts in St. Louis where she obtained a BFA in painting and printmaking in 1966. From 1968 to 1978 she worked at the Arkansas Arts Center while also teaching at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock. In 1980 she cofounded Design Communications, which is a studio that provides a range of design and fabrication services in architectural graphics, specifically the design and recreation of historic painted decoration. The fleur-de-lis pattern on the walls and columns are Becky Witsell's work. Some of the images were done in relief and you can still feel the raised pattern. "Fleur-de-lis" is French for flower of the lily, symbolizing purity and/or the three petals can symbolize the Holy Trinity of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost.

2nd Floor Gallery

The rose windows on the 2nd floor gallery had suffered some damage from the application of plexiglass storm windows. Moisture and heat became trapped between the storm windows and the stained glass, which rotted the wood, also the mullions had become weakened, which caused the glass to bow out. The church raised approximately 2 million dollars and the windows were restored by Conrad Schmitt Studios of Wisconsin. They were disassembled, each piece was marked and taken to Wisconsin for cleaning and reconditioning. The Conrad Schmitt Studio was founded in Milwaukee in 1899 and its roots can be traced to ecclesiastical, decorative art, stained glass and interior design. The studio has repaired windows designed by artists such as Louis Comfort Tiffany, Thomas O'Shaughnessy, John LaFarge, F.X. Zettler and Mayer of Munich. They also restored theaters designed by architects Rapp and Rapp, John Ebersson, C. Howard Crane and Thomas Lamb and religious and secular buildings designed by Louis Sullivan, Frank Lloyd Wright and others.

Closing

Although western expansion of the city caused reduction in attendance over the years, First United Methodist Church is still very much alive. The church supports two separate worship services and the average weekly attendance at the traditional church service is between 250-300 people.